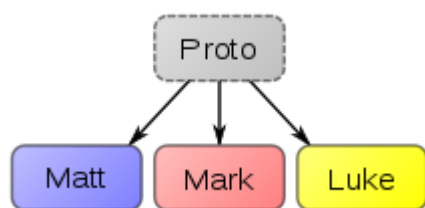


Hebrew Gospel hypothesis

The **Hebrew Gospel hypothesis** (or **proto-Gospel hypothesis** or *Aramaic Matthew hypothesis*) is a group of theories based on the proposition that a lost gospel, written in the [Hebrew language](#) or the [Aramaic language](#), lies behind the four [canonical gospels](#). It is based upon an [early Christian tradition](#), deriving from the 2nd-century bishop [Papias of Hierapolis](#), that [Matthew the Apostle](#) composed such a gospel. Papias appeared to say that this Hebrew or Aramaic gospel was subsequently translated into the canonical [Gospel of Matthew](#), but modern studies have shown this to be untenable.^[1] Modern variants of the hypothesis survive, but have not found favor with scholars as a whole.



The Hebrew Gospel hypothesis theories posit that a lost gospel in Hebrew or Aramaic lies behind the four [canonical gospels](#).

Basis of the Hebrew gospel hypothesis: Papias and the early church fathers

The idea that some or all of the gospels were originally written in a language other than Greek begins with [Papias of Hierapolis](#), c. 125–150 CE.^[2] In a passage with several ambiguous phrases, he wrote: "Matthew collected the oracles (*logia* – sayings of or about Jesus) in the Hebrew language (*Hebraïdi dialektōi* — perhaps alternatively "Hebrew style") and each one interpreted (*hērmēneusen* — or "translated") them as best he could."^[3] Some have claimed that by "Hebrew" Papias would have meant [Aramaic](#), the common language of the Middle East beside koine Greek.^[4] A 2014 survey of contemporary texts asserts that "Hebraïdi" meant Hebrew and never Aramaic.^[5] Nevertheless, Matthew's Greek "reveals none of the telltale marks of a translation."^[2] However, Blomberg states that "Jewish authors like Josephus, writing in Greek while at times translating Hebrew materials, often leave no linguistic clues to betray their Semitic sources."^[6]

Scholars have put forward several theories to explain Papias: perhaps Matthew wrote two gospels, one, now lost, in Hebrew, the other the preserved Greek version; or perhaps the *logia* was a collection of sayings rather than the gospel; or by *dialektōi* Papias may have meant that Matthew wrote in the Jewish style rather than in the Hebrew language.^[3] Nevertheless, on the basis of this

and other information [Jerome](#) (c. 327–420) claimed that all the Jewish Christian communities shared a single gospel, identical with the Hebrew or Aramaic Matthew; he also claimed to have personally found this gospel in use among some communities in Syria.^[1]

Jerome's testimony is regarded with skepticism by modern scholars. Jerome claims to have seen a gospel in Aramaic that contained all the quotations he assigns to it, but it can be demonstrated that some of them could never have existed in a Semitic language. His claim to have produced all the translations himself is also suspect, as many are found in earlier scholars such as [Origen](#) and [Eusebius](#). Jerome appears to have assigned these quotations to the [Gospel of the Hebrews](#), but it appears more likely that there were at least two and probably three ancient [Jewish-Christian gospels](#), only one of them in a Semitic language.^[1]

Quotes by Church Fathers



Matthew, who is also Levi, and who from a publican came to be an apostle, first of all composed a Gospel of Christ in Judaea in the Hebrew language and characters for the benefit of those of the circumcision who had believed. Who translated it after that in Greek is not sufficiently ascertained. Moreover, the Hebrew itself is preserved to this day in the library at Caesarea, which the martyr Pamphilus so diligently collected. I also was allowed by the Nazarenes who use this volume in the Syrian city of Beroea to copy it.

