

The Formation of the Gospels

We are going to begin our close contact with Scripture with a lecture on the way the Four Gospels come to be as they are. I hope this will be the beginning of an installation in your reading and listening equipment of a series of sensors, which will give you ways of reacting to the various signals put out by each individual evangelist. They often tell the same story, but they have varying instincts, varying points of view, indeed in some ways different theologies which govern their presentations.

Because most people don't know what these are, never having had them pointed out, doesn't mean that they are negligible. What's more, we shall find that our sensitivity to these determining conditions affords us a way into hearing the Word and a way into preaching it.

First of all, remember the opening of the course, which drew your attention to *the time before the Gospels became written documents*. If you go back to the furthest possible point in that time, you arrive at the actual happenings which the Gospels narrate. Many people believe that this is an easy place to go to: simply read the Gospels, which are the Word of God and therefore the most reliable documents on earth, and you will arrive back at the facts about Jesus. The unspoken assumption is that the Gospels are simply a reporting of facts, like a good historical account. You use books like this to look up the facts.

It doesn't take long for a serious student to know that this isn't true. The Gospels quite cheerfully tell contrasting, even contradictory facts about Jesus. From an historical point of view they won't do as documents of historic record, and their points of agreement on those strict historic criteria are relatively few, if very central.

So if we use the Gospels like this we will fall into major error, missing the gifts they *actually* offer, and demanding something they definitely do not. In the end we shall bring the Word of God into disrepute, if we represent it as something it isn't. You can see from this how seriously important it is to understand the true nature of the Gospels, if we are to use them respectfully, in the correct way, and persuasively.

Remember the words of St Augustine about God's plan to save humanity:

*Without him, we cannot.
Without us, he will not.*

This makes very clear the central contribution of *human response* to the mystery of salvation; and this collaboration is symbolically, but quite practically, present in the Scripture itself, above all in the Gospels. We have already considered their status as documents that have been *translated linguistically* - from their Aramaic beginnings, into the Greek in which they are written. We also have to say that they are *mediated theologically*, through the differing minds of their authors; and the differing experience of each of the four churches where they were embodied in writing have also had their impact. This isn't a random or accidental fact. *The Word became flesh*, and this mystery is not a temporary one covering thirty years of the

first century, but a continuing one; the Gospel takes the flesh of those who proclaim it and live by it, and so *we see his glory*. And this pattern holds good for the Old Testament too, where the word of the Lord was mediated through prophets who were meshed in a particular historical situation, often extremely tightly, and whose message was couched in the terms of their culture and the needs of their hearers. God never speaks without a human mediator, and this entrusting of the Word to human mediation flavours it heavily with the tang of the times in which it takes human form.

As we read the gospels we sense another of their qualities, that of **religious obedience**. These documents are not the free product of a literary mind, as a modern novel might be. Despite the fact that the gospels do not have the particular obedience we sense in an historical biography, yet they are fiercely devoted to a truth outside themselves, a truth which is the ministry and import of the Church's faith in Christ. They have their own ways of conveying this faith, and the decisions of the authors about how to do this give rise to the differences in presentation they employ. But they do not have liberty to invent the matters they convey.

What the Gospels say they are is confusing from time to time. Luke, for instance, says he is writing "an ordered account" for Theophilus, and refers to his "going over the whole story from the beginning"; as Luke is a Greek, some of us might conclude that he is presenting us with a researched historical record of the very sort we do *not* find the Gospels to be. It's true that he opens with the apparatus of a classical history. Remember that in the first century there are no dating systems in place, and the custom of naming regnal years is notoriously inexact.

But this very attempt at historical exactitude shows us the unreliability of Luke in historical terms. In fact Herod the Great died in 4BC and Quirinius governed Syria in the year 6-7AD - ten whole years later. What happened was that on the death of Herod (4BC) there were riots - a common occurrence at such junctures in occupied lands. The Romans responded by dividing Herod's territory into three, and gave Judaea to Archelaus, with the title not of King, but of ethnarch. In the year 6AD they deposed him for malpractice and placed Judaea under direct government from Rome. At this point a census of Judaea was taken so that Rome could collect the taxes required to finance the government. Needless to say, this caused another rash of riots. Luke has simply confused the two riots, and made a porridge of the results.

With no exact independent dating, ten years is easily lost in such matters.

