

## **Formation of the Gospels**

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## Formation of the Gospels

### Introduction

The New Testament begins with four books that proclaim “the Gospel (the good news) of Jesus Christ”. Though they are not biographies of Jesus in the strict sense of the word, they provide accounts of his earthly life and an interpretation of its meaning for the world. The students of the New Testament have many questions about the formation of Gospels. The most important one probably centers on the stages of the formation of Gospels. The formation of the Gospels can be seen in different stages beginning with the life and mission of Jesus, the Apostolic *Kerigma*, the life of *Ecclesia* and the present form of the Gospel and in this area of study we define the Gospel and to see how it came to be in the form in which it exists today.

### 1. The Word Gospel

The word ‘Gospel’ (*euangelion*) signifies good news or glad tidings. Originally the term did not have an exclusive religious significance either in Hebrew or in Greek. However, from the time of Second Isaiah the verb “to announce or to proclaim” takes on an exclusively religious meaning and it denotes the saving action of God (Isa 40:9-10; 41:27). In the Greco-Roman world too, the word ‘good news’ and ‘to proclaim good news’ were mostly used in secular and profane sense, referring for example, to victory in war, the birth of a ruler, his accession to throne and his decrees. But even in the context of emperor worship, ‘good news’ in the Greco-Roman world assumed a certain religious significance. After the proclamation of ‘good news’ of the victory in the war, the thanksgiving sacrifices offered in the temples were called *euaggelia* (celebration of the good news by offering sacrifices). Similarly, a religious oracle, a solemn announcement of a glad event at some shrine was called ‘good news.’

In the NT the word ‘Gospel’ or ‘good news’ has a special religious significance: it means God’s saving action in and through the person of Jesus Christ, His Son. The good news also meant in the NT, the proclamation of God’s saving actions in Christ. Thus, the term ‘Gospel’ means the act of proclaiming the good news as well as the content of the proclamation. It is important to note that both the noun ‘gospel’ and the verb ‘to preach the gospel’ were part of the primitive Christian terminology and that before any of the gospels came to be written these two terms were well known and frequently used in the

Church's proclamation of the Christian message. However, in the early Church's usage, the word 'gospel' never meant a written book but simply the good news of salvation and its proclamation.

Similarly, the early Church could never have used the term gospel in the plural because there was only one gospel, "the Gospel of Jesus Christ." It was only at the beginning of the Second Century that 'the gospel' was referred to for the first time as a book, a written work (Cf. Didache; 2 Clement 8:5) but always in the singular until Justin the Martyr, about AD 150, used it in the plural to explain the memoirs of the apostles as gospels (*Apology* 66).

## **2. The Written Gospels**

The four canonical gospels are four versions or representations of the one and the same gospel. All of them deal with the person of Jesus Christ, his ministry, his passion, death and resurrection. But no gospel was written during the life time of Jesus; in fact, the first gospel was written some 35-40 years after the life time of Jesus.

## **3. Stages of Gospel Formation**

1. *Sitz in Leben Jesu*: Situation in the life of Jesus (words and deeds of Jesus)
2. *Sitz in Leben der Kirche*: Situation and life of the Church
3. *Sitz in Evangelium*: (Situation in the Gospels Itself)
4. The Present Form of the Gospel

We are at the 3<sup>rd</sup> stage when we read the gospels. They are influenced by the previous stage i.e. the church, that in turn is influenced by the words and deeds of Jesus. This became very important to the people as they remembered things at difference times. In the first stage to the II stage we have the oral transmission with probably the passion narrative being written i.e. a period of 40 years. Another thing written was the saying of Jesus called Q (Quelle meaning source, 60 CE)

The evangelists belong to different regions and so are influenced in the region where they lived which already had a passion narrative and some other sayings. Mark did not make use of the Sayings. Between 80 and 85 CE we have Marks gospel and Q (Sayings source).

### **3.1. Stage One: Jesus of Nazareth (6 BC to 30 AD).**

He did things of note, orally proclaimed his message, and interacted with others (e.g., J. Bap and Jewish religious figures). Jesus chose companions who traveled with him and saw and heard what he said and did. Their memories of his words and deeds supplied the raw 'Jesus material.' On a practical level it is important for modern readers to keep reminding themselves that these were memories of what was said and done by a Jew who lived in Galilee and Jerusalem in the 20s. Jesus' manner of speaking, the problems he faced, his vocabulary and outlook were those of that specific time and place. Many failures to understand Jesus and misapplications of his thoughts stem from the fact that Gospel readers remove him from space and time and imagine that he was dealing with issues he never encountered.

### **3.2. Stage Two: The Church (30 AD to 65 AD)**

The second stage, namely, the life of the primitive Church from Pentecost to the first written gospel was a decisive factor in the formation of our gospels. Several formative influences can be identified in the Church's life during this period.