— [Jerome](#): *De viris inlustribus* (On Illustrious Men), chapter III.^[7]

He (Shaul) being a Hebrew wrote in Hebrew, that is, his own tongue and most fluently; while things which were eloquently written in Hebrew were more eloquently turned into Greek.

— Jerome, 382 CE, *On Illustrious Men*, Book V

Matthew also issued a written gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect.

— Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3:1 [c.175-185 A.D.]

First to be written was by Matthew, who was once a tax collector but later an apostle of Jesus Christ, who published it in Hebrew for Jewish believers.

— [Origen](#) circa 210 CE, quoted by [Eusebius](#), [Church History](#), Book 6, Chapter 25, Section 4^[8]^[9]

Composition of Matthew: modern consensus

The Gospel of Matthew is anonymous: the author is not named within the text and nowhere does he claim to have been an eyewitness to events. It probably originated in a [Jewish-Christian](#) community in [Roman Syria](#) towards the end of the first century AD,^[10] and there is little doubt among modern scholars that it was composed in [Koine Greek](#), the daily language of the time^[11] [although this is disputed; see, for example, Carmignac, "Birth of the Synoptics", and Tresmontant, "The Hebrew Christ", both of whom postulate early Hebrew gospels.] The author, who is not named in the text itself but who was universally accepted by the early church to be the apostle Matthew, drew on three main sources, the [Gospel of Mark](#), possibly the hypothetical sayings collection known as the [Q source](#), both in Greek, and material unique to his own community, called [M](#).^[12] Mark and Q were both written sources composed in Greek, but some of the parts of Q may have been translated from Aramaic into Greek more than once.^[13] M is comparatively small, only 170 verses, made up almost exclusively of teachings; it probably was not a single source, and while some of it may have been written, most seems to have been oral.^[14]

Modern forms of the hypothesis: the synoptic problem

The [synoptic gospels](#) are the three gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke: they share much the same material in much the same order, and are clearly related. The precise nature of the relationship is the [synoptic problem](#). The most widely held solution to the problem today is the [two-source theory](#), which holds that Mark, plus another, hypothetical source, [Q](#), were used by Matthew and Luke. But while this theory has widespread support, there is a notable minority view that Mark was written last using Matthew and Luke (the [two-gospel hypothesis](#)). Still other scholars accept [Markan priority](#), but argue that Q never existed, and that Luke used Matthew as a source as well as Mark (the [Farrer hypothesis](#)).

A further, and very minority, theory is that there was a single gospel written in Hebrew or Aramaic. Today, this hypothesis is held to be discredited [by most experts](#). As outlined subsequently, this was always a minority view, but in former times occasionally rather influential, and advanced by some eminent scholars:

Early modern period



[Richard Simon](#) of Normandy in 1689^[15] asserted that an Aramaic or Hebrew Gospel of Matthew, lay behind the Nazarene Gospel, and was the Proto-Gospel. [J. J. Griesbach](#)^[16] treated this as the first of three [source theories](#) as solutions to the [synoptic problem](#), following (1) the traditional [Augustinian utilization hypothesis](#), as (2) the [original gospel hypothesis](#) or [proto-gospel hypothesis](#), (3) the [fragment hypothesis](#) ([Koppe](#));^[17] and (4) the [oral gospel hypothesis](#) or [tradition hypothesis](#) ([Herder](#) 1797).^{[18][19]}

18th century: Lessing, Olshausen



[Gotthold Ephraim Lessing](#) whose *New hypothesis on the Evangelists*, 1778 suggested a lost Hebrew Gospel as a free source for the Synoptic Gospels

A comprehensive basis for the original-gospel hypothesis was provided in 1804 by [Johann Gottfried Eichhorn](#),^[20] who argued for an Aramaic original gospel that each of the Synoptic evangelists had in a different form.^[21]

Related is the "Aramaic Matthew hypothesis" of [Theodor Zahn](#),^[22] who shared a belief in an early lost Aramaic Matthew, but did not connect it to the surviving fragments of the [Gospel of the Hebrews](#) in the works of Jerome.^{[23][24]}