You can see that despite Luke's attempts to write accurately, he simply didn't have the *resources*. Josephus, who wrote the history of the Flavians' Jewish War, had squads of scribal assistants, the full resources of the military records office, and residence in Palestine to help him; he was also writing of contemporaneous history. Luke was describing events perhaps a thousand miles away, and eighty years earlier. Even if he had known and visited Palestine - and we are nearly certain he never did - he would have met no-one who knew Mary and Joseph, and the information to be included would have been sparse.

If we read the *Acts of the Apostles*, we are offered samples of the style of missionary sermon given by the first apostles. The account they give of the life of Jesus is extremely sketchy: they concentrate on the political situation surrounding his condemnation and death on the Cross. When you step back from the religious spectrum we have inherited, in which it becomes familiar to speak of the crucifixion as a scene to meditate on, a kind of devotion, and imagine what it was like to propagate faith in a man who had been steamrollered in this quite ghastly - but to the Gospel's ancient audience, quite familiar - way, we shall perhaps re-examine the parameters in which the first Church was working. For Jews, it was hard enough to hear a Galilean carpenter claiming Messianic meaning for himself. To accept the disciples of a *crucified convict* using exalted and even divine language about him must have been impossible.

It therefore became necessary for the *life* of Jesus to be presented as displaying signs of special significance: his unknown birth must be seen as providential, like the birth of Samson or Samuel, or even of Moses himself. The biblical accounts of these births were to hand, and it was a lot easier for Matthew and Luke to echo them in the gospel than it was to discover any historical facts about Jesus' real birth. Here we tread on dangerous ground as preachers: fundamentalists in any Christian congregation will be deeply offended by what they see as an attempt of any kind to disqualify the birth narratives; but to question their historical veracity is not to assault their cardinal importance as theological texts, which is what they are.

The Galilean Accent One practically important matter was certainly a difficulty in Stage One of the tradition: how does the alleged Messiah come to have a broad Northern accent, when Davidic stories and the royal promises are grounded in Judaea, and at Bethlehem in particular? The question is directly raised in John 7:42. Matthew answers the question in one way - that Jesus was indeed born at home in Bethlehem, but left Judaea in response to providential warnings of persecution (shades of the birth of Moses) and went via Egypt to the North. Thus the Galilean accent.

Doing it differently, Luke manages to feed in a morsel for his Gentile readership: Joseph and Mary are indeed residents of Nazareth, but Joseph is a Davidid. They are brought to Bethlehem providentially, and the unwitting mover in the business is no-one less than the Emperor Augustus, the head of the pagan world, here depicted as ordering the counting of the population of the whole Roman Empire, with each person travelling to his or her ancestral home.

The historical possibility of such a census taking place in real time is risible; and it is hard to imagine how and why Joseph should be sent to the village where *David* lived, allegedly 28 generations previously. (Why not to one of the ancient confederate shrines of the patriarchs, for instance, 52 generations back - such as Abrahamic Mamre?)

These two birth-stories contrast heavily with each other, but their import is basically the same: that Jesus is the son of David, that he has divine parentage and no human father, and that his birth fulfils the prophecies of God. Nevertheless, the stories that dramatise these factors are quite different from each other, and cannot both be historical.

The question about historical truth in the gospel tradition is already raising its head in a big way. We are not used to this mode of writing, which makes good its ignorance by pastiche of ancient scripture. Nor, while we are in the chair, are we particularly happy to learn that Moses wrote Deuteronomy eight centuries after his death, that the Wisdom of Solomon postdates Solomon by about 700 years, and that St Peter wrote his two epistles in AD120, roughly fifty years after his alleged martyrdom in the Circus Vaticanus. That the alleged misogyny of St Paul actually appears in letters that aren't by him is a bitter-sweet discovery.

It doesn't do to react hastily in this situation. Jürgen Moltmann assumes that Mark's Gospel is the only one which gives us unvarnished truth. A nice thought, but not born out in any way historically (the finding of historical and archaeological background for the Fourth Gospel came as a major shock in the middle of the 20th century; it had been assumed for a long time that John was a largely theological gloss on the other Gospels, paying scant attention to history). We simply have to have a weather eye out for the workings of theological interpretation; for instance, the Star of Bethlehem makes its first appearance in Nb 24:17, Judas' thirty pieces of silver are explicable as fulfilment of scriptural prediction in Zech 11:12, the dicing for the robe of Christ is a clear adoption of Ps 22:18.

