

**IN DEFENSE OF THE GOSPELS:  
POST-REFORMATION ERA ARGUMENTS FOR  
THE NECESSITY OF AN EARLY PUBLICATION OF MATTHEW**

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Few and far between are the contemporary voices who yet contend that a written Gospel was published and widely disseminated during the first decade of the Christian church.<sup>3</sup> Yet there exists a rich history of post-Reformation era scholars who contended that the first Gospel, Matthew, was published within a few years or perhaps within a decade of the ascension. While these authors leveraged the writings of the church fathers for this viewpoint, along with internal features of Matthew's Gospel, our primary interest will be in their related arguments concerning the necessity of an early written Gospel for propagating the gospel message and for preserving its contents, as the church expanded beyond Judea. These scholars spoke of the common desire of ancient people to preserve their religious tenets through written materials, the duty of the witnesses to employ a written medium, the need to secure the church against the spread of falsehoods, the additional weight, authority, and certainty which a written record provided, the uniqueness of the Christian message, and the advantage of written instructions over oral.

The literary efforts of these authors were not merely academic, for many were defending the Christian faith and scriptures against contemporary challenges to its authenticity and authority, and they believed that the credibility of the Gospel witness was linked to the publication date of Matthew's Gospel. Correspondingly, the intent of this paper is to showcase these historical writings and to demonstrate that these scholars considered the early publication date for Matthew's Gospel to be defensible based on the perceived motivations of the early church. But further, it will be suggested that modern apologists should adopt a similar "motivational argument" for an early publication date for the Gospels, in defense of their veracity, rather than accepting the popular theory that multiple decades transpired before the church was motivated to publish the first Gospel. For pragmatic reasons, the scope will be limited to fourteen English works, published between the mid-1600s and AD 1900, with other works cited as appropriate.

### **Affirmations That Matthew Was Published No Later Than AD 42**

"The historical testimony of the church" was of immense importance to seventeenth century English Protestant apologists, as Anglicans, Puritans, and Nonconformists contended with each other and with papists and atheists.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, Patristic authorities were frequently invoked, not only when addressing issues of faith and practice, but also when defending the authenticity and authority of the Gospels, and this deference continued over subsequent centuries.<sup>5</sup> For those apologists who understood the publication date of Matthew's Gospel as

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<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the most notable contemporary advocates of early Gospels within the past century are John Wenham and Bernard Orchard. John Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark & Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem* (Sevenoaks, Kent: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991), 146–172; Bernard J. Orchard and Harold Riley, *The Order of the Synoptics: Why Three Synoptic Gospels?* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 241.

<sup>4</sup> John Spurr, "'A Special Kindness for Dead Bishops': The Church, History, and Testimony in Seventeenth-Century Protestantism," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 68, no. 1–2 (2005): 315, 323, 326. Nonconformists included those outside the church of England, such as the Presbyterians, Baptists, and Congregationalists.

<sup>5</sup> Spurr, "A Special Kindness," 314–317. For example, the reverence for the writings of the "primitive" church can be observed in the opening pages in William Cave, *Antiquitates Apostolicae: Or, The History of the*

being central to defending Gospel integrity, this testimony of the church fathers was leveraged, along with evidence identified within the Gospels themselves. But further, these apologists argued that the situation and needs of the early church would have motivated the publication of Matthew within roughly the first decade after the ascension, as Christianity spread first in Judea and then to the Jewish diaspora and beyond.<sup>6</sup> It is these latter arguments which this paper particularly seeks to explore and articulate, especially given that modern Christian academia has largely adopted the contrary premise that several decades transpired before the Jesus traditions were widely disseminated in a written form.<sup>7</sup>

Fourteen post-Reformation (pR) era writers have been selected who affirm that Matthew was written no later than AD 42, with several arguing that Matthew was published and widely distributed within just a few years after the ascension. Their affirmation of these early dates will be enumerated below, along with their evaluation of the external and internal evidence, and then their “motivational arguments” for the early necessity of a published Gospel will be elaborated, as they aspired to defend the credibility of the Gospel testimony.

Modern researchers owe a significant debt to the digitization efforts of recent years, which have made these pR materials more widely accessible. Therefore, I want to acknowledge Google books, the Library of Congress, Hathi Trust, Microsoft’s funding of the Internet Archive, and the Early English Books Online project for making this paper possible.

### Post-Reformation Era Advocates for an Early Matthew

Eight of the surveyed post-Reformation era writers assert that Matthew was written around AD 41-42. These include Richard Ward (1646), William Cave (1676), John Edwards (1693), Jeremiah Jones (1798), Edward Greswell (1837), Richard Watson (1844), Thomas Birks (1852), and Joseph Angus (1866).<sup>8</sup> Four writers propose AD 37-38, including Henry Owen

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*Lives, Acts and Martyrdoms of the Holy Apostles of Our Saviour, and the Two Evangelists SS. Mark and Luke* (London: R. Royston, 1676), sec. dedication.

<sup>6</sup> “The first decade” nomenclature is used a bit loosely herein, as the assumed date of the ascension itself varies by a few years between the various post-Reformation era authors. For example, Birks holds to AD 30 for the ascension and AD 42 for the publication of Matthew. T. R. Birks, *Horae Evangelicae: The Internal Evidence of the Gospel History*, ed. H. A. Birks (London: George Bell & Sons, 1852), 147, 243.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Richard Bauckham presumes that Mark was published in the 60s CE, thirty years after the death and ascension of Jesus, and that Matthew and Luke were likely published in the 80s CE, with John a little later. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 14, 19–20, 137. Craig Keener places Mark in the mid-60s and Matthew in the 70s. Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 42–44; Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 44, 126. Craig Blomberg argues that Mark was written sometime in the 60s, and believes that the evidence for Matthew slightly favors a date in the 60s, sometime after Mark. Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: Volume 1 New Testament: Introduction and Survey*, 2nd ed. (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009), 135, 151. Although, he does not want to place too much “significance” on whether the date of Matthew is in the 60s or later, given the availability of the “eyewitnesses of Jesus’s ministry.” Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament: Countering the Challenges to Evangelical Christian Beliefs* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2016), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Ward, *Theological Questions, Dogmatical Observations, and Evangelical Essays, upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ According to St. Matthew* (London, 1646), 4; Cave, *Antiquitates Apostolicae*, 180; John

(1764), George Tomline (1822), Thomas Horne (1825), and Francis Upham (1881).<sup>9</sup> Two writers simply insist that Matthew was written within a few years of the ascension; these are Robert Cockburne (1755) and Thomas Townson (1778).<sup>10</sup> Several non-English authors are also reported as having affirmed similar dates, including Baronius, Vossius, Wetstein, Tillemont, Patritius, Reithmeyer, and Du Pin.<sup>11</sup>

Broadly, their determinations are driven by their understanding of the testimony of the church fathers, the internal evidence within the Gospel itself, and by the perceived needs of the early church. The excerpts provided below are intended to showcase these perspectives, using their words, without highlighting or aspiring to resolve discrepancies between the various authors.

