

THE GOSPELS

Modern scholars are always careful to instruct us that the gospels were “written by believers for believers”. They are not the stuff of polemics or evangelization, much less modern history, but perhaps can best be described as an attempt to preserve the *interpreted* memory of those who knew Jesus and of those who in turn tried to interpret and apply this memory to the circumstances, questions and needs of their own time.

There were many memories of what Jesus said and did, however not everything needed to be recalled or preserved. John’s Gospel ends with this observation: “But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (Jn 21:25).

The majority of Jesus’ youth and his personal characteristics were deemed not necessary to recall and the two stories of his birth were shaped more by the theological perspective of the author and the needs of his audience than by facts remembered. And so this memory of which we speak is not some mechanical recalling of information from the past, but a memory presented to give meaning and power to the present. Just as the celebration of the Passover was not a simple recalling of the past, but also an interpretation and celebration of the present, designed to renew the life and faith of the people, so too memories of Jesus were recited and celebrated to give meaning to the present. As Crossan says “the Good News is always Good News for somebody”, somebody in a certain time, place and circumstance.

The Gospel writers certainly gave witness to the past, but they also crafted their writings to recall and interpret the past in terms of the questions and challenges of the present. For example, for those who denied Jesus in the early persecutions, the Gospel of Mark presents the memory of Peter’s denial and his subsequent role as a leader in the early Jerusalem community.

For those in his community who were Jewish, the author of Matthew went to great lengths to portray Jesus not only as Messiah but also as the new Moses, replacing or fulfilling the Old Law. And for the Gentiles, Mark presents the Roman centurion at the crucifixion as the first person in his gospel to say “Surely this man was the Son of God”. For Mark the apostles never got beyond the expectation that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, but his Gentile audience near the end of the first century needed to hear that from the beginning Gentiles could recognize and accept Jesus as divine. Matthew employs the Magi for the same purpose.

And so while the four gospel traditions represent the need to interpret the Good News to differing communities, they also represent a certain theological perspective which each author sought to communicate. For example, Mark stresses the human side of Jesus. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus shows his human weakness and fear. He is “overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (14:34) and he prayed that “if possible the hour might pass from him” and entreated the Father to “Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (14:36). He was then simply seized and arrested by

the crowd.

In John's Gospel we see a different side of Jesus, a powerful, divine Jesus fully in charge of his own fate. In the scene in the garden there is no account of the fear of death or the prayer to the Father to "take this cup from me". Jesus is aware of all that is going to happen and when the crowd comes to arrest him, Jesus asks them who they want, when they reply "Jesus of Nazareth" he says "I am he" and on hearing this the armed soldiers fall the ground (18:3-6). And when Peter cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant, Jesus says to him "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" (18:11). Earlier in Chapter 10:17-18, Jesus speaks of his death and he is fully in charge: "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again, this charge I have received from my Father".

So a modern historian might ask, what did happen in Gethsemane? How did Jesus react to his oncoming death? Was he meek, mild and fearful as in Mark, or powerful and in charge as in John? We will probably never know, but the memory of that event was shaped by the faith perspective of each gospel writer. Therefore the event was recalled and presented by Mark in such a way as to present the human dimension of Jesus while John presented the divine dimension. They are both true -- Jesus is truly human and truly divine. It is a question of emphasis and perspective. We have believers addressing believers, not history professors addressing history majors.

THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM - The first three gospels in the canon, Mt., Mk and Lk are alike in that they are different from John. Their general likeness have given them the name "Synoptic", i.e., providing a common view - a synopsis. It is obvious that they are also markedly similar and markedly different from each other. So the question arises: what is their relationship? There have been a number of solutions proposed, but the modern consensus is that Mk came first and then some ten years later Mt and Lk used Mk along with another source called "Q" to construct their gospels.

The so-called "Q" source (quelle in German=source) is postulated because of the common non-Markan material shared by Mt. and Lk. The Sermon on the Mount in Mt and the same "sermon on the plain" in Lk are examples of important Q material not found in Mk. Crossan and others have raised "Q" to the stature of a gospel itself, but this is a minority view.