I sense that I am starting all kinds of hares in your mind: who wrote the Passion Account? Could Caiaphas and company have been crass enough to "fulfil the Scriptures" down to the last piece of silver? Or is the real source of the familiar incidents on Calvary the 22nd Psalm? And is the endlessly-discussed cry from the Cross - Ps 22:1 - really Mark's heavy-handed inclusion of the clue to his code? *Not one of his bones shall be broken*: the prescription for

the choice of the Paschal Lamb; are the soldiers who *see he was already dead* unconsciously fulfilling Scripture, or is the Beloved Disciple theologising the flow of blood and water from the pericardium into the stream of sacramental life in the Church? These are questions which rush in upon us, once we realise the territory we are entering by reading the Gospels. So, without prejudice to the fascination of the Synoptic Problem and the Two-Source theory, let us impose a working map on our studies.



“We fault others only for not following the spirit of critical scholarship consistently enough. In the study of the New Testament in particular, piety and wishful thinking intervene sporadically and create blind spots. In general the same view is shared by all scholars, and we shall attempt to pursue it rigorously: the gospels are texts which are to be studied on the basis of information which they themselves provide, or which is provided by closely-related sources, and we do not know in advance what conclusions we may come to. The genius of “critical study”, a method sometimes employed in the ancient world, but which we have inherited from the Renaissance, is the willingness to examine and assess all the available evidence, and to comprehend the range of possible conclusions. Conforming the evidence to fit prior conclusions is a temptation which we shall try to avoid.”

EP Sanders & Margaret Davies

A Map For Studying The Formation Of The Gospels

Stage One - the life and death of Jesus

How can we access the actual happenings and determine the precise sayings of Jesus?

- There are the Gospels themselves, and other contemporary sources, either surviving intact (like the letters of Paul) or conjectured and partially reconstructed (like “Q”).
- We also have hard evidence of historical conditions in the Roman Empire of the day, in the form of contemporary historians like Tacitus and Josephus.
- There is also a good deal of archaeological evidence, growing all the time, from the Middle East; for instance, the Qumran library of the Essenes was quite unknown until the 1940s, and has revolutionised our study of Judaism contemporary with Jesus.

The conditions for reading these sources correctly are complex, but the subjection of the sources themselves to critical examination is certainly possible.

This is known as “**Source Criticism**”.

Anything that can be learned about the history of the time is going to help our understanding of the Christian phenomena in their context. We should grasp as carefully as we can the excellent results of the study of Pharisaic and Rabbinic Judaism at the time, which will help us to burrow behind the received wisdom, and the accustomed Church interpretations which have coloured not only the way the Gospels are understood, but the way they were actually written.



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

Stage Two - the early preaching and receiving of the message

The proclamation (Gk “kerygma”) of the Gospel was no factual reportage. It was the message of salvation, delivered with the full force of the personality: we have only to read the letters of Paul to imagine the impact of his personal preaching. There can be not the slightest doubt that this programme of preaching modified and voiced the convictions which were forming in the minds of the proclaimers (we would say, “under the Holy Spirit”, but a cultural historian might have other terms for it). There was time for a great deal of tempering and voicing to be introduced into the tradition as it travelled into newer and stranger climates, always before the decision to create a documentary vehicle for it (ie the written Gospel). We can hear Paul breaking off from his expounding of the Gospel to a new audience, constantly overwhelmed by the new depths of relevance and new insights generated by the explosion of ultimate truth into a new receptive audience. He constantly finds new hooks on which to hang his gospel; and he can’t refrain from these delighted exclamations: cf Rm 11:33ff.

Do the kerygmatic sermons of the *Acts of the Apostles* accurately represent that primitive message? If we read Paul’s letters (think in terms of AD50 for their rough date), we can compare their weighting of various elements in the eventual Gospel material: birth narratives, nil; miracle stories, nil; actual sayings, so few as to be almost nil. The whole message for Paul’s letters is about the nature of Christ (Son of David according to the flesh, and risen Son of God in the order of the Spirit, cf Rm 1), and the only references to his historical life are in the area of the Paschal Mystery. That the sermons in *Acts* concentrate very fully on the cross and resurrection is proof that in the eighties or nineties of the first century this was the way preaching was understood; the concentrated transition described on the road to Emmaus was still the preaching “method” as Luke understood it.

