

GROWING IN FAITH

THE GOSPELS AT THE HEART OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

February 10, 2022

Introduction:

--The unique place of the Four Gospels in the New Testament and in Christian faith: first place in the New Testament canon; singularly honored in the liturgy; foundational for our encounter with Jesus Christ.

--The focus of our session: what is the nature of the “Gospels;” how were they composed; and why are they diverse from one another?

I. What is a “Gospel” and how did the Four Gospels emerge in the early church?

a) The term “gospel” derived from the Greek *evangelion* (Greek for “good news”); the Gospels as proclamation in narrative. The focus on the person and mission of Jesus Christ (e.g., Mark 1:1 “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus the Christ, the Son of God.”).

b). The Gospels written from the vantage point of the resurrection, and written “from faith to faith.”

c). The *three stages* in the evolution of the gospel literature:

1. Rooted in the life, mission, and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth and his setting in first century Palestinian Judaism.
2. Collective memory of Jesus sustained and developed in the faith and practice of the earliest Christian communities; mostly in systemic oral tradition.
3. The literary composition of extended narratives about Jesus by the evangelists and their communities, in the post-70 period of the early church.

II. The Evangelists and the Diversity of the Four Gospels.

a) The evangelists and the metaphor of the “portrait artist.” The interaction of tradition, situation, and the evangelist (in the context of a specific early Christian community).

b) The interrelationship among the Four Gospels:

- the “synoptics”: Mark, Matthew, Luke (and Acts).
- the Gospel of John.

c) The “personality” of the Four Gospels:

1. Gospel of Mark; perhaps written in Rome in wake of persecution of Nero; Jesus and liberation from evil (exorcisms); “a passion narrative with a long introduction.”

2. Gospel of Matthew; perhaps written in Antioch; strongly Jewish-Christian (“I have not come to destroy the law and the prophets but to fulfill them;” “continuity in the midst of discontinuity; orientation to the Gentile mission as the flowering of the mission to Israel.

3. Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles; perhaps written in Antioch or Ephesus; the universal sweep of the gospel and its message of salvation “from Jerusalem to the Ends of the Earth.”

4. Gospel of John; rooted in Palestinian Judaism but final edition perhaps written in Ephesus; the cosmic scope of the mission of Jesus the “Word made Flesh,” from God and back to God. Jesus as the “human face of the Father’s mercy” (Pope Francis).

Conclusions:

1. The “incarnational” nature of Scripture in Catholic perspective: both i.e., both “divine” and “human.”

2. The credible, Spirit-inspired connection between the historical figure of Jesus and the Gospels’ portrayal of the Risen Jesus and his mission to the world.

3. The Four Gospels as “normative,” as touchstone for all subsequent reflection on the identity and mission of Jesus in the ongoing life of the church.

For Further Reading:

Donald Senior, **Jesus: A Gospel Portrait** (Paulist Press; revised and expanded edition, 1992).

Donald Senior, **The New Testament: A Guide** (“Guides to Sacred Texts”; New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

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