There are also passages in Mt. and Lk. that are not found in Mk or Q. These independent sources are labeled "M" for Mt. and "L" for Lk. They all find their original in the oral tradition that circulated before any written accounts were attempted.

Almost all the opinions listed below reflect a consensus, but are questioned by a number of noted scholars.

MARK

Date - probably between 68-70

Author - There is no mention of the author by name in the gospel itself. The label “according to Mark” was added later. Some scholars now think that Mark was an otherwise unknown, Greek speaking Christian who wished to remain anonymous.

However, around 320 AD, Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, wrote in Greek a history of the Church. He reports that Papias, bishop of Hierapolis (130 AD), had recorded a tradition that Mark’s gospel was a translation into Greek of the teaching which Peter had given in Rome. Mark is identified as the young man in Acts called John Mark, the companion of Paul and Barnabas on their “First Missionary Journey”. Tradition states that he did not know Jesus personally. His errors in statements about Palestinian geography are further witness to the probability that the author did not accompany Jesus, but they also seem to be incongruent with the Mark of Acts (12:12,25) who seems to be from Jerusalem.

Place of Composition - Most place the composition in Rome because of the Latin loanwords in the Greek text and the allusions to real (Nero 64-68) or possible persecutions which were located in Rome. However, the location is not certain.

Target audience - Mk shows a transition in thought and expression from a more conservative Jewish Christian community to a more liberal Gentile Christian community, e.g., he puts the apostles who were the leaders in Jerusalem of a conservative Jewish Christian community in a somewhat diminished position - they are portrayed as never understanding Jesus properly. Again in Mk the Gentile centurion is the first person in the gospel to confess that Jesus is Son of God. The implication is that Gentile Christians understand Jesus better than Jewish Christians. Most conclude that the audience was primarily Gentile and spoke Greek influenced by Latin.

Sources - Since most scholars judge that Mk was the first gospel and that Mt and Lk used Mk as a source, then it seems logical that Mk, who was not an eyewitness to the events he described, was greatly dependent on the preaching and oral traditions of the early church. Were there written preMarcian sources? Some think so, but there is little agreement on what they were.

Eusebius claimed that Mk’s gospel was a written form of the preaching of Peter, however this is difficult to detect in Mk. Peter is given no greater role than that found in Mt. and Lk. Furthermore, he is treated harshly by Mk as he recounts Jesus saying “get behind me Satan”. However, Peter’s preaching may well have been known to Mk, but it is unlikely that Peter is *the* major source for Mk.. Eusebius also claimed that Mk was a companion of Paul and Barnabas, if so Mk could have used their material. On the other hand, the Eusebius claim may be totally incorrect, and the identity of Mk and the exact nature of his sources may ever remain a mystery.

It seems logical that “Q” was not used by Mk, because by definition “Q” material in Mt and Lk are those which are not found in Mk.

Message - Mk focuses on the Kingdom of God. Jesus inaugurates the Kingdom which is largely hidden and in the future. He also announces in the first verse that Jesus is Son of God. However, the overall tone of the gospel highlights the humanness of Jesus. Scholars have also identified what has been called the “messianic secret” which alludes to the times that Jesus commands people to be silent about His identity as messiah.

Some describe Mk as a handbook for basic Christian instruction and that it was written with that in mind.

MATTHEW

Date - 80-85 These dates assume that Mt used Mk and Mk could have been written as late as 70 or later. Some time was needed for Mk’s gospel to be well known and gain authoritative status. However, Mt. was certainly composed before 110 AD when Ignatius of Antioch quoted it.

Author - The work itself is anonymous. The words “according to Matthew” became the title by the middle of the second century and the apostle Matthew became known as the author simply by attribution. However, because it is clearly based on Mark it would be highly unlikely that an apostle, an eyewitness, would base his work on one (Mark) who was not an apostle and not an eyewitness.

