

## HOW WE GOT OUR SYNOPTIC GOSPELS<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Preliminaries

The *Synoptic Gospels* are those of Matthew, Mark and Luke, so called because on account of their similarities and overlapping material they can be placed side by side in a *synopsis* for comparison.

Jesus died on the Day of Preparation for the Passover, 14 Nisan, Friday 3 April 33, and rose two days later. This is determined by computing the days within Pilate's governorship (AD 26-36) when the Day of Preparation fell on a Friday. And that we can calculate astronomically, since Jewish months began at the first sighting of the new moon, which we can determine, while the Passover was always on 15 Nisan. This gives us only 7 April 30 and 3 April 33; the first of these would be too soon after Jesus' baptism in 28/9 or 29/30.<sup>2</sup> Corroboration for this is to be found in the reference in Peter's speech at Pentecost to the recent lunar eclipse (moon turning to blood, Acts 2:20): there was such an eclipse visible from Jerusalem at 6.20 pm on 3 April 33.<sup>3</sup> So this is when it all began.

### 2. First Phase: Aramaic Sayings (St Matthew's *Logia*)

What would we expect to happen on the death of a great religious teacher and the founder of a movement? We would probably not expect his followers to sit down and write instant biographies of him. Rather,

- (1) They would continue to propagate his teachings *orally* in public (cf Pentecost in Acts 2, and later chapters of Acts) and in private (upper rooms), rehearsing and repeating them, perhaps rounding them into familiar shapes as they did so.
- (2) Some would begin to *write down these sayings* to preserve their accuracy.
- (3) *Persecution*, if any, would hasten this process to prevent the movement from dying out.

This is what we find. Our earliest record of this activity comes from none other than St John the

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper summarises many of the arguments in Martin Mosse, *The Three Gospels: New Testament History Introduced by the Synoptic Problem* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> J.K. Fotheringham, 'The Evidence of Astronomy and Technical Chronology for the Date of the Crucifixion', *JTS* 35 (1934) 146-62.

<sup>3</sup> Colin J. Humphreys and W. Graeme Waddington, 'The Date of the Crucifixion', *JASA* 37 (1985) 2-10.

## How We Got Our Synoptic Gospels

Apostle, recorded by Papias, bishop of Hierapolis (in the Lycus valley, Turkey, near Colossae and Laodicea) in the early second century:

'Matthew made an orderly arrangement of the *logia* [oracles, sayings of Jesus] in the Hebrew [or, Aramaic] tongue, and each one translated them [into Greek] as best he was able.' (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.16)

This is *not* as has been supposed a confused reference to Matthew's Gospel, which was written in Greek, but a collection of *sayings* for which we have a superb visual aid in the (Coptic), so-called, Gospel of Thomas. This consists of almost no narrative (beyond introductory phrases such as, 'Jesus said...'), but plenty of sayings attributed to Jesus. Much of it is familiar from our canonical gospels, although there is also much that has been debased by the Gnostic circles through which it has passed and some that is positively bizarre. Unlike St Matthew's collection described here, Thomas is not ordered; and it was not endorsed by the Church.

Content of the *logia*: I believe the *logia* comprised many of the sayings of Jesus which we find in the (later) Gospel of Matthew which are not to be found in Mark. In particular, I would identify the Beatitudes and Sermon on the Mount, which have been tailored into a beautiful rounded whole; but it may have included some of the other sayings in the First Gospel as well.

We may compare the Letter of James the Lord's brother, probably the earliest NT epistle, dating I believe from 47-48, just before the Conference of Jerusalem (Acts 15, late 48). At that time, Paul was just getting started and on his First Missionary Journey. Even though this was 8 years after Peter's Cornelius episode, James still assumes uncontroversially (1:1) that all Christians are Jews. It contains *numerous echoes of the Sermon on the Mount* with which Jerusalem was still buzzing (eg James 5:12 // Mt 5:33-7 on not swearing but letting your yes be yes and your no no). So if you moved in Christian circles in Jerusalem in the mid-forties, it is the Sermon on the Mount that you will have been discussing.

Date and place of the *logia*: We are told elsewhere in Eusebius (*EH* 3.24.6) that St Matthew wrote while 'on the point of going to others'. This recalls a saying attributed to Jesus that the apostles were to remain in Jerusalem for twelve years after the crucifixion (33). Whether or not this is authentic, it is very probable that the persecutions by Herod Agrippa I in 42-44 did trigger an exodus from Jerusalem which in turn generated some of the writings which became our gospels. St Matthew's *logia* was the first. *So we place St Matthew's logia in c.44*, around the time when James the Lord's brother was assuming headship of the Church in Jerusalem such as we find in Acts 15.