### The External Evidence of the Church Fathers

Each of these post-Reformation era authors typically begin their case for an early Matthew by recounting the testimony of the church fathers, and much of this testimony should be familiar to modern students of Gospel origins. And as with modern scholars, the pR authors struggled with how to reconcile this testimony. Cockburne is representative of most of these pR authors in leveraging the testimony of Eusebius, as confirmed by Jerome, Epiphanius, and others,

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Edwards, *A Discourse Concerning the Authority, Stile, and Perfection of the Books of the Old and New Testament*, vol. 3 (London: J. D., 1695), 416; Jeremiah Jones, *A New and Full Method of Settling the Canonical Authority of the New Testament*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1798), 162; Edward Greswell, *Dissertations upon the Principles and Arrangement of an Harmony of the Gospels*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, 4 vols. (Oxford: University Press, 1837); Richard Watson, *An Exposition of the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Mark and of Some Other Detached Parts of Holy Scripture* (New York, NY: G. Lane and P. P. Sandford, 1844), 8–9; Birks, *Horae Evangelicae*, 243; Joseph Angus, *The Bible Handbook: An Introduction to the Study of the Sacred Scripture*, Rev. (Philadelphia: James S. Claxton, 1866). Note that Lardner, contrary to what Cave appears to be saying in the cited work above, attributes an AD 48 date to Cave. Nathaniel Lardner, “A History of the Apostles and Evangelists, Writers of the New Testament,” in *A Collection of Theological Tracts, in Six Volumes*, by Richard Watson, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (London, 1791), 40–41.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Owen, *Observations on the Four Gospels: Tending Chiefly, to Ascertain the Times of Their Publication; and to Illustrate the Form and Manner of Their Composition* (London: T. Payne, 1764), 22; George Tomline, *An Introduction to the Study of the Bible: Elements of Christian Theology*, 14th ed., vol. 1 (London: T. Cadell, 1822), 211; Thomas Hartwell Horne, *Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*, 4th ed., vol. 4 (Philadelphia, PA: E. Littell, 1825), 232; Francis W. Upham, *Thoughts on the Holy Gospels: How They Came to Be in Manner and Form as They Are* (New York, NY: Phillips & Hunt, 1881), 163, 175.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Cockburne, *An Historical Dissertation on the Books of the New Testament; or, An Enquiry into Their Authority and Particular Character*, vol. 1, (1755), 191; Thomas Townson, *Discourses on the Four Gospels, Chiefly with Regard to the Peculiar Design of Each, and the Order and Places in Which They Were Written*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1778), 128. Note that the first work is actually anonymous, but is attributed to Cockburne by Townson. Townson, *Discourses*, 25n5.

<sup>11</sup> Lardner reports that Baronius “was of the opinion that this Gospel was published in the year 41, soon after Peter had begun to preach to Gentiles at the house of Cornelius in Caesarea,” while Vossius and Wetstein held that Matthew was written eight years after the ascension, and that Tillemont asserts that Matthew “wrote his Gospel about three years after the crucifixion,” around AD 36. Lardner, “A History,” 41. Patritius and Reithmeyer are identified by Heiss as arguing for an early date. M. Heiss, *The Four Gospels: Examined and Vindicated on Catholic Principles* (Milwaukee, WI: Hoffman Bros., 1863), 27. Du Pin indicates that Matthew wrote about AD 39. Louis Ellies Du Pin, *A New History of Ecclesiastical Writers*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (London: Abel Swall and Tim Childe, 1693), 187.

when declaring that “it seems to have been generally agreed among ancient writers” that Matthew’s Gospel was published first, “a few years after our Savior’s ascension, and before the apostles left Jerusalem to execute the commission [which] they had received to proselytize the nations.”<sup>12</sup> But further, Cockburn understands Eusebius as reporting that “St. Peter preached the Gospel at Rome, in the reign of Claudius; about which time it was that Matthew published his account ... when the witnesses ... were alive.”<sup>13</sup> More specifically, it was at the “beginning of the reign of Claudius.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the implication for Cockburne is that the Gospel was written no later than AD 41, though he himself will ultimately assert an earlier date.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, he does acknowledge that the writings of Irenaeus and other church fathers do suggest later dates.<sup>16</sup>

Edwards and other authors generally do not claim such an early trip to Rome by Peter, instead resolving that Matthew “committed the evangelical transactions to writing ... about eight years after Christ’s ascension,” before the apostles’ departure “to go and preach in foreign regions.”<sup>17</sup> Owen and others cite sixth century Cosmos of Alexandria as declaring that the Gospel was authored during the persecution which followed “the death of Stephen, which obliged St. Matthew to depart from Judea,” before which “the believers entreated him to leave with them a written instruction for the regulation of their lives ... his Gospel.”<sup>18</sup> Cave also cites Epiphanius as reporting that Matthew published “at the command of the apostles, while he was yet in Palestine, about eight years after the death of Christ.”<sup>19</sup> This account is “most plain,” Cave

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<sup>12</sup> Cockburne, *A Historical Dissertation*, 1:191–192. Cockburne is presumably deferring to such passages as Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.24.5-7; 5.8.1-2 (Origin); 6.25.3-6; Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, preface; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 51.4.12-51.5.1; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1.

<sup>13</sup> Cockburne, *A Historical Dissertation*, 1:113. For the reference to Peter being in Rome during Claudius, Cockburne cites Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.14. For the Matthew reference, Cockburne cites Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.15, which does not directly refer to Matthew. Perhaps Cockburne is suggesting a linkage to Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.24.5-7. For this time period, the pertinent emperors were Tiberius (14-37), Caligula (37-41), Claudius (41-54), and Nero (54-68). Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, ed. D. A. Carson, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Cockburne, *A Historical Dissertation*, 1:194n3. Cockburne attributes this to Eusebius, without specifying the reference; perhaps he is alluding to Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.13-14. Some of our authors also link to a disputed “third year of Caligula” passage in Eusebius. Tomline, *Introduction to the Study*, 1:210ni.

<sup>15</sup> Cockburne, *A Historical Dissertation*, 1:192–193.

<sup>16</sup> Cockburne, *A Historical Dissertation*, 1:192; Owen, *Observations*, 2–3. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1.

<sup>17</sup> Edwards does not cite his source, although shortly thereafter he cites Jerome, Eusebius, St. Augustine, and Chrysostom, when asserting that Matthew wrote first in Hebrew, then Greek. Edwards, *A Discourse*, 3:416. Some of the others who leverage the eight years or so statement include Jones, *Method*, 3:162; Ward, *Theological Questions*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Owen, *Observations*, 2, 21–22.

