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A Trustworthy Gospel:

Arguments for an Early Date for Matthew's Gospel

by Daniel B. Moore

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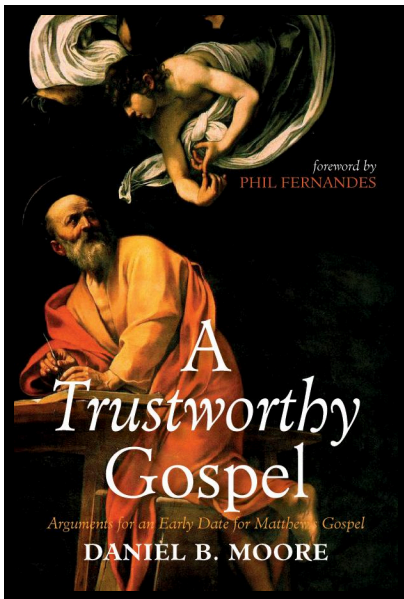
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New Title from Daniel B. Moore

A Trustworthy Gospel: Arguments for an Early Date for Matthew's Gospel

The trustworthiness of the Gospels rests not only on claims of inspiration, but also on eyewitness testimony. And our confidence in that testimony is directly related, Daniel Moore contends, to when the first Gospel was published. Therefore, it is incumbent upon Christians to consider whether an effective case can be made for asserting that the first Gospel was published within several years or perhaps a decade of the resurrection. To this end, this book offers a series of arguments demonstrating that an early publication of Matthew is reasonable, defensible, and preferable over the popular view that several decades passed before Gospels were published.



These arguments include a reasonableness argument that the early church had the means, motive, and opportunity to produce a Gospel; an argument from the church fathers, which also resolves supposed conflicts; exegetical arguments from Galatians; apologetic-motivational arguments from Christian scholars over the last several centuries; arguments based on ancient perspectives on aging memory and on the obligation of orators to write, concerns which would have motivated the apostles to publish early; and an explanatory power argument. Ultimately, the author will encourage

the reader to view Matthew as the Messiah's royal chronicler.

Daniel B. Moore is the men's ministry director at a small church in the Pacific Northwest and is currently pursuing a ThM at Liberty University.



Interview with Daniel B. Moore

Why did you resolve to write this book?

Over the years, as I studied the Gospels and read various commentaries and New Testament survey books written by Christian scholars, I kept encountering claims that the earliest Gospels were written decades after Christ. And that over these decades, the leaders of the early church preserved and disseminated the teachings and life story of Jesus primarily based on their supposedly perfect memories of what they had been taught. This simply didn't appear rational, given that the story of the Bible portrays Jews and Christians as being devoted to written Scriptures, rather than to oral traditions passed down from one generation to the next; and besides, the early church was born into an era in which Greco-Roman authors wrote extensively. Therefore, I wanted to offer Christians a reasoned basis for confidently asserting that the early church promptly published the teachings and story of Jesus in written form, as a Gospel. Indeed, I believe that we intuitively find the eyewitness testimony contained within the Gospels to be more trustworthy, if we can reasonably affirm that the earliest Gospels were written shortly after the life of Christ.

Who is your intended audience?

A Trustworthy Gospel is written for Christian professors, Bible college and seminary students, Christian school Bible teachers, pastors, apologists, and self-educated church leaders and teachers, who affirm inerrancy and are seeking to defend the trustworthiness of the Gospels. The book exclusively focuses on arguments in favor of an early publication of Matthew and is not meant to displace works which more broadly speak to Gospel reliability or which survey the various theories of Gospel origins, although it certainly engages with a number of these theories. Readers should enjoy the many citations from ancient writers who expressed their concerns over aging memories and the need for orators to be active writers, from the church fathers who gave their testimonies concerning the origin of the Gospels, and from writers over the last several centuries who contended that Matthew was written within a decade of the resurrection. In the end, I will invite the reader to pass judgment on whether belief in an early Matthew is reasonable, defensible, and even preferable, over the popular view that the church instead waited for decades before publishing the life and teachings of Jesus in written form.

How early do you claim that the earliest Gospels were written?

In the book, I present arguments from the church fathers that Matthew was published for the Jews as Peter and Paul first began preaching to the Gentiles, such as to Cornelius and to those in Antioch, coincident with the events in Acts 10 and 11, and that Mark was published shortly thereafter, for the benefit of the Latin converts in Caesarea Maritima. We don't have a precise timeline for when these events in Acts 10 and 11 transpired, but it could be anytime within a few years or perhaps a decade after the resurrection. I also present arguments that Paul would have expected someone to have written a Gospel like Matthew within a

few years of the resurrection, elaborating on Jesus's biography and core teachings—given that Paul's own letter to the Galatians, written within just a few short years after his visit to the region, provided his own biography and core teachings. Further, I present evidence that Galatians 3:1 refers to a previously written Gospel which details Christ's crucifixion, which Paul had laid before the Galatians when he visited Galatia on his first missionary journey.

Most experts dismiss the testimony of the church fathers, as their reports are contradictory and even nonsensical. How do you get past such?