### 3. Second Phase: Greek Narrative History (St Mark's Gospel)

## How We Got Our Synoptic Gospels

Like St Matthew's *logia*, St Mark's Gospel was also occasioned, indirectly, by the persecutions of Herod Agrippa I. St Peter, after escaping arrest by Herod in 42 is reported as leaving Jerusalem for 'another place' (Acts 12:17). Most probably his first port of call will have been Caesarea, where he had friends in the household of Cornelius. Eusebius' *Chronicle* has him arriving at Rome from Antioch in 42, the second year of the reign of Claudius. Though there has been some confusion, there is probably a kernel of truth here. There is a strong tradition that Peter exercised oversight (as 'bishop'. *episcopus*) over the church at Rome for 25 years (42-67, the traditional date of his death in the last year of Nero). However this need not mean constant residence (cf. Acts 15:36, *episkepsômetha*, commonly translated 'visit') in Rome, and we know that Peter travelled elsewhere (eg Corinth, c.54, 1 Cor 1:12. There is also some suggestion that he visited some of the churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia to whom he wrote his first epistle (1 Peter 1:1)). He probably made other visits to Rome (55-6?), where like Paul he was martyred c.67.

The earliest Roman Christians date from Pentecost (33, Acts 2:10). By 57, when Paul wrote his epistle to the Romans, they were clearly flourishing, and their 'faith is being reported all over the world' (Rom 1:8). Paul had wanted to visit them earlier but was unwilling to 'build on another man's foundation' (Rom 15:20) - who else could that be of that stature but Peter?

So very possibly in 42 Peter escaped from Jerusalem via Caesarea, from there by the coast road to Antioch, then from Antioch's port Seleucia to Rome. Two episodes are associated with this visit:

- (1) A public confrontation with Simon Magus, the villainous magician we first meet in Acts 8 (EH 2.14.6)
- (2) A meeting with Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (EH 2.17).

Both of these are expressly stated to have taken place under Claudius, emperor 41-54. Even if they are apocryphal, the fact that the stories were attached to him makes it certain that Peter was actually there. No one would have invented the engagements if Peter had not actually been there to engage.

The early Church was quite emphatic that Mark's gospel originated there and then. St Mark, traditionally seen as Peter's right-hand man and 'interpreter', recorded his preaching for their benefit. Clement of Alexandria (d. c.211) put it like this:

When Peter had publicly preached the word at Rome, and by the Spirit had proclaimed the Gospel, that those present, who were many, exhorted Mark, as one who had followed him for a long time and remembered what had been spoken, to make a record of what was said; and that he did this, and distributed the Gospel among those who asked him. And that when the matter came to Peter's knowledge he neither strongly forbade it nor urged it forward. (Clement of Alexandria in Eusebius EH 6.14.6-7, tr. Oulton; cf. EH 2.15.1-2.)

## How We Got Our Synoptic Gospels

This association between Mark, Peter and Rome has been challenged by modern scholars but is robust and emphatically survives the challenge.<sup>4</sup> The German historian Eduard Meyer, one of the greatest ancient historians of all time, a rationalist and no card-carrying Christian believer, after examining Mark's Gospel, commented as follows:

The conclusion we have won is of the highest importance. It is evident that for our history of Jesus we have by no means to reckon merely with representations of the second, sub-apostolic, generation, but are taken back far behind that into the midst of the first generation who personally had known him intimately (*genau*) and still preserved a lively recollection of him; and that these old recollections lie under our eyes in manifold forms. There is no ground at all for refusing to accept these oldest traditions as historically trustworthy in all essentials, and in their chronological ordering of the history.<sup>5</sup>

Bishop Gore, who quotes this, describing Meyer in 1929 as 'the greatest living authority on the history of antiquity as a whole', goes on to summarise:

Thus in particular Meyer claims that we must accept as trustworthy the tradition of Papias..., that Mark was the author of the second Gospel and that he had been the companion and interpreter (*Dolmetscher*) of Peter in his missionary journeys, so that it is obvious that 'the foundation of our tradition goes back to Peter, and that Mark in a great part of his Gospel was reproducing Peter's own memories as to how things happened at the beginning, as Peter gave them to his converts.'<sup>6</sup>