<sup>19</sup> Cave, *Antiquitates Apostolicae*, 180. Cave’s sidenote identifies Epiphanius’ “Haeref. 51” as his source; however, Epiphanius merely reports that “the first issuance of the Gospel was assigned to” Matthew. Thus, Cave may be taking Epiphanius as implying that Matthew was still in Jerusalem while the disciples were still gathered. Epiphanius, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: Books II and III, De Fide*, trans. Frank Williams, 2nd ed., vol. 79, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 29.

declares, as Matthew's Gospel must have been "written before the dispersion of the apostles, seeing [that] St. Bartholomew ... took it along with him into India," according to Pantaenus.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, brief reference is made to notes added to various manuscripts, which also attest to this time frame, eight years after the ascension, but this is merely offered by these authors as supplemental collaboration, and generally with the full recognition that the attestation of these side notes is unprovenanced.<sup>21</sup>

### The Conflicting External Evidence: An Early Hebrew Edition?

The pR authors often tried to address the difficult statements and apparent discrepancies within the writings of the church fathers, beyond just the issue of Matthew's publication date. For example, one major area of contention concerns the language of the original publication of Matthew's Gospel, and these authors are certainly not agreed in how to reconcile the ancient testimony. Townson, Tomline, and other pR authors cite Papias (as quoted by Eusebius), Irenaeus, Origen, Jerome, and others who assert that Matthew was initially written in the Hebrew language (or perhaps Aramaic or Syriac), while in Judea, and principally for the sake of the believing Jews, before a Greek version was published, despite there being no extant physical evidence of a Hebrew version.<sup>22</sup> Of course, this absence of a Hebrew manuscript has long been raised by those who dispute the broader testimony of the church fathers.<sup>23</sup>

Cockburne is willing to accept the testimony of the church fathers, that Matthew was originally written in Hebrew, lest "their testimony in points of higher consequence" be weakened.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, he speculates that it is probable that the Greek version was written by Matthew himself, still well before Mark was published, and not as a pure translation.<sup>25</sup> Townson likewise proposes that Matthew was initially published in Hebrew, "for the sake of the common people of Jerusalem and Judea," but that "at the same time or very soon after it must

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<sup>20</sup> Cave, *Antiquitates Apostolicae*, 172, 180. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.10.2-3; Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men* 36.

<sup>21</sup> Townson, *Discourses*, 25; Jones, *Method*, 3:162; Louis Ellies Du Pin, *A Compleat History of the Canon and Writers of the Books of the Old and New Testament: By Way of Dissertation with Useful Remarks on That Subject*, vol. 2 (London: H. Rhodes, 1699), 36.

<sup>22</sup> Townson, *Discourses*, 26; Tomline, *Introduction to the Study*, 1:213. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.24.5-6; 3.39.16; 6.25.3-4; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1; Jerome, "Prefaces to the Commentaries," in *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. W. H. Fremantle, vol. 6, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1893), 495; Cyril, "The Catechetical Lectures," in *S. Cyril of Jerusalem, S. Gregory Nazianzen*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Edwin H. Gifford, vol. 7, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1894), 98.

<sup>23</sup> For example, Michaelis reports Schroder as taking "pains to invalidate" the testimonies of the church fathers, beginning with the testimony of Papias and others concerning the Hebrew Matthew. John David Michaelis, *Introductory Lectures to the Sacred Books of the New Testament* (London: J. and R. Tonson, 1761), 214-217.

<sup>24</sup> Cockburne, *A Historical Dissertation*, 1:196.

<sup>25</sup> Cockburne, *A Historical Dissertation*, 1:205-206. Edwards considers it probable that Matthew also wrote the Greek version, adding explanations of "some of the Hebrew words." Edwards, *A Discourse*, 3:416.

have been published also in Greek, which was more familiar than Hebrew to a great body of the [Jewish] dispersion.”<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, Horne proposes that the Hebrew version was published in AD 37-38, while the Greek version was published in AD 61; with the latter date proposed as a means of reconciling “the apparently conflicting testimonies of Irenaeus and Eusebius.”<sup>27</sup> Greswell echoes this view, dismissing the notion that both versions were published together, as he maintains that the diaspora Jews would have understood the Hebrew version; plus, he reasons that if the Greek version quickly followed, then of necessity it would have begun with an obligatory mention of the Hebrew text, which it does not.<sup>28</sup> Regardless, there is no suggestion by these writers that the Hebrew version might have been inferior in scope or quality to the Greek version, as though a subsequent Greek version improved on what was originally published.<sup>29</sup> Ward and Watson, on the other hand, are skeptical that a Hebrew version ever existed.<sup>30</sup>

### The Conflicting External Evidence: Irenaeus’ “in Rome”

Many scholars of the era understood Irenaeus’ testimony as suggesting an early 60s date for Matthew. For example, John David Michaelis accepts Matthew as being written first, given the canonical order, and although he acknowledges that “Eusebius affirms that this Gospel was written in the year forty-one,” Michaelis instead defers to his understanding of Irenaeus, who “dates it [Matthew] about the year sixty-one.”<sup>31</sup> This is because Michaelis deems Irenaeus as providing the most ancient testimony and because he believes that Luke’s Gospel does not reflect an awareness of Matthew’s Gospel.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, some who favor Irenaeus’ dates are accused of having had ulterior motives. For example, Jones cites the Portuguese Jesuit Andradius as agreeing with Irenaeus, as this better supported the “Popish doctrine of the necessity of

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<sup>26</sup> Townson, *Discourses*, 78. Owen asserts that if the Gospel was not originally in Greek, then it was “very early translated into that language.” Owen, *Observations*, 83.

<sup>27</sup> Horne, *Critical Study*, 4:234. Horne points out that Josephus also published in two languages, as he “wrote the History of the Jewish War in Hebrew and Greek.” Horne, *Critical Study*, 4:237. Also, Greswell, *Dissertations*, 1:137. Upham merely asserts that Matthew turned the Hebrew (or Aramaic) Gospel into Greek, “some years after.” Upham, *Thoughts*, 195.

<sup>28</sup> Greswell, *Dissertations*, 1:141–142, 153. Greswell goes further, to suggest that Mark was the primary translator of Matthew’s Gospel, and then supplemented it with his own, “either both at Rome, or both about the same time. Greswell, *Dissertations*, 1:154.

<sup>29</sup> Nor do the church fathers suggest that the Hebrew version of Matthew was inferior to the Greek version, given that it is held up for direct comparison with the other Gospels, and given that they don’t feel the need to address the eventual Greek publication of Matthew, other than what Papias indicates. Blomberg, however, argues that the *logia* referred to by Papias was “probably a precursor to what we call the Gospel of Matthew ... perhaps a collection of Jesus’s teachings.” Yet, this fails to recognize that Papias’ works themselves were called the “Interpretation of the Oracles (*Λογίων*) of the Lord,” comprised of five books. Thus, Papias uses the term to refer to a substantive body of work. Paul likewise uses the term to refer to the large body of OT writings (Rom. 3:2). Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the New Testament*, 6–7. Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 3.39.1.

<sup>30</sup> Ward, *Theological Questions*, 5; Watson, *An Exposition of the Gospels*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Michaelis, *Introductory Lectures*, 212–213.

<sup>32</sup> Michaelis, *Introductory Lectures*, 213.



traditions and the insufficiency of scripture.”<sup>33</sup> Townson cites “learned men,” who dismissively respond to suggestions that Matthew could have published in the early years, given that, in their opinion, Matthew could not possibly have understood the “prophecies and prophetic parables” which he cites until the church had been more fully realized.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the dating is an apologetic issue for our authors.

In this context, it is profitable to consider how those supporting an early date dealt with the following account from Irenaeus.

Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, Irenaeus not only affirms that Matthew was written first and that he wrote in the Hebrew dialect, but also that Matthew apparently did so while Peter and Paul were together at Rome, founding the church. Horne, as noted earlier, attempts to reconcile the apparent conflict between Irenaeus and Eusebius by proposing that the Hebrew version of Matthew was published in AD 37-38 and the Greek version in AD 61, yet even this doesn’t fully align with what Irenaeus appears to be claiming, relative to the founding of the Roman church.<sup>36</sup> Birks outright dismisses Irenaeus, as offering “an historical absurdity,” in proposing that Matthew would write the first Gospel 36 years after the ascension, and “in Syriac,” a language unknown to most of Christendom at that time.<sup>37</sup> Other authors follow Eusebius in arguing that Irenaeus is mistaken in not recognizing that Peter had been “at Rome long before [he and Paul were there together], viz. in the year 41,” for it is clear, per Paul’s letter to the Romans, that the Roman church was founded long before the apostles’ joint residency there in the 60s.<sup>38</sup>

Compounding this enigma is the fact that Eusebius, when quoting the passage from Irenaeus, does not take issue with Irenaeus’ views on the date of the Gospel, though they appear

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<sup>33</sup> Jones also cites Chemnitius and Mill as subscribing to Irenaeus’ date. Jones, *Method*, 3:48–49.

<sup>34</sup> The critics also alleged that Matthew could not have sufficiently understood the superiority “of the moral above the ceremonial law, the extent of Christ’s kingdom on earth, the calling of the Gentiles and rejection of the Jews ... ‘till a course of years had unfolded their meaning and given him a clearer discernment of their nature.’” Townson, *Discourses*, 109–112.

<sup>35</sup> Irenaeus, “Irenæus against Heresies,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Alexander Roberts and W. H. Rambaut, vol. 1 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 414; Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. 3.1.1. The portion concerning Matthew is repeated in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.8.2.

<sup>36</sup> Horne, *Critical Study*, 4:234.

<sup>37</sup> Birks, *Horae Evangelicae*, 267.

<sup>38</sup> Cockburne, *A Historical Dissertation*, 1:192–193; Greswell, *Dissertations*, 1:153. This early visit approach is adopted by Wenham and Bernier. Although, Bernier ultimately concludes that Matthew was written between 45 and 59, and with Mark written between 42 and 45, given Mark’s purported lack of attention to the Gentile mission. Wenham, *Redating*, 146–147; Jonathan Bernier, *Rethinking the Dates of the New Testament: The Evidence for Early Composition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 71, 75, 84.

to modern readers to diverge from Eusebius' own.<sup>39</sup> Townson offers a solution by suggesting that Irenaeus is not actually addressing the question of when Matthew was published; but rather, Irenaeus' objective "was to declare from whom and how the churches had received the doctrine which they held."<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, Townson proposes to restructure the relationship between Irenaeus' statements above, treating "preaching" (i.e., "evangelizing") not as an adverbial (temporal) modifier of the first clause, but as a substantive, thus rendering the passage as, "now Matthew among the Hebrews published also a written Gospel ... Peter and Paul being the evangelizers at Rome," etc.<sup>41</sup> In 1905, Chapman offered up this same approach, pointing out that the preceding paragraph (as preserved in a Latin manuscript) sets up the question, "How has this preaching [of the principle apostles] come down to us in writing?"<sup>42</sup> Irenaeus' response is simply that "two of the apostles wrote down their own teaching, while [the teaching of] two others were reported by a follower."<sup>43</sup>

But this still leaves unresolved Irenaeus' apparent claim that both Peter and Paul directly participated in the founding of the church in Rome, given that Paul's participation is not supported by the biblical record.<sup>44</sup> Fortunately, a contemporary classics scholar has perhaps offered a solution. Michèle Lowrie reminds us that "cities bear a symbolic weight that goes beyond their manifold physical and social structures."<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, Rome was not merely the capital city, but Rome was the empire to its fullest extent. Hence in our context, to preach in Rome (ἐν Ῥώμῃ) was to preach *among* the Romans, to take the gospel outside Judea, as opposed to working *among* the Hebrews (ἐν τοῖς Ἑβραίοις).<sup>46</sup> And in particular, Roman colonies such as Caesarea Maritima and Pisidian Antioch "were considered extensions of Rome itself."<sup>47</sup> And thus, in so far as Roman bastions represented Rome, preaching in a city like Caesarea Maritima was akin to preaching in Rome. Birks perhaps comes closest to this approach when he makes his case that Mark's Gospel was written to the Roman converts in Caesarea Maritima, given the Latinisms and other internal evidence, Caesarea's role as "the seat of Roman government in the province," and the frequent movement of public servants to and from Italy.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> John T. Curran and John L. Curran, "St. Irenaeus and the Dates of the Synoptics - Part 1," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (January 1943): 38. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.8.2.

<sup>40</sup> Townson, *Discourses*, 112. Wall similarly asserts that Irenaeus was not trying to lay out chronological relationships. William Wall, *Critical Notes, Especially on the Various Readings of the New Testament Books* (London: William Innys, 1730), 1–2.

<sup>41</sup> Townson, *Discourses*, 111–112.

<sup>42</sup> John Chapman, "St. Irenaeus on the Dates of the Gospels," *Journal of Theological Studies* VI, no. 24 (1905): 564–565.

<sup>43</sup> Chapman, "St. Irenaeus on the Dates of the Gospels," 565.

<sup>44</sup> John L. Curran, "St. Irenaeus and the Dates of the Synoptics - Part 3," *The Catholic Biblical quarterly* 5, no. 3 (July 1943): 302.

<sup>45</sup> Michèle Lowrie, "Rome: City and Empire," *The Classical world* 97, no. 1 (Autumn 2003): 57.

<sup>46</sup> This approach to the 'preposition plus singular noun' construct (ἐν Ῥώμῃ) is comparable to the usage in Mark 6:4, which speaks of Jesus' reception within his homeland (ἐν τῇ πατρίδι αὐτοῦ).

<sup>47</sup> John E. Stambaugh, "Cities: Greco-Roman Cities," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1047.

<sup>48</sup> Birks, *Horae Evangelicae*, 232.

Again, note that the same Greek preposition (ἐν) is used by Irenaeus to introduce the two audiences, perhaps suggesting contrasting spheres, rather than a contrast between a location and a sphere, as the disparate glosses used in the English translations suggest. Similarly, Josephus could speak of Caesar as bestowing on “Antipater the privilege of a citizen of Rome (Ἀντιπάτρῳ δὲ πολιτείαν ἐν Ῥώμῃ),” in a sense which is broader than the geographically defined city on seven hills.<sup>49</sup> And Paul could defend himself as a Roman citizen (Ῥωμαῖός; Acts 22:25-29).

If this approach is accepted, then Irenaeus stands well aligned with the other church fathers, in affirming an early date for Matthew, by stating that Matthew published among the Hebrews even as both Peter and Paul were preaching in Rome, whether in Caesarea Maritima (Acts 10) or beyond.

