I recently received an important and puzzling question about the names attached to our four Gospels. All four books were written and circulated anonymously, and only later did Christian leaders maintain that they were Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Why these names? Here’s the question:

**QUESTION**: I understand why the names John and Matthew ended up being part of the tradition concerning authorship for gospels, but why a tradition for Mark and Luke? Today, they seem like unlikely characters for a tradition since they were not eyewitnesses. In the 2nd century did Jon Mark (companion of Peter) and Luke (companion of Paul) hold more significance to the early church?

**RESPONSE:**

Even though the question is only about Mark and Luke, I think I should provide some context by discussing Matthew and John as well. I devoted some thought to the question for my book *Jesus Before the Gospels*. Here’s what I say about it all there.

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The final, big question is why these four names were chosen. They are the names of two of the disciples of Jesus and two of the companions of important apostles. Matthew was named after the tax-collector who became Jesus’ follower in the first Gospel (Matthew 9:9-13). John was named after Jesus’ disciple, the son of Zebedee, assumed to be the “beloved disciple” mentioned in the fourth Gospel (John 21:20, 24). Mark is named after a person popularly connected with Peter (1 Peter 5:13). Luke is named after a travelling companion of Paul (Colossians 4:14). But why these four in particular?

In fact, there were clear and compelling reasons. Matthew was an obvious choice. Since the days of Papias, it had been thought that Jesus’ disciple Matthew had written a “Hebrew” Gospel. It came to be thought that this book must have been it. (Never mind that Papias was talking only about a list of Jesus’ sayings and that our Matthew was not written in Hebrew. Early Christians as a rule didn’t know that.) The call of Matthew the tax collector is found only in this first Gospel (9:9-14), and so obviously (at least it was obvious to some people) this Gospel was especially focused on Matthew. [Mark 2:13-17 and Luke 5:27-32 both have the call of the tax collector to be Jesus’ disciple, but in those versions his name is Levi, not Matthew.] Moreover, the first Gospel has always been seen as the most “Jewish” of the Gospels; if Matthew wrote a Gospel in Hebrew, it was for Jews or for Jewish followers of Jesus. That would be this Gospel. Whoever named the first Gospel wanted it to be attributed to a follower of Jesus, so Matthew was an obvious choice.

The reasons for naming the Fourth Gospel John are less straightforward but somewhat more intriguing. In many ways the disciple who is closest to Jesus in this Gospel is not Peter but the mysterious “disciple whom Jesus loved” (e.g. John 13:23; 20:2). Who was this beloved disciple? He is never called by name. But the author indicates that he wrote down what he knew about Jesus (21:24-25). Some readers (wrongly) read the reference to him in 19:35 – where he sees water and blood coming out of Jesus’ side at his crucifixion – to be the author’s reference to himself, spoken in the third person. So the author was thought to be someone particularly close to Jesus. Which of Jesus’ close disciples would it be?

In the other Gospels, Jesus’ closest disciples, the “inner three,” were Peter, James, and John (e.g., Mark 5:37; 9:2-13). But the Beloved Disciple of John’s Gospel could not be Peter because he is mentioned in episodes alongside Peter (e.g. 20:1-10). Moreover, it was
widely known that James the son of Zebedee had been martyred early in the history of the church, before any of the Gospels was written (Acts 12:2). That leaves John, the son of Zebedee, who is otherwise not called by name in the Gospel. Even though he is elsewhere said to be illiterate (Acts 4:13) he came to be considered the Beloved Disciple who wrote the fourth Gospel.

The authorship of the third Gospel, Luke, is also relatively unproblematic, but for completely other reasons. The author of that book also wrote the book of Acts (read the first few verses of each book and you’ll see why this has always been obvious to most people). Acts is not about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but about the spread of Christianity in the years after Jesus’ ascension. The main character for most of Acts is the apostle Paul, whose missionary endeavors form the subject of a good bit of the book.

Acts is told in the third person, except in four passages dealing with Paul’s travels, where the author moves into a first-person narrative, indicating what “we” were doing (16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; and 27:1-28:16). That was taken to suggest that the author of Acts – and therefore of the third Gospel – must have been a traveling companion of Paul. Moreover, this author’s ultimate concern is with the spread of the Christian message among gentiles. That must mean, it was reasoned, that he too was a gentile. So the only question is whether we know of a gentile traveling companion of Paul. Yes we do, Luke the “beloved physician” named in Colossians 4:14. Thus, Luke was the author of the third Gospel.

That leaves the Gospel of Mark. One can see why the Gospel of Luke would not have been named after one of Jesus’ own disciples: but what about Mark? Here too there was a compelling logic. For one thing, since the days of Papias, it was thought that Peter’s version of Jesus’ life had been written by one of his companions named Mark. Here was a Gospel that needed an author assigned to it. There was every reason in the world to want to assign it to the authority of Peter. Remember, the edition of the four Gospels in which they were first named, following my hypothesis, originated in Rome. Traditionally, the founders of the Roman church were said to be Peter and Paul. The third Gospel is Paul’s version. The second must be Peter’s. Thus it makes sense that the Gospels were assigned to the authority of Peter and Paul, written by their close companions Mark and Luke. These are the Roman Gospels in particular.

The main reason there may have been reluctance to assign this book directly to Peter (“The Gospel of Peter”) was because there already was a Gospel of Peter in circulation that was seen by some Christians as heretical, and which was known to authors such as Justin Martyr in Rome. It is the Gospel I mentioned in chapter one, with a Jesus who does not appear to suffer and who comes forth from his tomb as a very non-human giant. It was easiest then to assign Peter’s real account to the figure that had been known for many years to have written down his recollections of Jesus’ words and deeds, Mark.

That Mark and Luke were considered to be the Gospels of Peter and Paul is clearly seen in other writings from about this time. Just about two decades after Irenaeus, the church father Tertullian, stressed: “That which Mark produced is stated to be Peter’s, whose interpreter Mark was. Luke’s narrative also they usually attribute to Paul. It is permissible for the works which disciples published to be regarded as belonging to their masters.” Tertullian, of course, would have no way of knowing who actually wrote these two Gospels. He is simply repeating the tradition he learned when he converted, that Mark represents Peter’s views and Luke Paul’s. By his time this was the accepted view, and it continued to be the accepted view until the modern era.
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