#### **3.2.1. Primitive Preaching**

After the resurrection of Jesus and the event of the Pentecost the disciples began to preach about the Risen Christ as Son of God and Savior of the world. Their initial proclamation of the Christian message, which is called the primitive kerygma, consisted of brief statements, the essentials of the message, namely, the passion, death, resurrection and glorification of Christ. Gradually, the primitive, apostolic preaching took on a narrative form and included certain brief reference to John the Baptist, to Jesus' ministry in Galilee and in Jerusalem. Elements of this primitive apostolic kerygma can be found in the speeches of St. Peter in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:14-39; 3:13-26; 4:10-12; 5:30-32; 10:34-43). These important facts supplied by the primitive kerygma form the outlines of our written gospels. In other words, the gospels are extended narratives which grew out of the basic elements of the primitive kerygma.

#### **3.2.2. Teaching or Catechesis**

The apostolic preaching was directed to those who had heard nothing about salvation in Christ. It was aimed at eliciting the response of faith from the listeners. Those who responded with faith were given a deeper understanding of the Christ-event

through teaching (*didache*). In instructing the new converts the disciples made use of Jesus' own teaching, his words and deeds and the events connected with his life. The disciples had to call to mind what Jesus said and did and pass it on to others by word of mouth: this is what is called oral tradition. In this process the retelling of the exact words of Jesus or a photographic reproduction of his deeds was not possible nor was it attempted. The focus was not so much on accuracy and exactness, or on the details of place and time as on the person of Jesus, the meaning of his words and the significance of his deeds. What was, therefore, attempted in the oral tradition was to faithfully transmit the message of Jesus and interpret its significance for the benefit of the new converts and for their instruction.

### 3.2.3. Life Situations

Not only for teaching and catechetical instruction, but also when confronted by different life situations and practical questions about Christian life (marriage, divorce, attitude towards others, discipleship, sufferings, relationship to the Jews etc.), the disciples had to turn back to Jesus' teachings, his actions and attitudes and find in them the norm of their life. The retelling of the story of Jesus and his sayings in these different situations and needs meant that his original words came to be reformulated, adapted and, at times, changed in the oral tradition. Thus, the reformulation of the story of Jesus and of his teaching included also an interpretation of the concrete life-situations of the communities and their problems. This is one of the reasons why the evangelists differ even when they cite the same saying of Jesus, or why certain sayings of Jesus, or stories are not found in all the gospels. In other words, while being faithful to the message of Jesus, the early preachers and teachers had to adapt and recast the sayings of Jesus and reformulate certain miracle stories according to the needs and circumstances of their audience. All this is done during the period of oral tradition, and we can say without hesitation that the life situations, the needs and interests of the early Church had a definite influence on the formation of the Jesus tradition, on its content, growth and development and, ultimately, on the written gospels themselves.

### 3.2.4. The Liturgical Influence

The passion narrative is remarkably similar in all four gospels. Beginning with the Last Supper and culminating in the burial and resurrection of Jesus, the passion account

is a continuous and detailed narrative similarly structured in the gospels. This fact indicates that the evangelists had already before them some written accounts of the passion story, which probably took shape in the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist in the primitive Church. In the context of the breaking of bread the early Church recalled the events of Jesus' passion as part of the celebration of the Eucharist. This recital of the passion gradually took on a fixed form and came to be written down very early in the Apostolic Church. The composition of the passion narrative can thus be attributed to the influence of the early Christian liturgy.

Moreover, there are several other passages which show some liturgical influence for their incorporation into the gospels. Thus, for example, one can see the baptismal formula of the early Church in Mt 28:18-19; the Eucharistic formula and the Eucharistic symbolism coloring the account of the multiplication of bread (Mk 6:34-44 and parallels; see also Lk 24:13-35). The anointing of the sick with oil, spoken of in Mk 6:13, may point to the Sacrament of the sick in the early Church. Similarly, the details of the two healings that Mark reports (Mk 7:31-37; 8:22-26) betray certain liturgical and ritual practice of the Church in connection with the Sacrament of baptism. Thus, the early Christian liturgical celebrations have played an important role in the formation of the gospels.

### 3.2.5. Apologetic Interests

Another factor that influenced the shaping of the gospel material can be identified as the apologetic interests of the primitive Church. The early Church had to defend its life and practices against attacks from the Jews. In such situations of conflict or crisis the disciples looked back into the life of Jesus and recalled his teaching, his conduct and practices as norms for their own life. Thus, certain apologetic interests of the early Church seem to have influenced the inclusion of episodes in which Jesus defended himself, his conduct and practices or those of his disciples against his opponents' criticism. We can think of the many conflict stories in the gospels, particularly the controversies regarding fasting, observance of the Sabbath and Jesus' association with sinners and outcasts. Similarly, certain authoritative, pithy sayings of Jesus, such as found in Mk 2:10, 17; 10:14; 12:14 etc., may have been used by the early Church to defend its own doctrine and practice.

To sum up: the second stage of the formation of the gospels is the time of the incipient Church during which Jesus traditions were transmitted mainly by word of mouth in preaching, teaching, liturgical celebrations etc. The handing over of these traditions was connected with the life and practice of the primitive Church. Constant repetition in different contexts and life situations eventually led to certain fixed forms of expression for the events, word and deeds of Jesus. Consequently, some of the material in the oral tradition came to be written down as small collections. These include the account of the passion, death and resurrection; some of the sayings of Jesus, collections of parables and perhaps also of Jesus' miracles. Except for the passion narrative, other units of tradition were not written down according to their chronological or geographical sequence.

