

View

"...Having the eyes of your heart enlightened..." Ephesians 1:18

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An Argument for the Early Dating of Mark

This is background for a series I'm beginning today from the book of Mark. — dp

Whether or not the Gospels are eyewitness accounts first rests on the evidence for their dating. Obviously, they would have to be dated early enough to record the testimony of those who witnessed Jesus' ministry.

So Jim Wallace's approach to the Gospel of Mark is an interesting one. Jim is a cold case homicide detective and has specialized skill in forensic document analysis. He applied these skills to the Gospel of Mark to evaluate the source of the testimony. His conclusion is that Mark is not only dated very early, it's likely Peter's testimony recorded by Mark.

There are many reasons to believe that the Gospel accounts we have in the Bible are a reliable record of eyewitness observations. Critics often try to claim that these Gospels first appeared late in history and were not written by anyone who actually saw the events with their own eyes. These same critics would like to place the dating of the Gospels in the late second century in an effort to discredit the validity of the accounts. But a simple argument for early dating can be sketched out:

We Know That the Book of Acts was Authored By Luke

Most historians will admit that Luke wrote both the Book of Acts and the Gospel of Luke. These two texts contain introductions that tie them together in history. In addition, the Book of Acts contains a number of regional, cultural and geographical details that reflect the fact that the author was present during the period that is being described.

We Know that the Book of Acts was Completed Prior to 67AD

It is also most reasonable to conclude that the Book of Acts was completed prior to 67AD. This is the most reasonable explanation for the fact that:

- Paul is still alive in Rome at the conclusion of the book of Acts

- Church history tells us that Paul was killed under the persecution of Emperor Nero in about 68AD
- The Temple has not yet been destroyed

In addition, we can see that all the Gospels omit the fact that the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70AD. The most reasonable conclusion is that this had not yet taken place at the time of the writing. This is especially reasonable given that Jesus predicted the destruction... we would expect that authors would mention it to affirm the prediction.

We Know that the Gospel of Luke was written prior to the Book of Acts

In the introduction to the book of Acts, Luke refers to his 'former book' where he 'wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven.' If it is reasonable to conclude that the Book of Acts was written prior to 67AD, it would also be reasonable to conclude that the Gospel of Luke was written many years prior to this. Paul certainly knew that Luke's Gospel was common knowledge in about 65AD when Paul penned his letter to Timothy. Note the following passage from his letter (1 Timothy 5:17-18):

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,' and "The worker deserves his wages."

Paul quotes two passages as scripture here; one in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament. "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," refers to Deuteronomy 25:4 and "The worker deserves his wages" refers to Luke 10:7. It's clear that Luke's Gospel was already common knowledge and accepted as scripture by the time this letter was written. It's therefore reasonable to assume that Luke's Gospel was written in the early 60s.

We know that Luke quoted Mark often in his Gospel

There are many large portions of Luke's Gospel that are simply quoted from Mark. This shouldn't surprise us; Luke told us that he was not an eyewitness but simply a good historian who was consulting the witnesses at the time:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

So, it's reasonable to believe that Mark's gospel was already in circulation prior to Luke's investigation. If Luke is written in the early 60s, it's reasonable to assume that Mark's Gospel was written just prior to that... in the late 50s.

This brief argument is a fair and reasonable representation of the historical facts surrounding the writing of both the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Mark. If the Gospel of Mark was written as early as we suspect, it appears that its author either had a personal eyewitness experience or was writing for someone who did. As it turns out, early church history maintains that Mark was actually a scribe for Peter. If this is true, we can have confidence in the early dating of the Gospel of Mark because Peter would have been the source for its narrative. Are there good reasons to believe that Peter was the source for Mark's Gospel?

The Reasonable Basis

Before we begin to look at the evidence for Peter's influence on the Gospel of Mark, we need to recognize that Peter and Mark did actually have a relationship with one another that is described in the Bible. Mark is traditionally considered to be the "John Mark" mentioned as a companion of Paul in the Book of Acts. If this is true, we also know that Mark was a cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10) and originally fell from favor with Paul as a young man when he failed to continue on an evangelistic journey with Paul and Barnabas. This caused the two older men to separate, with

Barnabas continuing on with Mark and Paul continuing on with Silas (Acts 15:37-40). It is also clear from the Bible that Mark eventually became a close associate of Peter; we know this from two pieces of Biblical evidence. First, it appears that Peter was part of a Christian community (a house church) in Jerusalem that actually met in Mark's home.

When Peter miraculously escaped from jail (assisted by the angel of the Lord), he returned to his home group to tell them the good news:

When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" (Acts 12:12-14)

Peter was well known to Mark, therefore, and over the course of time, it appears that Mark became even closer to Peter as he ministered throughout Asia Minor and Rome. By the time Peter wrote his first epistle, Mark had become like a son to him:

She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark. (1 Peter 5:13)

On the basis of this relationship between Mark and Peter, it is reasonable to conclude that the testimony of history accurately describes Mark's connection to the Apostle. This history records the fact that Mark acted as a scribe for Peter and recorded his teaching and preaching to form the Gospel of Mark.

The External Case

There are two possible ways to determine if Peter provided Mark with the information he needed to write the Gospel. First, we can see if there is any external corroboration from historical sources who make this very claim. If Mark wrote his Gospel from the teaching of Peter, someone should have known about it and reported on it. As it turns out, there are a number of historical references to the Gospel of Mark and to the manner in which it was written. The rest of the article is on the Stand to Reason blog: <http://str.typepad.com/weblog/2010/07/forensic-analysis-of-the-gospel-of-mark.html.dp>