### The Internal Evidence within the Scriptures

The pR authors often found evidence for an early date within the text of Matthew’s Gospel itself. Lardner, though not himself an advocate of an early date, nicely articulates one argument as he finds it remarkable that “none of the Evangelists should give in their account [anything] of the preaching of the apostles after our Lord’s ascension, and the descent of the Holy Ghost upon them,” nor of the miracles performed, nor of the many converts.<sup>50</sup> To other authors, this suggests that the earliest Gospel must have been written before substantive time had passed.<sup>51</sup> In particular, the failure to mention the persecution following Stephen’s martyrdom is claimed by Owen and others as evidence for a very early date.<sup>52</sup> And Upham elaborates on “Matthew’s caution ... [in referring to] certain persons and events” as evidence that his Gospel was “written as early as” this time of persecution, as he seeks to protect the identities of vulnerable Christians.<sup>53</sup>

In addition, Townson highlights the distinct way in which Matthew references prominent individuals. For example, “Matthew entitles Herod the Great simply [as] Herod the King” (compare Matt. 2:1 with Luke 1:5), which to Townson suggests that the disciple wrote before he knew of another king Herod; namely Herod Agrippa, who was not “invested ... with regal power over Judea” until AD 37.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, in Matthew’s account, the most distinguished John is John the Baptist, and therefore Matthew consistently refers to the disciple John, as the brother of James. Whereas the other Gospels only refer to the disciple as John, given his post-resurrection prominence, except for when he is first introduced. Also, Pilate is frequently referred to as being

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<sup>49</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 14.137; Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 374; Flavius Josephus and Benedictus Niese, *Flavii Josephi Opera*, vol. 3 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1892), 264.

<sup>50</sup> Lardner, “A History,” 164.

<sup>51</sup> For example, Tomline, *Introduction to the Study*, 1:211.

<sup>52</sup> Owen, *Observations*, 22; Upham, *Thoughts*, 163, 178.

<sup>53</sup> For example, Matthew’s Gospel appears particularly discrete, in comparison with the other Gospels, in its treatment of the family of Lazarus and of Jesus’ mother, who may have been at particular risk. There are likewise others whom he does not refer to by name, such as Jarius, Bartimaeus, and Zaccheus. Upham, *Thoughts*, 163, 170, 178–179.

<sup>54</sup> Townson, *Discourses*, 106–107.

governor, suggesting that Pilate still held that post at the time Matthew was written, in advance of his recall to Rome before Tiberius' death in AD 37.<sup>55</sup>

Greswell simply notes that Matthew's Gospel "exhibits plain indications that it was composed expressly for a Hebrew community of Christians, and in Palestine, and very probably, early in the Christian history."<sup>56</sup>

### Summary

The varied accounts from the church fathers are well known to modern students of Gospel origins, as are the weaknesses of these accounts, given their apparent contradictions and the temporal remoteness of the church fathers from the first century. Indeed, the weaknesses of these testimonials were well known to the pR authors themselves, and they openly acknowledged such. However, for the pR authors, what was often more important than the testimonies of the church fathers was what our authors found in the biblical texts themselves and what they understood of the situation of the early church. Owen explains his process of evaluation, as follows, while speaking in the third person.<sup>57</sup>

In the course of his [Owen's own] enquiry, he followed chiefly the light of Scripture; and where that failed, betook himself to the primitive writers for further instruction. But as these writers differ widely in their accounts, he has only so far adopted their opinions, as they appear conformable to the sacred history, and consistent with each other and even the testimonies alleged are generally to be looked upon as no more than collateral proofs of what had been deduced [by Owen] before from the internal structure of the Gospels. ... if he has affixed to some of the Gospels, and particularly to Saint Matthew's, an earlier date than others have done, it was because the peculiarities of this Gospel, in conjunction with the circumstances of the Jewish church, evidently point to such a period.<sup>58</sup>

### Arguments for the Early Necessity of a Published Gospel

We now move to the main focus of this paper. From the perspective of the pR authors, Matthew was motivated to publish his Gospel within the earliest years of the church for a variety

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<sup>55</sup> Townson, *Discourses*, 105, 107–108; Horne, *Critical Study*, 4:232. Birks makes the same argument concerning John and Pilate. Birks, *Horae Evangelicae*, 244–245, 251.

<sup>56</sup> Greswell, *Dissertations*, 1:16.

<sup>57</sup> Note that it was Henry Owen who some credit with originating the Two Gospel hypothesis, which postulates that Matthew was written first, that Luke then used Matthew, and that Mark then used both Matthew and Mark. Stanley E. Porter and Bryan R. Dyer, "The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction to Its Key Terms, Concepts, Figures, and Hypotheses," in *The Synoptic Problem: Four Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 14–15; Grant R. Osborne and Matthew C. Williams, "The Case for the Markan Priority View of the Gospel Origins," in *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2002), 20–21.

<sup>58</sup> Owen, *Observations*, iv–v.

of reasons. Twelve arguments for the necessity of an early Gospel publication are elaborated below.

### Because all People Seek to Preserve Their Religion

Cockburne observes that people of “all civilized nations” seek “to preserve their religion and to transmit it to [their] posterity.”<sup>59</sup> Indeed, the custom of writing religious tenets was evident among the Jews, the followers of Confucius, the Persians, the Arabians, and the Romans.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, it is reasonable, Cockburne insists, to assume that the Jewish Christians would likewise seek to expeditiously preserve their religion through written means. Correspondingly, Greswell finds it “reasonable to assume that the necessities of later ages [for written religious material] would ... immediately” be in view.<sup>61</sup>

### Due to the Demand for an Authentic Record by Both Judean Jews and Diaspora Jews

Owen contends, with regard to the time of the first Gospel publication, that “it may be sufficient to observe at present, that the circumstances of things, and the necessities of the church, seem to plead in favor of the earliest, rather than the latest [proposed] dates. For we can hardly suppose that the church would be left [for many years] ... without any authentic account in writing of facts so highly important not only to its edification, but also to its very being.”<sup>62</sup> More specifically, Cave reports that after the ascension, Matthew was “entreated by the converted Jews to commit to writing the history of our Savior’s life and actions, and to leave it among them as the standing record of what he had preached to them.”<sup>63</sup>

Townson, having determined that the Hebrew and Greek versions of Matthew were written for the Jews of Judea and the Diaspora before a large number of Gentiles were integrated into the church, resolves that “Matthew was published when the situation of the church ... required” a Gospel, “within just a few years of the ascension” while the apostles were still in Judea, and certainly by the beginning of AD 37.<sup>64</sup> Birks identifies the conversion of Cornelius as the “motive for recording the discourses and miracles of Jesus, both for the use of the converts in Palestine and for a testimony to the unbelieving Jews.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Cockburne, *A Historical Dissertation*, 1:iii.

<sup>60</sup> Cockburne, *A Historical Dissertation*, 1:v–vi.

<sup>61</sup> Greswell, *Dissertations*, 1:68.

<sup>62</sup> Owen, *Observations*, 7.

<sup>63</sup> Cave, *Antiquitates Apostolicae*, 178. Geisler aptly asserts that “it is highly improbable that the early church had no biographical interests” and illustrates this by highlighting the specificity of the details which are included within the Gospels. Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2013), 312–313. Indeed, Paul demonstrates the inherent value of biological history to a contemporary audience, by reciting his own personal history in his first epistle (Gal. 1:11-2:19).

<sup>64</sup> Townson, *Discourses*, 113, 128.

<sup>65</sup> Birks, *Horae Evangelicae*, 243.