### **3.3. The Third Stage: The Evangelists (65 AD to 100 AD)**

The third stage in the formation of the gospels is to be seen in the work of the evangelists themselves, who brought together in an orderly sequence the various written collections and other material in the oral tradition. However, the work of the evangelists did not consist in collecting the traditions about Jesus and transmitting them in written form. As mentioned already, some of the traditions had attained a fixed form; some may have reached the evangelists in written collections or blocks and the rest as isolated pieces. The evangelists had to create a seam in order to unite these traditional materials and present them in a coherent and intelligible flow and forward movement. This they did by means of selection, modification and arrangement of the traditions adding comments and summaries and finally, organizing the material into a chronological and geographical framework. In this way, the evangelists gave the ultimate form to the gospels as we have them today. But that is not all. The evangelists were authors and theologians in their own right. They were not mere collectors and transmitters of the traditions, writing from within and for the Church they composed the gospels in accordance with their own distinctive theological viewpoints. The gospel writers not only collected the traditions about Jesus but made a selection from among them, modified and interpreted them in view of the needs and situations of the Church for which they wrote. Thus, despite the close similarity between the first three gospels, we can notice a marked difference in emphasis, in the presentation of the person of Jesus and in the details of his ministry.

These and other differences in the synoptic gospels must be attributed, to a great extent, to the different theological perspectives of the evangelists.

The II Vatican Council (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 19) teaches us: “For, after the ascension of the Lord, the apostles handed on to their hearers what he had said and done, but with that fuller understanding which they, instructed by the glorious events of Christ and enlightened by the Spirit of truth, now enjoyed. The sacred authors, in writing the four Gospels, selected certain of the many elements which had been handed on, either orally or already in written form, others they synthesized or explained with an eye to the situation of the churches, the while sustaining the form of preaching, but always in such a fashion that they have told us the honest truth about Jesus. Whether they relied on their own memory and recollections or on the testimony of those who ‘from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word, (Lk 1:2-4)’ their purpose in writing was that we might know the ‘truth’ (Lk 1:2-4) concerning the things of which we have been informed.”

### **3.4 The Present Form of the Gospel**

As we know, the Gospels were not written until thirty to fifty years after the resurrection and ascension of our Lord. This meant that his sayings were passed on orally within the early Christian communities for several decades before they took written form. The early apostles and teachers, therefore, had to rely upon these oral traditions in their ministry to the Church.

There were a number of factors during the first and the second centuries which made it necessary for the church to establish a canon of authority for the written words of Jesus. First of all, there was the gradual spread of the Gospels throughout the churches. Since the Gospels initially were written to meet the liturgical, didactic, apologetic and pastoral needs of a specific community, it follows that they remained in a certain churches or region. In the meantime, each gospel eventually reached other churches and areas throughout the empire. This expansion forced the church to decide whether it would acknowledge all four Gospels instead of just one.

Secondly, there was the proliferation of other Gospels circulating throughout the churches. Documents such as the Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Philip, Gospel of Peter and Gospel of truth also claimed to record the words of Jesus and thus claims to authority



for the church. Decisions had to be made on the legitimacy of such claims, because some of these materials were used by some churches or groups within churches to support heretical ideas, as for example, Gnostics.

Finally, there was the existence of the four Gospels themselves. Separately, they each had authority in the localities where they were written and circulated. When they were brought together and compared, a new problem was created. Why were there such differing accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus? This concern begged for a different solution and several were offered. However, the collection was due to the dominating importance of apostolic witness and apostolic testimony. The Gospels were apostolic, and were, therefore, the essential documents of the Christian faith.

### **Conclusion**

Our written gospels, then, are the result of a long process of historical development. They describe the person of Jesus, his words and deeds, his passion, death and resurrection. But the gospels are not histories or biographies in the modern sense of these terms. They are a proclamation of the salvific acts of God in Jesus with a view to evoking and strengthening faith. The gospels are not a simple, factual record of the past for its own sake; but they record the past in order to proclaim and interpret it for the benefit of the Church, to show the Church the ground of its faith and practice. Our written gospels are documents of the faith of the early Church and they are intended to be in the service of Christian faith everywhere and at all times.

The Holy Spirit was at work in the entire process of the formation of the gospels. The Spirit was active in the Church's formation of authentic traditions concerning Jesus and in faithfully transmitting them. Above all the Spirit was active in the sacred authors who compiled, edited and interpreted the traditions in the composition of the gospels. The activity of the Holy Spirit in the entire process of the formation of the gospels, especially his activity in the sacred writers, is known as inspiration. It is the inspiring presence and activity of the Holy Spirit that enabled the evangelists to be faithful to Jesus and his message in their gospels and also to be faithful to the particular communities which they served as ministers of God's Word. It is the same Spirit who guided the Church to acknowledge the Gospels as authentic word of God.