The earliest church fathers consistently identified Matthew as publishing his Gospel first; however, Irenaeus also makes the problematic claim that Matthew published “while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome and laying the foundations of the church.” We have no evidence that they were in Rome together prior to their joint residence there in the mid-60s, before their executions, and by then the church there was already well established. What then do we do with this passage? In the book, I present an argument for understanding “at Rome” as referring to Rome as the empire, rather than to the capital city. Hence, Irenaeus can be understood as affirming that Matthew published coincident with the events of Acts 10 and 11.

What about the claim from the church fathers that Matthew wrote in Hebrew, given that we have no evidence of a Hebrew version of our canonical Matthew?

Given that the church fathers were trying to explain how it was that the Gospels had come down to them, it is challenging to think that they would only speak of a Hebrew Matthew, without explaining how they came to be in possession of a Greek Matthew. Further, the very notion of a Hebrew Matthew is counter-intuitive, when both the letter from James, written to Jewish Christians, and the letter to the Hebrews, written much later, were both written in Greek. In the book, I argue that we need to take a closer look at what Irenaeus and the other church fathers actually said. I demonstrate that there is a basis for translating their statements to the effect that Matthew was written in a language other than that spoken by the Hebrews; namely, Greek. However, you'll need to go to the book to follow the argument.

Most evangelical scholars embrace the notion that leaders within the early church preserved the teachings and life story of Jesus through a disciplined practice of memorization, with the apostles and other eyewitnesses ensuring that the accounts remained accurate. What evidence do you have to dispute such?

I turn to Greco-Roman writings to demonstrate that even back around the time of Christ and the apostles, there was concern over the accuracy of memory, particularly as people aged. This is not unlike modern concerns over memory, which often lead modern skeptics to deny the accuracy of the Gospels. This is one reason why ancient historians valued written witness testimonies. Furthermore, the most famous orators taught that orators should be active writers—developing their speeches in writing, memorizing from written material, and then often publishing such. And while literacy at the time was generally limited to the

upper classes, bureaucrats, and their professional secretaries, orators had ample opportunity to convey their biases to their audiences, not unlike the way that TV programming conveys attitudes to those who consume such. Hence, I contend that the apostles would have been sensitive to increased levels of skepticism concerning their testimony—from both elites and those of lesser status—the longer that they delayed in publishing the story and teachings of Jesus.

Does it really matter when the Gospels were written? Couldn't the Holy Spirit have ensured the accuracy of the Gospels, regardless of when they were written or even by whom?

Of course. But would claims of supernatural preservation reduce the skepticism of your unsaved friends and neighbors, or even of new Christians, once they discovered that the disciples allegedly preserved and disseminated the life and teachings of Jesus almost exclusively by word of mouth for thirty or more years? Indeed, the trustworthiness of the Gospels does not rely solely on the supernatural, for the disciples repeatedly identified themselves as eyewitnesses—it is the perceived credibility of this eyewitness testimony which is at stake, if we allow that decades passed before the church began publishing Gospels.

If we accept the premise that Matthew was published early, before Paul's first missionary journey, then what does this mean to our understanding of the rest of the New Testament?

If we accept an early publication of Matthew, then we can visualize Paul as unrolling Matthew alongside the Old Testament when reasoning from the Scriptures in the synagogues. We can understand Paul's references to Scripture within the Pastorals as being inclusive of Gospels and other New Testament writings—as he directs Timothy to publicly read the Scriptures (1 Tim. 4:13), to “preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:2), and as he asserts that “all Scripture is ... profitable ... that the man of God may be complete” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). There are also connections which can now be discerned between 1 Timothy 1 and Matthew 9, 1 Timothy 2 and Matthew 20, Romans 12 and Matthew 5; these provide additional insight into Paul's writings. Additional intertextual connections may yet be awaiting discovery, as we consistently approach the writings from an early Matthew perspective.

An Excerpt from *A Trustworthy Gospel: Arguments for an Early Date for Matthew's Gospel*

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Praise for A Trustworthy Gospel: Arguments for an Early Date for Matthew's Gospel

“The perspective that Mark’s Gospel predates the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John has achieved nearly universal recognition among biblical scholars and is rarely questioned. In this fresh and provocative study, Daniel Moore challenges this widely held theory, presenting a variety of evidence that points to Matthew as the earliest Gospel. While Moore’s conclusions will not be embraced by all, his study makes an important contribution to the current debate over Gospel origins.”

—**Benjamin Laird, associate professor of biblical studies, Liberty University**

“In *A Trustworthy Gospel*, Daniel Moore takes his stand with an increasing minority of NT scholars who affirm that Matthew was the first Gospel to have been written, in contrast to the reigning Markan priority hypothesis currently prevailing amongst NT scholarship. Moore buttresses his thesis with arguments from patristic testimony, exegesis, apologetics, and history. Moore’s work is a valuable contribution to the conversation on gospel origins, and NT scholars cannot afford to ignore his work. Highly recommended.”

—**Michael M. Canham, director, The Barnabas Initiative**