## To Provide Greater Weight and Authority to the Christian Message

Tomline asserts that the apostles would lose “no time in writing an account of the miracles which Jesus performed, and of the discourses which he delivered, because the sooner such an account was published, the easier it would be to enquire into its truth and accuracy; and consequently, when these points were satisfactorily ascertained, the greater would be its weight and authority.”<sup>66</sup> This is reminiscent of Paul’s evangelistic approach during his journeys, as he would often reason from the written scriptures (Acts 17:2, 11).

Horne is of the same opinion, “for as the Jews ... [would] endeavor to render suspected, the oral declarations of the apostles concerning the life, transactions, and resurrection of our Savior, it would not a little tend to strengthen the faith and courage of the first Christians, if the most important events in the history of Jesus Christ were committed to writing in a narrative which should set forth his dignity and divine majesty.”<sup>67</sup> Townson also points out that since the Jerusalem counsel deemed it necessary to convey their message to Antioch in writing, “we cannot suppose” that they would find it any less necessary to convey the “life and doctrine of their blessed Lord” in a similar authoritative manner.<sup>68</sup>

## As a Duty of Those Called to Be Witnesses

Given the use of “the scriptures on every Sabbath ... the witnesses could secure the precision and permanency of their witness only by putting it in writing.”<sup>69</sup> Per Upham, many within the church would surely have started writing out their recollections of Jesus at an early date, particularly after the conversion of thousands within Jerusalem and so, “the witnesses must then have seen ... that it was their duty to have the Gospel properly written out.”<sup>70</sup>

## To Secure the Church Against the Spread of Falsehoods

Given the widespread interest in Jesus, and the likely emergence of “apocryphal and imperfect gospels,” Birks argues that placing the “facts on record” was imperative, in order “to secure the church against the spread of falsehoods” or the publication of materials by writers “of secondary and more remote authority.”<sup>71</sup> This is reminiscent of Quintilian’s lament that students

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<sup>66</sup> Tomline, *Introduction to the Study*, 1:211. Horne affirms Bishop Tomline’s assessment. Horne, *Critical Study*, 4:229–230. Further, the Christian teachings would then be understood to “be of equal authority among Christians, as the writings of the Old Testament were among the Jews.” William Lowth, *A Vindication of the Divine Authority and Inspiration of the Writings of the Old and New Testament* (Oxford: John Wilmot, 1692), 13.

<sup>67</sup> Horne, *Critical Study*, 4:226.

<sup>68</sup> Townson, *Discourses*, 75.

<sup>69</sup> Upham, *Thoughts*, 40.

<sup>70</sup> Upham, *Thoughts*, 44–45.

<sup>71</sup> Birks, *Horae Evangelicae*, 55.

“made frequent annotations [against his orations] that sometimes circulated in public and reproduced a teacher’s work to its detriment.”<sup>72</sup>

#### Due to the Apostle’s Zeal and the Uniqueness of the Christian Message

Jones goes further, by pointing out that “the zeal of the apostles and first Christians for propagating Christianity” was so great that it cannot be imagined that they would “be so negligent” as to not promptly employ a written medium as a “means to promote it.”<sup>73</sup>

Christianity, in its very infancy, made a very great noise in the world: the doctrines of it were new and surprising; vast numbers continually embraced it: one would think therefore, that, had there been nothing else, men's curiosity would have influenced them to procure those authentic accounts, which the Gospels contain; that so they might know the history of a person's life and doctrines, who had been so remarkable, and made so great a figure in the world.<sup>74</sup>

#### To Facilitate Training in Christian Belief and Practice

Edwards contends that, when Paul reminded Timothy of the training which he had received as a child, Matthew’s Gospel was one of the scriptures which guided Timothy in the development of his Christian faith and practice (2 Tim. 3:14-16).<sup>75</sup> The early dissemination of these written materials could be used for private edification.

#### To Support the General Edification and Public Reading Within the Church

Church leaders were expected to publicly read and exhort from the Christian scriptures (2 Tim. 4:13), reflecting the synagogue practice. Accordingly, Watson asserts as presumptive that Matthew would have been published early, if only to satisfy the public reading and general education needs of the Christian assemblies.

Still many became Christians in Judea, and other countries, who could only be generally and vaguely acquainted with the public life and discourses of their Redeemer; persons brought to faith and salvation by the impression of the miracles of the apostles, the convincing native energy of truth, and the secret influences of grace upon their hearts, for whose confirmation in faith, and the holy comfort of the Gospel, that history of Christ, that exhibition of his doctrine, that powerful impression of his whole extraordinary character, which every single gospel contains, was essential. The Gospels were books to be read in their assemblies, as being placed upon a level with the sacred books of the Old Testament by their inspiration, and as being also the key to the law and the prophets ...

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<sup>72</sup> Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory* 1 Pr 7-8 and 2.11.7, as cited by Raffaella Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 144.

<sup>73</sup> Jones, *Method*, 3:164, 172.

<sup>74</sup> Jones, *Method*, 3:164.

<sup>75</sup> Edwards, *A Discourse*, 3:29.

All these present strong reasons for an early composition of an authorized history of Christ, and favor, as a presumptive argument, the early dates ascribed to that of St. Matthew, which was undoubtedly the first published.<sup>76</sup>

### To Help Christian Faith Be More Certain

Ward asserts that the Gospels were written “for the help of our knowledge, lest that in process of time, there should either have been no remembrance, or a false remembrance, of our salvation and redemption by grace”; thus, God has committed such to writing, “that the truth might remain . . . unto all ages.”<sup>77</sup> Further, the “Lord would have our memories to retain truth, not lies, and therefore commands the Gospel to be written that the truth may not be corrupted.”<sup>78</sup> Ward claims that

The gospel was written for the help of our faith, lest it should have been uncertain. If the history of Christ's conception, birth, life, temptation, sufferings, obedience, and the like, had only been by tradition delivered from father to son; in process of time, we should have questioned the truth of it, and so our faith would have been the more shaken and less sure: to redress which, the Lord commends all these things to writing, that so our faith might be firm and working, not frail, and wavering. If the gospel had been related unto us by others, not by the apostles, we should have been prone to have called the truth and certainty of it in question: as the Sadducees, who will neither receive nor embrace any other scripture, but only the Pentateuch, or five books of Moses, because none were written by him, but them: and therefore the Lord will have the gospel written, and the canon and rule of faith taught, confirmed, and sealed by his apostles, who were eye and ear witnesses, of what they wrote, that we might the more undoubtedly believe the infallible truth of it.<sup>79</sup>

### Due to a Concern over the Loss of the Eyewitnesses

Cockburne dismisses the late dates which Irenaeus seems to suggest, lest “the memory of these extraordinary facts” be “impaired by the death of so many eyewitnesses.”<sup>80</sup>

### Due to Concerns that Oral Traditions Are Liable to Uncertainty and Resistance

Jones reminds his readers that “Matthew has delivered to us not only the actions, but the discourse of Christ; and this he must needs be able to do with greater certainty, while they were fresh in his memory, than when through length of time he began to lose the impressions of them.”<sup>81</sup> Indeed, the consensus of these authors was that oral traditions were liable to great

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<sup>76</sup> Watson, *An Exposition of the Gospels*, 9.