When, under Claudius? Mark is found back in Rome in 46 at the conclusion of Paul's famine relief visit to Jerusalem (Acts 12:25), and one or other of Peter and Mark is spoken for elsewhere in each of the immediately succeeding years. Thus Peter was in Jerusalem for the conference of 48 (Acts 15). Further, in 49-50 Claudius expelled 'the Jews' (or at least their leaders?) from Rome, as we learn from Suetonius.<sup>7</sup> Priscilla and Aquila were among those expelled (Acts 18:2). So Peter and Mark wouldn't have got through passport control after 49. Hence we can confidently place *Mark's gospel c.45, just twelve years after the resurrection*. This has been confirmed independently by a detailed analysis of the attitudes to the Torah (Jewish Law) within Mark which suggests a date *between the mid to late 30s and the mid 40s*.<sup>8</sup>

This blows quite a few theories. Almost any commentary you read will tell you that none of the gospels was penned before Paul had written some if not all of his epistles. On most reckonings Paul's first letter, 1 Thessalonians, was not written until around 50 or 51, although many would place Galatians in 48. Either way, Mark got there first. This is the conclusion most of us would reach if we simply read through Mark's Gospel and Paul's undisputed epistles. Everything about Mark proclaims

---

<sup>4</sup> On the connection between Peter and Mark, see especially Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, ET John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1985) 47, 50-3.

<sup>5</sup> Eduard Meyer, *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums (Origin and Beginnings of Christianity)* (Stuttgart and Berlin: Cotta, 1921-3), quoted in translation by Bishop Charles Gore, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Butterworth, 1929) 191.

<sup>6</sup> Gore, *op.cit.*, 191-2.

<sup>7</sup> Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.

<sup>8</sup> James G. Crossley, *The Date of Mark's Gospel: Insight from the Law in Earliest Christianity*, *JSNT Sup* 266 (London: T. & T. Clark International, 2004) 208.

its primitiveness as against Paul's sophistication.

Again, a gap of twelve years allows nothing like the time required for the kind of historical distortions of which our Synoptic Gospels are often accused. So if you want to embark on a 'quest for the historical Jesus' you could do a lot worse than start by reading Mark's gospel!

#### 4. Third Phase: Conflation (Gospel of Matthew)

Our present Gospel of Matthew is a conflation of

- (1) St Matthew's *logia*, now translated into Greek - essentially the Sermon on the Mount; perhaps other sayings as well.
- (2) St Mark's Greek narrative Gospel.
- (3) Original material eg the nativity, sayings (including numerous parables like the talents, the labourers in the vineyard, and the discourse on the sheep and the goats in Mt 25); and the closing post-resurrection stories.

Matthew bears a very close relationship to Mark. From chapter 12 onwards it follows very closely the *order* of events in Mark 2:23 onwards. Such a parallelism characteristically indicates a close *literary* relationship between two documents, resulting from the physical process of turning through a scroll or, later, the pages of a codex (book). (If they were simply sharing a common *oral* tradition, although the wording might be similar, we would not expect a common order to be preserved.) In this case, detailed comparison of the order of pericopae (units, events) shows beyond doubt that it is Matthew who is following Mark. Were it the other way round, St Mark would have to be jumping backwards and then forwards again into his scroll of Matthew in a most improbable way.

Who did this conflation? I have argued in my book that this was St Matthew the Apostle updating his own work, sticking very closely to Mark in deference to St Peter, the senior Apostle whose authority was known to lie behind Mark. Matthew the taxgatherer, an orderly man working for the highly ordered Roman Empire, will have had a strong habit of respect for authority. However a very recent work by Richard Bauckham has caused me to doubt this, chiefly because of the closeness with which the First Gospel follows Mark's account of the call of Matthew: would we not expect St Matthew to give his own account of his own call?<sup>9</sup>

So perhaps the First Gospel was crafted by someone other than St Matthew, in Jerusalem, some time after most of the apostles had left (45), by someone familiar with it, and definitely while the city was

---

<sup>9</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 108-12.

still standing. This is confirmed by 27:7-8 where the Potter's Field bought with Judas' blood money has been called the Field of Blood 'to this day'; and by 28:15, where the account that the disciples stole the body of Jesus has been widely circulated among the Jews 'to this very day'. So we are still in an inhabited Jerusalem.