18th Century scholarship was more critical. [Gotthold Ephraim Lessing](#) (1778) posited several lost Aramaic Gospels as **Ur-Gospel** or **proto-Gospel** common sources used freely for the three Greek Synoptic Gospels.^[25] [Johann Gottfried Eichhorn](#) posited four intermediate Ur-Gospels, while [Johann Gottfried von Herder](#) argued for an [oral Gospel tradition](#) as an unwritten Urgospel, leading to [Friedrich Schleiermacher](#)'s view of [Logia](#) as a Gospel source.^{[26][27]} [Reicke 2005](#), p. 52: 'He

asserted that an old Gospel of Matthew, presumed to have been written in Hebrew or rather in Aramaic and taken to lie behind the Nazarene Gospel, was the Proto-Gospel. In 1778 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in Wolfenbuttel identified the...^[28] [Hermann Olshausen](#) (1832)^[29] suggested a lost Hebrew Matthew was the common source of Greek Matthew and the Jewish-Christian Gospels mentioned by [Epiphanius](#), [Jerome](#) and others.^[30] [Reicke 2005](#), p. 52: 'No 2, the Proto-Gospel Hypothesis, stems from a remark of Papias implying that Matthew had compiled the Logia in Hebrew (Eusebius, History III. 39. 16). Following this, Epiphanius and Jerome held that there was an older Gospel of...'^{[31][32][33][34]} [Léon Vaganay](#) (1940),^[35] [Lucien Cerfaux](#), [Xavier Léon-Dufour](#) and [Antonio Gaboury](#) (1952) attempted to revive Lessing's proto-gospel hypothesis.^{[36][37][38][39][40]}

Nicholson, Handmann



[Edward Nicholson](#) (1879) proposed that Matthew wrote two Gospels, the first in Greek, the second in Hebrew. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (1915) in its article *Gospel of the Hebrews* noted that Nicholson cannot be said ...[to] have carried conviction to the minds of New Testament scholars."^[41]

Rudolf Handmann (1888) proposed an Aramaic Gospel of the Hebrews^[42] but reasoned that this was not the Hebrew Matthew and there never was a Hebrew Ur-Matthew.^[43]

Edwards



[James R. Edwards](#), in *The Hebrew Gospel and the development of the synoptic tradition* (2009), suggested that a lost Hebrew Ur-Matthew is the common source of both the [Jewish-Christian Gospels](#) and the unique [L source](#) material (material not sourced from Mark or Q) in the [Gospel of Luke](#). His thesis has not been accepted by other scholars.^{[44][45][46]}

The Hebrew gospel hypothesis and modern criticism

Multiple Jewish-Christian Gospels



Carl August Credner (1832)^[47] identified three [Jewish-Christian Gospels](#): Jerome's [Gospel of the Nazarenes](#), the Greek [Gospel of the Ebionites](#) cited by Epiphanius in his *Panarion*, and a Greek gospel cited by [Origen](#), which he referred to as the [Gospel of the Hebrews](#). In the 20th Century the majority school of critical scholarship, such as [Hans Waitz](#), [Philip Vielhauer](#) and [Albertus Klijn](#), proposed a tripartite distinction between Epiphanius' Greek Jewish Gospel, Jerome's Hebrew (or Aramaic) Gospel, and a Gospel of the Hebrews, which was produced by Jewish Christians in Egypt,

and like the canonical [Epistle to the Hebrews](#) was Hebrew only in nationality not language. The exact identification of which Jewish Gospel is which in the references of Jerome, Origen and Epiphanius, and whether each church father had one or more Jewish Gospels in mind, is an ongoing subject of scholarly debate.^[48] However the presence in patristic testimony concerning three different Jewish Gospels with three different traditions regarding the [baptism of Christ](#) suggests multiple traditions.^[49]