<sup>77</sup> Ward, *Theological Questions*, 3.

<sup>78</sup> Ward, *Theological Questions*, 3.

<sup>79</sup> Ward, *Theological Questions*, 3–4.

<sup>80</sup> Cockburne, *A Historical Dissertation*, 1:193.

<sup>81</sup> Jones, *Method*, 3:50; Birks, *Horae Evangelicae*, 60.



uncertainty and corruption, and offered a basis for others to impeach the accuracy of the Gospels.<sup>82</sup> This view aligns with that of ancient Greco-Roman authors, such as Cicero, Livy, Philo, Plutarch, Quintilian and others who likewise expressed concerns over the reliability of aging memories and admonished orators to be active writers.<sup>83</sup> Further, it was believed by the pR authors that only by recording the rules of a religion could it successfully be promulgated, particularly since there is “an innate propension to licentiousness” and indulging the passions, which resists constraints; thus, “it would not have been safe for this reason to trust to their memory that which they did not care practice.”<sup>84</sup> Plus, it was observed that the oral tradition practices of the Jews were condemned by the Lord Himself (Matt. 15:2-9); therefore, the pR authors expressed little sympathy to the prospect that the church would have followed a similar oral tradition model.<sup>85</sup>

### To Facilitate Propagation into Other Languages

Angus points out that “the public reading of these books [scripture] in a language intelligible to the people, was appointed by God both among the Jews and in the Christian church.”<sup>86</sup> Therefore, it may be assumed (although Angus doesn’t explicitly state such), that the bilingual disciples, who were ministering in regions where Syriac, Latin, and other languages were prominent, would recognize the inherent value in having a written source from which translations could be made.

### Summary

In summary, the authors cited above emphatically argued that the apostles would have been motivated to promptly publish a Gospel, soon after the ascension and before the church expanded much beyond Judea. The prompt publishing of a Gospel would preserve Jesus’ ministry and teachings for both present and future believers, would make them available for both private and public use, and would facilitate the propagation of the message into other lands and languages. And it would secure the accuracy of such against the death of the witnesses, the inaccuracies of less credible witnesses, the frailties of memory, the natural propensity to soften the teachings, and the attacks of outsiders. For these and other reasons, our authors fully believed

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<sup>82</sup> Cockburne, *A Historical Dissertation*, 1:iii; Birks, *Horae Evangelicae*, 39; Townson, *Discourses*, 76.

<sup>83</sup> Daniel B. Moore, “Original Audience Skepticism of Bauckham’s Eyewitness Memory Theory for Preserving the Jesus Traditions” (MA thesis, Western Seminary, 2020), 54–56.

<sup>84</sup> Cockburne, *A Historical Dissertation*, 1:iv. “So incessant is the influence of man’s moral state upon his judgment and perceptions, that any unwritten revelation must have undergone essential, though, perhaps, insensible modifications.” Angus, *Bible Handbook*, 81.

<sup>85</sup> Angus, *Bible Handbook*, 90.

<sup>86</sup> Angus, *Bible Handbook*, 88. Also, Louis Ellies Du Pin, *A Compleat History of the Canon and Writers of the Books of the Old and New Testament: By Way of Dissertation with Useful Remarks on That Subject*, vol. 1 (London: H. Rhodes, 1699), 226.

that an early publication date was both reasonable and defensible based on the perceived situation of the early church.<sup>87</sup>

### **An Apologetic Concern for the Authenticity and Authority of Scripture**

But why did these post-Reformation era writers themselves publish their own books? Many of these authors saw a need to respond to contemporary challenges to the authenticity and authority of the Gospels. For example, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in the English preface to Du Pin's treatise it is warned that "such a Spirit of atheism, skepticism, and infidelity has of late prevailed, that 'tis high time for every honest man and good Christian to look about him. ... [for] they chiefly aim to strike at the genuineness and authority of the Holy Scriptures ... [raising] objections against the truth and authority ... of Holy Writ."<sup>88</sup> Du Pin's apologetic treatise defends against this challenge by declaring that "the Gospels were from the first infancy of the church in the hands of all the Christians and read publicly in all the church."<sup>89</sup> Likewise, Cave regrets that "we live in a time, wherein religion is almost wholly disputed into talk and clamor, men wrangle eternally about useless and insignificant notions ... how much these evils have contributed to the atheism and impiety of the present age, I shall not take upon me to determine."<sup>90</sup> And his apologetic writings aspire to counter such.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Jones was responding to challenges from several authors who asserted that the Gospels were for a long while unknown and concealed.<sup>91</sup> While Cockburne was countering those who "have endeavored by subtle evasions to reason us out of the most important doctrines of the Christian faith, which they have represented with their usual modesty, as contradictory and absurd, or have explained away, by their artificial comments, the plain sense of the text, and the common belief of Christians, in order to accommodate them to certain schemes of moderation."<sup>92</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Birks begins his work by speaking of contemporaries who claim that the Gospels "are not real histories, but a collection of early legends," whose "composition must be referred to a date very considerably removed from the events they profess to record," with the "earliest barely preceding the fall of Jerusalem."<sup>93</sup> Thus, the Gospels are accused of "infidelity," charges are made against the accuracy of numerous accounts, and the German critics even go so

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<sup>87</sup> In the modern era, John Wenham has echoed many of these concerns. "Good reasons for making a written record are likely to have arisen quite soon. For instance, a reliable source of instruction would be needed when no qualified teacher was available; it would be felt necessary to secure accuracy in ... what was being taught ... [and] a need would be felt for a form of witness to those outside the church." Wenham, *Redating*, 200.

<sup>88</sup> "Translator's Preface," in *A Compleat History of the Canon and Writers of the Books of the Old and New Testament: By Way of Dissertation with Useful Remarks on That Subject*, vol. 1 (London: H. Rhodes, 1699), i.

<sup>89</sup> Du Pin, *A Compleat History*, 1:226.

<sup>90</sup> Cave, *Antiquitates Apostolicae* dedication.

<sup>91</sup> Jones refers to assertions recently made by Hobbes, Toland, and Dodwell. Jones, *Method*, 3:160, 163. Also, Cockburne, *A Historical Dissertation*, 1:58–59.

<sup>92</sup> Cockburne, *A Historical Dissertation*, 1:liv.

<sup>93</sup> Birks, *Horae Evangelicae*, 1–2.

far as speaking of the “inventive fertility of the writer of the third gospel.”<sup>94</sup> Upham understood that he had a duty to respond to “the insolence ... of infidels” who claimed that the church “knows nothing of her own records,” that the “Gospels are later than the time of the disciples ... their character [being] legendary and superstitious,” that they are later than the epistles, that “the disciples never thought of any written memorial to their Lord,” etc.<sup>95</sup> Accordingly, Upham endeavors to provide answers to “the time, the writers, and the inspiration of the Gospels.”<sup>96</sup>

In summary, these authors were motivated to defend the authenticity and authority of the Gospels, part of which was accomplished by defending an early date for the first written Gospel. And certainly, these same attacks on the veracity of the Gospels continue even to this day, with one modern author asserting that the Gospels are perhaps 80% accurate, given the publication delays.<sup>97</sup> Others skeptically speak of the Gospels as “refracted memories of Jesus, bent or skewed in a certain direction. But if we can recognize what these bents are ... we can still get back to probably authentic information about Jesus.”<sup>98</sup> Thus, the need to continue defending the Gospels yet remains.