The vehement tirade of woes against the scribes and Pharisees in 23:13-36 is often held up as impossibly unlike Jesus, originating instead in the growing antagonism between Christianity and Judaism which ensued in the decades following the fall of Jerusalem. However we can date this passage as geologists date rock strata by the fossils they contain. The condemnation of oaths by the Temple (23:16-22) could scarcely postdate its destruction in 70. (The notion that this has been inserted to add realism rather recalls those extreme creationists who claim that the world really did begin six thousand years ago, with fossils carefully implanted in the rocks to make it *look* as if they were millions of years old.) In fact Jesus is here at last preaching with the vehemence predicted by John the Baptist (3:10,12). The relative mildness of Jesus' early preaching seems to have surprised John, causing him in a fit of black panic in prison to question whether he had in fact designated the true Messiah (11:2-3). But he would have found nothing out of character in the woes of chapter 23.

Beyond that, Matthew was written for Jews, as is testified by the numerous and sometimes rather forced quotations from the OT.

### 5. St Luke's Gospel

Author: Beyond any reasonable doubt the Third Gospel was written by St Luke, Paul's doctor and companion, who later wrote Acts. So the early church believed, with no credible challenger. The contemporary fad for phrases like 'the anonymous author of Luke-Acts' summons at once the response of E. Earle Ellis: '[O]ne must resist the modern tendency to assume that in early Christianity only unknowns could be authors.'<sup>10</sup> Even those who would reassign Shakespeare offer us plausible alternatives.

As can be seen from Acts, Luke was a consummate historian with a tremendous attention to detail. As the eminent Roman historian A.N. Sherwin-White put it,

For Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. Yet Acts is, in simple terms and judged externally, no less of a propaganda narrative than the Gospels, liable to similar distortions. But any attempt to reject its basic historicity even in matters of detail must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> E. Earle Ellis, *The Making of the New Testament Documents* (Leiden: Brill, 1999) 36.

<sup>11</sup> A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: OUP 1963) 189.

## How We Got Our Synoptic Gospels

Luke's Gospel consists of

- (1) Material shared with Mark, including the Passion.
- (2) Material shared with Matthew but not in Mark (mostly sayings but also some narrative).
- (3) Material he has researched for himself (probably oral rather than written), eg the nativity (from the mother of Jesus?), and numerous parables unique to Luke such as the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son.

(1) Use of Mark: Like 'Matthew', St Luke also made extensive use of Mark, but in a different way. Whereas Matthew from 12:1 onwards makes continuous use of Mark, Luke exhibits what I call the 'lawnmower effect': He alternates long sections when he uses Mark with long sections when he doesn't. This effect does not manifest itself in reverse, so we can be sure it is Luke who is using Mark and not vice versa. Thus we know Mark was the earliest of the Synoptics, since both Matthew and Luke used him. This has long been the majority view among scholars, and will stand.

(3) Oral tradition: The availability to Luke of oral tradition - people telling and retelling the stories and sayings of Jesus - helps to explain numerous occasions where Luke offers a different variant from the others, as in the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer or parables of the talents/minas. It may well be that Jesus himself used variety in his teaching on different occasions. Contemporary scholarship is beginning to stress the accuracy with which particular accounts would be maintained by the individuals responsible for repeating them.<sup>12</sup>

(2) Relation to Matthew: This is the most contentious area. Luke has much material in common with Matthew which is not derived from Mark. For the last 80+ years the overwhelming consensus has been that this derives from a common source, designated Q, which has since vanished without trace. No fragment of it has ever been found and no mention of it is ever made by the Church Fathers. Many scholars today believe we can reconstruct Q from Matthew and Luke, and even deduce the nature of the 'Q community' that lies behind it, to which the 'Q editor' supposedly belonged, the 'Q theology' which they professed, and even the 'pre-Q' stage which preceded it.<sup>13</sup> Books are published giving the original text of Q. It is all big business. Highly significant is the fact that Q, if it ever existed, apparently contained no account of the crucifixion or resurrection. This has led to notions of a shadowy, perhaps even Passionless, Jesus, a teacher of wisdom whom we scarcely know, lying behind the gospels, waiting to be discovered in the background as the 'historical Jesus'.

---

<sup>12</sup> Richard Bauckham, op. cit. Perhaps also James C.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered: Christianity in the Making* Vol.1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> So David R. Catchpole, *The Quest for Q* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993). See also C.M. Tuckett, *Q and the History of Early Christianity: Studies on Q* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996).

