

THE THING

WHY FOUR GOSPELS?

The Christian Church speaks of *the Gospel* (singular) when it wants to refer to its central message. Why should there be *four* Gospels in the New Testament? How do they differ from each other? Do they tell the same basic story? Do they contradict each other in any important way? In what sense do they supplement or reinforce each other?

Some Interesting Facts:

We don't know the authors' names No evangelist signs his work, or indicates himself in any way. The Gospels are "of Jesus Christ" according to the title of the first of them, rather than "of Mark" &c as we have them now. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are attributions dating from the second century, which rest on the say-so of an old bishop called Papias of Hierapolis, of whom not a lot is known.

Almost certainly the evangelists were not eyewitnesses Most Catholics will have been brought up to think that the Gospels are *reminiscences* on the part of their authors. 95% of scholars do not think this today. The Gospels date from the last third of the first century AD, and were thus more concerned with the threat to oral tradition: i.e., the eyewitnesses were dying out.

The Gospels are not biographies Jesus' birth is only recounted in Mt & Lk. His mother is not named in Jn. Nor is Joseph in Mk. The details of his life differ considerably across the spectrum of the four documents. However, it would be just to conclude that a basic picture of a real life is delivered by the Gospels, even if it would be wrong to call them biographies.

Stages of Gospel making

Stage One is the life and work of Jesus himself, observed by the disciples who presided over the beginnings of his Church. (The first third of the 1st century AD, roughly).

Stage Two is the preaching of the Apostles, enlightened by their experience of the Resurrection; note that this is already a work of interpretation, rather than a programme of historical recording.

The apostles wanted *believers*, not informed observers. (AD 33 - 66, roughly)

Stage Three is the actual writing of the Gospels, which is assigned to the last third of the century (Mark c.70. Mt & Lk 80-90, Jn in the 90's). Second-generation Christians, organising the stories, facts, teachings, and events which make up the Gospel account, led both by their faithfulness to the traditions they have received, and by the needs of the Churches for which they wrote. Understanding these conditions is the key to understanding the works they produced. These are set out, not in *chronological* order (as an historian would have written them) but in *logical* or even *theological* order. Thus John places the cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of the story, the other three at the end. There is no problem about this, as soon as you start to see the evangelists as true authors, working in different ways with the one tradition, and as true theologians, responding to the needs of different readerships in various churches.

The Order of the Gospels

The first three Gospels hang together very clearly; they can be printed in parallel columns to produce a *synopsis*, and are thus known as the Synoptic Gospels. Explanation of this close correspondence is very complex, and many solutions have been proposed. The one most in vogue today sees the first Gospel to be written as Mark. Matthew and Luke were composed, by writers possessing Mark, subsequently and separately. They each used Mark as a kind of

central trunk for the story-line. But they supplemented what Mark offers: firstly from a common document giving *Teachings of Jesus*; scholars refer to this document as “Q” (for the German *quelle*, “source”). We do not have a copy of it; but it clearly existed, because often Luke and Matthew use identical phrasing in delivering Jesus’ teaching. However, there is other material that *only* Luke or *only* Matthew adds; so the eventual “recipe” for these Gospels gets very complicated!

The apparent unanimity of the Synoptics - and consequently the isolation of the very different account in John - made people think that the former were “historical” writings, agreeing so much because they were guided by what really happened: John was thought to have written a “spiritual” Gospel, unconcerned with the history but entering deeply into meaning. In fact archaeology and more careful thought has caused us to recognise that John is often right in historical terms where the others share errors: they place Jesus’ trial on the night of Passover, for instance, where John has it on the day before Passover. The Synoptics are making a theological point, but no Sanhedrin would have held a trial at night or on Passover, much less spent the afternoon of the Passover at a Roman trial and a crucifixion! John must be right. Yet the fourth Gospel does carry the overtones of its late composition: for instance, the atmosphere between the Synagogue and the Church had deteriorated to the point where John’s Jesus accuses the Jews - his own people - of being children of Satan and enemies of God.

Reading the Gospels

Correctly to read the Gospels means rediscovering *that which the original author intended us to hear*. That is the Church’s way of defining the inspired sense of Scripture: not what a later age may read into the meaning, but what the original author intended it to convey. This means that we have the responsibility of using every ounce of historical and archaeological purchase to recover the conditions in which these writings were made, and to unearth by every means the exact shade of meaning of every word and phrase. So the *readership* is of particular importance: the knowledge that Mt was written by a Jew for Jews, Mk for a mixed community of Gentiles and Jews, Lk by a Gentile for a community predominantly Gentile, and Jn for a post-Jewish church which had definitively severed its links with the Synagogue. A very little study using such knowledge will reveal startling differences between the presentation of the word in the four documents. This should not surprise us; Jesus spoke to Galilean Jews of the first century in Aramaic; the Gospel was preached to urban Jews and Gentiles in the Greek-speaking cities of the Empire. We cannot undo that transition: the recovery of the Aramaic Jesus is a rare and fraught achievement!

We must learn these characteristics, and then we must *tune in* to the thought and speech-patterns of the four evangelists. To help us to do this, the Church’s lectionary chooses one Gospel per year, and gives us a full year to cotton on to its qualities. We should recognise that the creating of the four written accounts was preceded by a long period of ferment, arising out of the preaching activity of the middle third of the first century, amid all the dangers and vicissitudes the Church endured; we should not consider that the history of the Church now proceeds without some similar kind of change and growth taking place. The possession of these four Gospels should *assist the unfinished process*; it does not fix it in concrete.