The unknown author often described as a Greek-speaking Jewish Christian (some say a converted rabbi or scribe) because of his use of Jewish terms and the construction of the gospel to portray Jesus as the new Moses, the fulfillment of OT prophesy and the Jewish Messiah. He is also described as a Gentile because he portrays Gentiles accepting Jesus (Magi) and the Jews rejecting him.

Place of composition - Most think that Mt was written for a church composed of a mixed Jewish/Gentile community in Syria, probably in Antioch although a number of other cities have been suggested.

Target audience - Recent scholarship identifies the Matthean community in the beginning as a Jewish Christian community recently expelled from Judaism and the synagogues, but a community which also embraced a Gentile mission and thus had many Gentile members. And as time went on the majority of the converts were probably Gentile, so that at the time of the writing of Mt. the church community may have been predominately Gentile converts. Therefore, Mt. makes it clear that the Jews rejected Jesus and that the Gentiles had faith. The Magi of the infancy narrative represent the Gentiles acknowledging Jesus, Herod represents the Jews not recognizing Jesus for who he was.

Sources - Mt. uses about 80% of Mk, however his gospel is 50% longer than Mk’s. The parallels with Lk which are absent from Mk, most scholars ascribe to the common source “Q” used by both Mt and Lk. The use of these sources indicated that the author was not

an eyewitness of the ministry of Jesus.

Material in Mt not found in Mk or “Q” is either based on written or oral traditions known to Mt., perhaps circulating in his particular church community or simply creations of his own based on his theological perspective.

Mt also used the OT in a unique way to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophetic word. In the many places where Mt cites the OT (Isaiah 8 times) the passage is accompanied by the following formula: “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet who said”.

Message - Three prominent themes include Jesus as the new Moses (lawgiver), the Messiah and the near approach of the Kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus. All attest to the belief that Jesus, in every detail of his life, is the fulfillment of the divine plan, especially as interpreted by Mt in the words of the prophets.

Jesus as the new Moses is supported by the infancy narrative which portrays Jesus (like Moses) as barely escaping death as a child, going into Egypt, coming out of Egypt and later as spending 40 days in the desert (Moses 40 yrs.) and then giving the new law in the Sermon on the Mount (new Sinai). As the authorship of the first five books of the Bible was imputed to Moses, Mt. also divides his work into five main sections preceding the passion narrative.

In the beginning genealogy Jesus is portrayed as of the line of David and is born in David’s town Bethlehem. John the Baptist testifies that Jesus is the one who is to come. In 16:16 Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. The claims to Messiahship are usually connected with OT passages which are interpreted by Mt as prophesy concerning Jesus the Messiah.

Jesus is also portrayed as the messianic interpreter of the Old Law. He interprets (contra the Jewish leaders) the true meaning of the Old Law.

The earthquake at Jesus’ death, rentng of the temple curtain and the resurrection all attest that the “last times” are upon us, the Kingdom has begun in Jesus. The many parables about the Kingdom and the new ethic in the Sermon on the Mount all represent a new age ushering in the reign of God. Jesus refers to himself as Son of Man, probably the title of a mediator of the Kingdom of God who would appear at the end of time.

Mt. is the only Gospel to mention the church and the place of Peter in the church.

LUKE

Date - 75-85

Author - Generally attributed of Luke, perhaps a physician, (who also wrote Acts) a companion of Paul. He seems to be an educated, Greek speaking, skilled writer and not a native of Palestine. He knew the Greek OT (The Septuagint or LXX). He was not an

eyewitness of Jesus. Probably a Gentile native of Antioch in Syria and a convert to Judaism before becoming a Christian.

Place of composition - There is divided opinion about the place of composition. Equal arguments can be made for Corinth (in Greece) or Antioch (in Syria), some traditions even mention Rome. Antioch seems doubtful for if Mt was written there it is unlikely that one Christian community would produce two somewhat different gospels.

Target audience - A Gentile church who spoke good Greek and had some well-to-do members. These churches were concerned with their missionary activity and how to present it to other Gentiles.