## How We Got Our Synoptic Gospels

However the resultant Q is well-nigh impossible to define and scholars disagree widely with each other in their attempts to do so. The scholar C.S. Petrie makes this point in a colourful way. Speaking of the 'exasperating contradictoriness' of scholarly views as to the nature of Q, he writes:

'Q' is a single document; it is a composite document, incorporating earlier sources; it is used in different redactions; it is more than one document. The original language of 'Q' is Greek; the original language is Aramaic; it is used in different translations. 'Q' is the Matthaean Logia; it is not the Matthaean Logia. 'Q' has a definite shape; it is no more than an amorphous collection of fragments. 'Q' is a gospel; it is not a gospel. 'Q' includes the Crucifixion story; it does not include the Crucifixion story. 'Q' consists wholly of sayings and there is no narrative; it includes some narrative. All of 'Q' is preserved in Matt. and Luke; not all of it is preserved; it is better preserved in Matthew; it is better preserved in Luke. Matthew's order of 'Q' is the correct order; Luke's is the correct order; neither order is correct. 'Q' is used by Mark; it is not used by Mark.

Belief in Q arose from a misinterpretation of St John's saying about Matthew's *logia*. It leaves us with two different Lukes: Luke the evangelist, who allegedly plundered Q for a large part of his source material, and Luke the incomparable historian of the early Church who had apparently no notion at all of this mysterious 'Q community' where it all originated. I know of no believer in Q who is prepared to come to terms with the schizophrenic Luke which this belief entails.

In fact, the phenomena which give rise to Q can equally well be explained by the hypothesis that *Luke has simply used Matthew*.<sup>14</sup> Believers in Q commonly reject this notion on account of the apparently haphazard reordering of Matthew that this entails (recall that preservation of order often indicates a literary relationship). However this objection fails if Luke was working not from a scroll, but from a *memorised* Gospel of Matthew, as seems to have been the case. Besides, the notion that whoever wrote third (Luke or Matthew) was conflating the scrolls of both Mark and Q while writing his own, is physically improbable in an age which had no writing desk.<sup>15</sup> Imagine juggling three rolls of wallpaper on your lap at the same time!

Hence, Q falls to Occam's Razor, the principle which lies behind all scientific enquiry, that one should always adopt the simplest and most economical solution which fits the facts.<sup>16</sup> Belief that Luke used Matthew is a far simpler and more credible hypothesis than one which proposes a document for which historical evidence has never been found.

Why was Q so popular for so long? It is the archetypal product of source criticism, which has been the dominant approach to NT studies for most of the last century, and which concerns itself primarily with

---

<sup>14</sup> A.M. Farrer, 'On Dispensing with Q', in D.E. Nineham (ed.), *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R.H. Lightfoot* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955) 55-88.

<sup>15</sup> John Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark & Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1992) 204-5, citing B.M. Metzger, 'When Did Scribes Begin to Use Writing Desks?', *Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan and Jewish Christian* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 123-37.

<sup>16</sup> Or as Einstein put it, 'The grand aim of science [is] to cover the greatest number of empirical facts by logical deduction from the smallest possible number of hypotheses or axioms.' Quoted in Lincoln Barnett, *The Universe and Dr Einstein* (1950).

the *sources*, written and oral, behind the gospels.<sup>17</sup> The source critic as such seldom investigates the questions of *authorship, provenance and date* which are of primary interest to the historian. He wants to know about the *texts and traditions* behind the gospel; the historian wants to know also about the *people* behind the texts and traditions. Fairly obviously, if you do not ask the fundamental questions, you are unlikely to come up with the fundamental solutions.

This gives us the order: Matthew's *logia* - Mark - Matthew - Luke. We have already dated the first two. And we know that St Luke followed his Gospel with the Book of Acts. So if we can date Acts, we can give a *latest* date by which the Gospels of Matthew and Luke must have been written.

### 6. The Date of Acts<sup>18</sup>

*Acts can be dated with considerable confidence to the year 62* when it ends, judging from a convergence of what Luke says and what he doesn't say.

The very favourable view of the Roman Empire and its officials suggests strongly a date before the fire of Rome in 64, which occasioned the first persecutions by the Roman state of the early Church. Previously we see Roman governors bending over backwards to protect Paul & Co from the assaults of hostile Jews. There is no anticipation in Acts of Rome's later becoming the enemy.