Further, I contend that attempts by modern apologists to defend the accuracy of the Gospels, after having conceded that decades transpired before they were published, have proved unconvincing. This, despite the noble work of Norm Geisler and others to resist what he calls the “‘faulty memory’ hypothesis.”<sup>99</sup> Yet, while modern apologists generally root their arguments in those arguments found in scripture itself – finding that nature demonstrates the existence of God, that morality is inherent in the creation – there is no “perfect memory doctrine” found in scripture.<sup>100</sup> Rather, Jesus declared that he would be providing scribes to his church, not perfect memory (Matt. 23:34). Paul, coming out of the Pharisaic school does not affirm perfect memory;

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<sup>94</sup> The assertions of Strauss, Schleiermacher, Neander, and others are repeatedly countered by Birks. Birks, *Horae Evangelicae*, 37, 330–331.

<sup>95</sup> Upham, *Thoughts*, 14.

<sup>96</sup> Upham, *Thoughts*, 14.

<sup>97</sup> Robert K. McIver, *Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 20, 22; Robert K. McIver, “Collective Memory and the Reliability of the Gospel Traditions,” in *Jesus, Skepticism, and the Problem of History*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and J. Ed Komoszewski (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 132, 143.

<sup>98</sup> Anthony Le Donne, *The Historiographical Jesus: Memory, Typology, and the Son of David* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009). As quoted in Craig L Blomberg and Darlene M. Seal, “The Historical Jesus in Recent Evangelical Scholarship,” in *Jesus, Skepticism, and the Problem of History*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and J. Ed Komoszewski (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 50.

<sup>99</sup> Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 316–317.

<sup>100</sup> John 14:26 is the single passage which could perhaps be leveraged to assert a doctrine of perfect memory; and yet, Christian apologists do not appeal to the supernaturalistic empowerment of this passage, arguing instead based on speculative naturalistic assumptions. Carson appropriately offers a more exclusive understanding of John 14:26, as conveying that “one of the Spirit’s principal tasks” will be “to remind the disciples of Jesus’ teaching and thus, in the new situation after the resurrection, to help them grasp its significance and thus to teach them what it meant.” Donald A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 505. Indeed, John illustrates this ministry of remembrance and fuller understanding several times (John 2:17, 22; 12:16; 13:7; 16:4; 20:9). Yet, in every instance, the remembrance of the disciples is illustrated as occurring in the context of the resurrection itself, except for one instance (John 16:4) which presumably occurred after an initial period of persecution, perhaps that following Stephen’s martyrdom.

but rather, he wrote that the scriptures themselves are given for our instruction and encouragement, that we might have hope and glorify God, being in one accord (Rom. 15:4-5). And he wrote profusely, even demonstrating in his earliest letter, Galatians, that written biographical material is an essential aspect of one's testimony and authority. John declares that "these things are written that you might believe" (John 20:30-31), not on the basis of the traditions orally conveyed, but on that which has been written. We are people of the book; let us not defend a doctrine which denies that the earliest Christians were any different.

Many modern apologists are willing to concede later Gospel dates when arguing that the resurrection itself was so significant that even decades later the witness testimony of the event yet remained credible.<sup>101</sup> This is a reasonable argument. However, this concession becomes problematic to modern audiences when one argues that it is also reasonable to trust witness testimony and oral tradition practices as being capable of accurately preserving for several decades every detail eventually published within the Gospels.

Appropriately, Phil Fernandes has challenged evangelical apologists to reject popular modern dating theories and instead press the question, "how early could the four Gospels have been written?"<sup>102</sup> Perhaps, therefore, it is time to recognize that our apologetic forebears had it right, that the early dates must be defended and that the motivational argument is central to such, supported by internal evidence and a careful reading of the church fathers.

## Conclusion

There is indeed a rich history of post-Reformation era scholars who contended that the first Gospel, Matthew, was published within a few years or perhaps within roughly a decade of the ascension. They leveraged both the writings of the church fathers and internal evidence to make their case; but more significantly, they argued that the situation and needs of the early church served to motivate the early publication of Matthew. This paper has aspired to allow the present reader to hear these authors on their own terms. And in their own words, these authors have demonstrated that they considered an early publication of Matthew to be defensible based on the perceived situation of the early church. Future research might investigate how their arguments were contested by their antagonists.

We owe a debt of gratitude to these apologists, as they defended the credibility of the Gospels against contemporary attacks, attacks which leveraged the narrative that the first Gospel was not published until decades after the ascension. Nor should it be surprising that attacks on biblical integrity yet persist into the modern era, despite numerous apologetic efforts seeking to advance the speculative proposition that oral tradition was a desirable and sufficient means of

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<sup>101</sup> For example, Stewart, following Habermas' minimal facts method for defending the resurrection, has in the past conceded the "standard form-critical date for Mark's Gospel of AD 70 or shortly thereafter (Bart Ehrman's dating)" when making "an argument for the historicity of Jesus contra mythicism." Robert B. Stewart, "On Habermas's Minimal Facts Argument," in *Raised on the Third Day: Defending the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*, ed. William David Beck and Mike Licona (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 16.

<sup>102</sup> Phil Fernandes, "Redating the Gospels," in *Vital Issues in the Inerrancy Debate*, ed. F. David Farnell et al. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 488.

preserving the integrity of the Gospel contents over multiple decades, until evangelists were finally motivated to publish the story and teachings of Jesus.<sup>103</sup> Therefore, I suggest that the arguments of these post-Reformation era writers ought to be incorporated into our modern Gospel origins dialog. Let us grant that this *motivational* argument for the early publication of Matthew offers a coherent and reasonable and biblically grounded perspective on Gospel origins. Indeed, some contemporary authors have recognized the legitimacy of elements of the argument as “a conserving force” behind the preservation and transmission of the Jesus tradition, though without recognizing that the *motivational* argument drives not merely to an oral preservation of the tradition over decades, but to publications in the near proximity of the ascension itself.<sup>104</sup>

Nevertheless, regardless of one’s view of the Gospel dates, the arguments advanced by these writers are helpful for explaining the motivation behind the eventual publication of the Gospels, as the early church sought to accurately preserve and promote the teachings and story of their Lord and Savior.

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<sup>103</sup> As Richard Bauckham has attempted in recent years, despite the skepticism which even the ancients themselves had for the integrity of memory, as time went by and witnesses aged. Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*; Moore, “Original Audience Skepticism,” 54–56.

<sup>104</sup> Michael F. Bird, *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 66. Craig Blomberg nicely summarizes Bird’s reasons for wanting to accurately preserve the traditions. “These include practical guidance for Christian living, help for defining the Jesus-movement over against other forms of Judaism in the polemical environment of those early years, biographical interest in the movement’s founder, authentication of its beliefs and practices in the context of all the various religious and philosophical alternatives of the day, the desire to imitate Jesus’ example, and sheer curiosity and interest in the figure of Jesus.” Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 66.

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