

The Formation of the Gospels

The Lecture

1 Studying the human contribution to the production of inspired Scripture is like a detective story. We must dethrone our idea of the Gospels as governed by history, by what happened, if we see that as recoverable in the way, perhaps, a policeman may try to recover the happenings at a road accident or a crime with witnesses. The Gospels do try to tell us exactly “what happened”; but we must put up with their doing this in a way which doesn’t yield a smoothly factual history-book.

Instead of seeing this as an uncomfortable fault, we must find in it a richness which demands a parallel richness in our ability to read. We are here expressing the mystery of the Word becoming flesh, not consulting a railway timetable.

There is therefore a *collaboration* afoot between us and the self-communication of God. As soon as we lay our hands on the Book and begin to read, we are caught up into the sacramental space in which the Gospels and all Scripture came to be.

*The Gospel takes the flesh of those who proclaim it and those who live by it,
and so we see his glory.*

2 The Gospels are not free composition, but productions of a complex religious obedience to the “Kerygma”, the things that are proclaimed by the Church.

3 The self-understanding of the Gospels is also complex; Luke wears a sheen of historical gloss, but is in fact historically ill-equipped even by the standards of his own day. We would find it hard to locate the place where the Old Testament echoes were first heard. Did those around Jesus hear these echoes in his mind, as when he took the donkey for his ride into Jerusalem (Zechariah 9), or took a flail in his hand to cleanse the Temple (Malachi 3)? Or were the host of allusive citations of the Old Testament the fruit of the early church’s post-paschal meditation (Luke 24:27)? Or was there much inventive gathering of allusion by the evangelists (Matthew directly cites the Scriptures 123 times, Luke 109, Acts 133)? Truly this gathering of allusion was a concern for the Church long before these Gospels were made.

A Map For Studying the Formation of the Gospels

Put very simply, we propose three realms of study:

- 1 The situation of the life of Jesus
- 2 The situation in the life of the very earliest Church (the pre-scriptural Gospel)
- 3 The complex process by which the Four Gospels were written

Jesus’ Lifetime: We can study this with the aid of modern archaeology and scientific historical research. We should do so, because much of our mental imagery about Jesus’ life and death may owe much more to the work of fifteenth-century artists than the realities he actually knew. When we isolate a particular happening or element in the Gospel, can we discover how likely it is, what sort of writing we’re meeting, can we learn anything by subjecting the text to rigorous examination? Often we can. This critical examination is usually called “Source Criticism”.

We can study with especially good effect the Judaism of Jesus’ day. Remember that the Church has passed through massive trauma in its relationship with Judaism, just as Judaism has had to endure appalling trauma in response for many centuries. But Jesus remains Jewish, and to treat the study of Jesus as a Christian discipline is to go badly wrong; Jesus never even

heard the word “christian” and wouldn’t have known what it meant. His whole life was a living-out of a radical Judaism which threatened to shake the Jewish establishment to the point of destruction. Instead he himself was destroyed. To understand why this happened we need a much deeper awareness and appreciation of the Jewish faith Jesus loved and lived by. Christian ministers especially need to be re-educated in these terms.



E P Sanders, *Judaism: Practice & Belief 63BCE - 66CE*. SCM
Jesus and Judaism SCM
J Jeremias *Jerusalem at the Time of Jesus* SCM
Gerd Theissen *The Gospels in Context* T&T Clark
Any good History of Israel

The Earliest Church: How did the first apostolic homilies sound in the ears of their hearers? The easy response is to cite the *Acts of the Apostles*, which describe several sermons of Peter, Paul, Stephen, and Philip the Deacon. We can (must) compare these descriptions with the most precious documents of all that pre-exist the Gospels: the letters of Paul.

The road from the kind of preaching we find in those two sources to the much-amplified resource offered by any of the Gospels is a journey into *narrative*. “The story of Jesus” is not to be found in Paul or particularly in Acts, where the Kerygma is hugely centred on the meaning of Good Friday and its sequel. The stories, the sayings, the miracles enter the equation in response to questions: what questions? We must come to ask the same questions ourselves, in retroactive form: *Why did the Church save a story like this? What concerns made this saying important to the Church? What did the early Church understand by this or that piece of the tradition?*

If our study can help us to understand these questions, we shall know exactly how to preach about them as they appear in our Lectionary, and we see how the early Church’s experience illuminates our own. This analysis of the different intentions and expressions within the Gospel constitutes part of “Form Criticism.”



R E Brown *The Churches The Apostles Left Behind* Paulist Press
J D G Dunn *Unity & Diversity in the New Testament* SCM
Sanders & Davies *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* SCM

The Writing of the Four Gospels This is far and away the most complex and technical part of our study, but by far the most rewarding and exciting. In it we may feel we’re coming to know the Gospels very intimately, and that we can feel their aims and their insights personally. We can sense Mark’s dread of persecution, Luke’s longing for inclusiveness and belonging, Matthew’s need to gather the Jews into the Christian body, and John’s horror of infidelity and betrayal and all disunity. The way in which the evangelists wrote, and their editors amplified the Gospels, is studied in “Redaction Criticism”. We can use all our sensitivity to apprehend the living heart of the Gospels as they came to be written, which will always give us words to share with the people we serve.



This is where your commentaries and introductions to the Evangelists come into their own. Everything you can learn about the Gospels will be of real value.