The entry into the kerygma of the stories of Jesus’ life, the miracles, the encounters, and the sayings related to them, is therefore something we need to study. What issues within the proclamation, or within the experience of young churches, would evoke the particular stories the evangelists now transmit? The preaching of the contents of the Gospel gives us isolated stories, sayings, and arguments which each have a particular form. The study of these “pericopes” can sometimes reveal the sort of origin they might have had in Stage One, and the (occasionally surprising) metamorphosis they underwent in the process of preaching. We must ask ourselves why a particular story was saved, and what significance the Church would have given it in this second stage of its life, always remembering that the Gospel was moving westward, away from the geography and cultural ambience of its Jewish and Asian cradle, and into the different conditions of the Greek world. Parables are a particularly eloquent place to study this process; often we can clearly discern a change of gear between the Palestinian concerns of Jesus and the transforming context given to his stories when they resound in a foreign ambience. Again and again we shall discover a literary process taking hold of the Gospel; and the material that makes it up undergoes development as the polemical concerns of

preachers and the literary minds of the evangelists themselves are brought to bear on the Stage One material. That this process is real and substantial is symbolised in the fact that there is no Gospel left to us that was written in the Aramaic or Hebrew words in which Stage One was entirely transacted.

The recognition of the different forms of literary expression within the Gospel is called “**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*

Stage Three: The Work Of The Evangelists

It isn't a simple matter to transfer the burden of the apostolic kerygma over into literary form. It can easily be seen now that for the young Church the writing of *history* is not the point, and indeed it was not a prime concern for any of the Gospel writers except, to a very slight degree, Luke. Each of the evangelists has instead a *theological* outlook, which we need to study; and each of them has his own response to the materials before him and the way he edits and tailors the prose he produces, to present his theological outlook most clearly. These compositional habits are rather endearing, and well worth our attention if we want to be familiar with the words we have to elucidate and commend to people; we should hope to develop a specifically tuned ear to each of the Gospels.

The other important influence on the evangelists - one much harder to read correctly - is the particular situation of their readership when they did their work. It doesn't take rocket science to discern that Mark's community faced suffering through *persecution*. Nor is it hard to sense that Matthew is trying his best to commend the Gospel to *lifelong Jewish believers*. It becomes increasingly clear that John's church had undergone *disastrous division* (a factor which is confirmed when we read the Epistles that accompany the Gospel) nor that by the time the Fourth Gospel was written the relationship between Jews and Christians had deteriorated past saving.

No-one should preach about these Gospels without consciousness of these underlying factors. The unvoiced but quite real anti-Semitism which often comes across from insensitive expounders of the Gospel is astonishing. I hear over and over again the statement that Christ's New Commandment was *Love One Another*: as if Jews had never heard of such an idea. The easy assumption that the Pharisees were a crowd of mean-minded formalists with obsessive ways of avoiding the demands of holiness is widespread and goes unremarked, because the reading of the Gospels is uncritical, and its preachers do not know how to make allowances for the history of 85 AD, and take everything in the Gospels as straight history from AD 30.

When we have done some Source Criticism, to evaluate the standing of our text, and some Form Criticism, to establish the literary rules within which the Evangelist is writing, we come to the evaluation of the Evangelists' own thinking and concerns as they mediated their version for their Church. But this is not the end of the story, because there are clear signs of a subsequent process of *editing* the original Gospels; we cannot limit our conjectures to the workings or concerns of a single mind, conveniently labelled *Matthew, Mark, Luke* or *John*. A careful study of the literature surrounding the Fourth Gospel, in particular, will reveal a most complex relationship between the apostolic origins of the Gospel tradition, and the mysterious figure of the Beloved Disciple, and the magnificent and deeply mystical mind of the one who composed the Prologue of the Gospel and the Priestly Prayer of Jesus in ch 17. This relationship is exposed within the text of the Gospel after its climax, after the death of

Christ (Jn 21) where the authorial voice differentiates itself from the Beloved Disciple. Whatever we say of the latter, it is inconceivable that we should be speaking of any Galilean fisherman, much less of his “ghost writer”. The masterly arrangement of elements in the narrative, and the unparalleled depth of the theology point to a superb mind whose anonymity is one of the most tantalising mysteries of New Testament scholarship. But the Gospel presents a far from unified surface: it has been further edited, and some strange anomalies endure within it to show that there have been less even hands at work. The study of the history of the Gospels is therefore extremely complex. It is called “**Redaction Criticism**”.