19th century



Eichhorn's Ur-Gospel hypothesis (1794/1804) won little support in the following years.^[50] General sources such as [John Kitto's](#) *Cyclopedia* describe the hypothesis^[51] but note that it had been rejected by almost all succeeding critics.^[52]

20th century



Acceptance of an original Gospel hypothesis in any form in the 20th century was minimal. Critical scholars had long moved on from the hypotheses of Eichhorn, Schleiermacher (1832) and K. Lachmann (1835).^[53] Regarding the related question of the reliability of Jerome's testimony also saw few scholars taking his evidence at face value. Traditional Lutheran commentator [Richard Lenski](#) (1943) wrote regarding the "hypothesis of an original Hebrew Matthew" that "whatever Matthew wrote in Hebrew was so ephemeral that it disappeared completely at a date so early that even the earliest fathers never obtained sight of the writing".^[54] [Helmut Köster](#) (2000) casts doubt upon the value of Jerome's evidence for linguistic reasons; "Jerome's claim that he himself saw a gospel in Aramaic that contained all the fragments that he assigned to it is not credible, nor is it believable that he translated the respective passages from Aramaic into Greek (and Latin), as he claims several times."^[55] However, Lenski and Köster's views are in sharp contrast with those of [Schneemelcher](#). Schneemelcher cites several early fathers as seeing Hebrew Matthew including Clement of Alexandria (Stromata 2.9.45 and 5.14.96), Origen (in Joh. vol. II,12; in Jer. Vol. XV,4; in MT. vol. XV,p. 389 Benz-Kloostermann), Eusebius (Historia Ecclesiastica 3.25.5, 3.27.1-4, 3.39.17. 4.22.8 "Regarding Hegippus (c. 180) and his memoirs Eusebius reports: He quotes from the Gospel according to the Hebrews and from the Syriac (Gospel) and in particular some words in the Hebrew tongue, showing that he was a convert from the Hebrews", 3.24.6, 3.39.16, 5.8.2, 6.24.4, Theophania 4.12, 5.10.3), Jerome (Note by Schneemelcher "Jerome thus reluctantly confirms the existence of two Jewish Gospels, the Gospel according to the Hebrews and an Aramaic gospel. That the latter was at hand in the library in Caesarea is not to be disputed; it is at any rate likely on the ground of the citations of Eusebius in his Theophany. It will likewise be correct that the Nazaraeans used such an Aramaic gospel, since Epiphanius also testifies to this. That the Aramaic

gospel, evidence of which is given by Hegesippus and Eusebius, is identical with the Gospel of the Nazaraeans, is not indeed absolutely certain, but perfectly possible, even very probable...).[56]

New evidence regarding the provenance of Matthew (as well as Mark and Luke) was presented by [Jean Carmignac](#) in *The Birth of the Synoptics* (Michael J. Wrenn, trans.; Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1987). Carmignac in 1963, during his work with the Dead Sea Scrolls, attempted to translate Mark from Greek to Hebrew for his use in a New Testament commentary based on the Dead Sea Scrolls. He expected many difficulties but unexpectedly discovered that the translation was not only easy, but seemed to point to Greek Mark as a translation from a Hebrew or Aramaic original.^[57] Carmignac's discovery prompted further investigation, which yielded much evidence for a Hebrew origin for Mark and Matthew, and for a Lukan source. Among the nine types of Semitisms identified among the three Synoptics, Semitisms of Transmission are probably the strongest evidence for at least Mark and possibly Matthew as direct translations from a Hebrew original text. For example, "Mark 11:14 speaks of *eating of the fruit* = YWKL (according to the spelling of Qumran) and Matthew 21:19 to produce fruit YWBL: as the letters B and K resemble each other [in Qumran Hebrew] so greatly, the possibility for confusion is very likely."^[58] Carmignac's little book contains dozens of such evidences. He had intended to produce a comprehensive volume but passed away before this work could be produced. Likewise, [Claude Tresmontant](#) hypothesized Hebrew originals for all four Gospels in [The Hebrew Christ](#).[🔗]

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