A welter of details suggest that Luke was writing very close to the later events he is describing. For instance he never corrected Paul's prediction that he would never revisit Ephesus (20:25) as on the evidence of the letters to Timothy he clearly did. There is also the assumed familiarity on the part of his readers with the names of minor officials like Felix and Gallio, who would have been largely forgotten a few decades later. Most telling is Luke's silence as to Paul's fate at Rome, to which climax he has been building up for eight chapters. Instead of recounting the great show trial before Nero we have been expecting, his story fizzles out with a lame picture of Paul preaching the kingdom for two years, leaving the whole drama in mid-air. The effect has been compared to one of the gospels ending before the crucifixion. Various explanations have been attempted, but it is hard not to conclude that *the trial has not taken place at the time of writing*. Most probably Paul was released without trial in 62, there being no case against him, thus crystallising the book Luke has been assembling in Rome for the last two years. From the rough, unfinished nature of the text it looks as though he did so in a hurry, perhaps while preparing to depart with Paul for Ephesus, where they are next to be found. So *we can date Luke's Gospel*, which preceded it and is more polished, *to 60-1 in Rome*, where it was dedicated to the same Roman official 'Theophilus'. Hence it was subsequent to the shipwreck of Acts 27 when Paul and Luke will have lost practically everything except the clothes

---

<sup>17</sup> In the case of oral sources the pursuit in question is normally termed, 'form criticism'.

<sup>18</sup> See particularly R.B. Moberly, 'When was Acts Planned and Shaped?', *Evangelical Quarterly* 65:1 (1993) 5-26.

they stood up in. Luke had probably done most of his research while with Paul in his two year imprisonment in Caesarea (57-59, Acts 24:27). Interestingly, for part of this time he was in the company of Mark, who was probably his source for the Jerusalem scenes in the early part of Acts (Col 4:10,14, written from Caesarea). He will also have spoken to Mary the mother of Jesus, surely his source for the nativity, and to Philip the Evangelist (Acts 21:8); James (21:18); perhaps also to Peter at Antioch.

Then *Matthew's Gospel will have been written after Mark (45) and before Luke, say late 40s/50s.* Thus all three canonical gospels and Acts were complete within thirty years of the resurrection.

### 7. Later Dates for Mark

The dates proposed above constitute a reaction to the widely prevalent gospel dates that we find today. Thus Mark, the first canonical gospel, is often dated after 65 and commonly near or after the fall of Jerusalem in 70. The other gospels are then said to follow at intervals of about ten years. The driving force for such dates is to a large extent the belief that Jesus' prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple, sometimes called the 'Little Apocalypse', in Mark 13 and its parallel chapters in Matthew and Luke, must have been written after the event. We may comment:

- (1) Any date for Mark after 65 entails that not one of the thousands of Christians who perished under Nero after the fire of Rome in 64 had ever seen a single page of the canonical gospels. This gives some pause for thought. What was the anchor for their faith? Why did they bother?
- (2) Any date for Mark after 67 conflicts with the early Church's now unambiguous record that St Mark wrote during Peter's lifetime. One writer, Irenaeus, has been thought to imply otherwise, but this interpretation was decisively refuted a century ago and today there is no excuse for still maintaining it.<sup>19</sup>
- (3) The a priori belief that prophecies are always wrong is an unhistorical dogma and can in no way be used as a dating criterion. It is also falsified, eg by Churchill who at the age of 16 foretold his own role in defending London and the Empire from unprecedented attack some fifty years later.<sup>20</sup>
- (4) The Little Apocalypse is in fact strong evidence that all three Synoptics were penned before 70. For each of them contains a mixture of details relating to both the fall of

---

<sup>19</sup> Dom John Chapman, 'St Irenaeus on the Dates of the Gospels' *JTS* July 1905, 563-69, which convinced Harnack, *The Date of Acts and of the Synoptic Gospels*, (London: Williams & Norgate, 1911) 130, against his previous judgement.

<sup>20</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2003) 292.

## How We Got Our Synoptic Gospels

Jerusalem and the end of the age. None of the evangelists has managed to disentangle the two. After 70 it would have been quite evident that the first of these had happened while the second had not. So anyone recording this discourse afterwards would have doubtless made the distinction plain, giving Jesus full credit for his accuracy in predicting the fall of Jerusalem and anticipating equal accuracy at the end of the age. That not even Luke, the latest, has done so is strong evidence that all three were writing *before* the event.

© Martin Mosse,  
January 2008.