It has also been conjectured that, in a broader sense, Luke also wrote with non-Christian Roman readers in mind. Some think that the “most excellent Theophilus” could be a disguised name for a Roman official headquartered in Corinth. In any event, Lk stresses the non-political nature of Jesus’ kingship. Lk teaches that the state has a lawful place in society and the Christianity is not inherently anti-state.. The death of Jesus is laid primarily at the feet of Jewish authorities, not Roman. The Church and the Roman state can coexist.

Sources - Mk is the principal source for Lk and constitutes 35% of the gospel. Lk uses some 350 of the 661 verses found in Mk, but often changes their emphasis, e.g. the mother of Jesus is treated more kindly than in Mk.

Other eyewitness sources are alluded to in Ch 1:1-2 where Lk states that his narrative is based on eyewitnesses and ministers of the word who delivered a message about “certain things which have been accomplished among us”.

Most scholars agree that some 20% of Lk is taken from “Q”. However, Lk has much that is original with him and only him - e.g., the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. Therefore, Lk may have had special sources for these parables and other sources such as a collection of early hymns, stories of the early life of Jesus, certain miracle stories, etc..

Message - The ethical message is more rigorous and ascetic than in Mt.. In Lk Jesus condemns the wealthy and upholds the economically poor, not just the poor in spirit. Disciples are to sell all and leave all (including family) to follow Jesus.

For Lk, Jesus personifies the Jewish people and their history. Jesus is the fulfillment of the OT history, its faith and its hope. The titles “Son of God”, “Servant”, “Son of Man” and even “messiah” had been used in some instances in the OT as a personification of Israel in an individual human figure. Lk probably intends that Jesus applied these titles to himself in this light. Different from Mt, but equally true. Just a different perspective.

Since the resurrection, the Church is the realization of Jesus in history and thus the new Israel. But this new Israel would include not just Jews, but all people who have faith in

Jesus.

JOHN

Date - final form by 85 - 110

Author - In the 2nd century the Gospel was attributed to John, son of Zebedee, one of the apostles. However, most scholars now posit more than one author - one who composed the main part of the Gospel from existing traditions and latter a redactor who edited the existing document and added to it. All “authors” seem to have written in the tradition of the anonymous “disciple whom Jesus loved”.

Place of composition - Traditionally, and with good reason Ephesus, perhaps Syria.

Sources - Most scholars agree that the author of the main part of the Gospel used oral and/or written traditions circulating within the Johannine community. To these he added his own contributions to produce a single document. Later the redactor edited this document, added his own material and perhaps changed the orientation to conform to the church community of his time.

Message - For John, Jesus is the pre-existent, divine Word. The Word became flesh in Jesus, Jesus is truly human and divine. In the Gospel, Jesus is aware of His divinity, He is in total charge of His life (I take it up, I lay it down) , he is in total control. He reads the minds of friends and foes alike.

Jesus preaches that He is the source of life - “I am the bread of life”. Those who believe in Him have life, eternal life.

Note: Prior in time to the Gospels were the Letters of Paul. Most scholars agree that Paul is the author, (in chronological order), of I Thessalonians, Galatians, I and II Corinthians, Romans, Phillipians, and Philemon. The first four are usually dated in the 50’s and the last two in the 60’s. Paul probably died in the 60’s.

The non-Pauline or Deutero-Pauline Epistles that are attributed to Paul include the Pastoral Epistles (I and II Timothy and Titus) and other Epistles by unknown authors attributed to Paul to make use of his authority and thought. Raymond Brown (*The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*) gives us an idea of the scholarly debated about Pauline authorship.

By way of very broad approximation, about 90% of critical scholarship judges that Paul did not write the Pastorals, 80% that he did not write Ephesians, and 60% that he did not write Colossians (p. 47).

While not authored by Paul, these letters often use genuine Pauline theology. Their individual dating is problematic, but some could have been composed early in the second century to address problems in the newly organized Christian communities.