

On Reading the Gospels: A Brief Summary

The gospel was a new and unique literary form of the early Christian community. ***Gospels are not biographies of Jesus***, at least not as we understand biographies, although the gospels do contain some biographical features and historical elements. They are primarily written recollections of the encounter of the early Christian community with Jesus, and how they understood him as the Messiah. In other words, they are ***testimonies of faith imparting religious truth***. They are not meant to be history, as we now understand the term. Rather, just as the early community was inspired by their encounter with Jesus, they hoped to teach and inspire new believers to faith and action through their encounter with Jesus in the text of the gospel. The first gospel drew on oral tradition, some written lists, and the faith experience of the community. There is discussion among bible scholars as to which gospel came first. The prevailing theory has been that Mark's Gospel came first; and Matthew and Luke probably used Mark's Gospel as their primary source. More important for an understanding of the Gospels than the date when they were written, however, is to understand ***that each Gospel was written for a particular community. Each evangelist molded the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection to respond to the questions, needs, and issues of that particular community.***

There are four gospels in the New Testament. While each is about Jesus, each tells the story in its own way. Mark, Matthew and Luke, also known as the Synoptics, are similar, while John's gospel is unique. According to the above theory, Mark probably wrote about 65-70 C.E., Matthew and Luke about 80-90 C.E. and John about 90-100 C.E.

Who were the evangelists? It is widely acknowledged that Matthew and John were not the apostles of the same name mentioned in the Gospels. The gospels were written later than the time of the apostles (most had been martyred by 65-70 C.E.). From the information gleaned from the text and other sources, it is thought that Matthew was a Jewish-Christian scribe; Mark may have been John-Mark a missionary helper of Paul and Peter, mentioned in Acts; Luke was a Gentile, perhaps a companion of Paul. John, many think was a disciple of the "beloved disciple".

Mark's audience was a Christian community, suffering persecution and martyrdom, probably in Rome. They were tempted to betray and deny their faith to avoid pain and death. Mark emphasizes the suffering of Jesus and tells them that Jesus has suffered out of love for them and that they must be willing to risk suffering, pick up their cross and follow him. Being faithful means being willing to suffer for him and not deny him. More than any other gospel, Mark shows the humanity of Jesus. Jesus has emotions, is compassionate, embraces children, gets angry, he weeps ...and he suffers. In Mark, Jesus is the Suffering Servant Messiah foretold by Isaiah.

Matthew's community was Jewish-Christian. This community understood itself as Jewish and continued to pray in the synagogues, while also gathering in their homes for the breaking of bread (Eucharist). While Matthew's principal focus was his Jewish-Christian community, he was also reaching out to fellow Jews. His emphasis is that Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy. He drew on themes from the Hebrew Scriptures. He attempted to show that following Jesus was not a departure from Jewish belief but rather it was faithful to it. Matthew traces Jesus' ancestry through the House of David, back to Abraham. He quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures and compares Jesus to Moses. As Moses was the Lawgiver in the Hebrew Scriptures, so Jesus interpreted the Law anew. This also connects with the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who foretold a new covenant written not on stone but in the heart.

Luke, himself a Gentile, speaks to a Gentile audience. Gentiles, unfamiliar with Jewish Law and tradition, did not believe in the one God before their conversion. Luke explains the Jewish experience of this one God. He explains Jewish faith, practices, covenant and prophecies to a people who did not know about them. He also shows the relationship between Jesus and the history of Israel. Yet, his emphasis is universality - Jesus' salvation is open to all. Consequently, the Gentiles will also be included. Luke emphasizes this universal salvation and argues that it is especially true for the poor, despised, and oppressed people in the world. For Luke, this is a cause for joy and celebration. Luke traces Jesus' ancestry back to Adam, before Abraham, to stress the universality of Jesus' message. He uses his gospel to teach the Gentiles

important practices of faith, especially prayer, with which they were unfamiliar. He leaves out passages that might confuse a Gentile audience. He interprets Hebrew words for them. Instead of rabbi, he uses teacher; for scribe – lawyer. Luke is often called the Gospel of Women because of the way he fleshes out the character of key women figures.

John's Gospel was written later than the Synoptics and apart from them. It is the most theologically sophisticated of all the Gospels. With the passage of time, there was increased reflection on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This theological reflection often uses poetic imagery. Far from Mark's very human Jesus, John's Jesus is the *Eternal Word, Bread of Life, the Way, the Truth and the Life, and the Light of the World*. John emphasizes Jesus' divinity more strongly than any of the other gospel writers. The emphasis is not so much on Jesus' suffering as his freely choosing to suffer and to die for us. Jesus is self-confident in the face of death. In John, on the night before he dies, Jesus gives long theological discourses on the meaning of his time with them and what is to happen. The unique character of the Gospel, many believe, is based on the experience and insight of the Beloved Disciple of Jesus. John the evangelist's audience was a diverse group, primarily Jewish-Christian from the Diaspora, mixed with Samaritan converts, some followers of John the Baptist, and some Gentile-Christians.

This community, persecuted by its Roman overlords, as well as feeling isolated from, and even in conflict with Jewish and other Christian communities, created a gospel of sublime theological and poetic expression. However, the community also felt compelled to identify all who refused to follow Jesus as the children of darkness. Perhaps due to the preponderance of Jewish Christians in the community, the unfortunate generalization "the Jews" was often used to describe those who rejected Jesus. At other times, "the Jews" is used in a historical and objective manner, referring to the Jewish religious leaders, or people of the Jewish faith.

Consequently, when we read any of the four Gospels we must take care to read them in the historical context in which they were written. Mark writes on the verge of a destructive war against Rome that resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Matthew's gospel is written while the Jewish community is experiencing turmoil and conflict involving the question of what it means to be Jewish, whether to follow those Jewish teachers who eventually develop a Rabbinic Judaism or the Jewish teacher preaching another Jewish way of life following Jesus. Luke's gospel is an outreach to the Gentile world by a Gentile Christian believer who "soft-pedals" the role of Roman responsibility to make peace and give credibility to this new religious message. And lastly in John we have a reflection of extreme tension between Jews who do not follow Jesus and Jesus' believing community where the mutual protagonists project their contemporary differences back into the narrative about Jesus—some 65 years earlier.

From all that has preceded, it becomes clear that the gospels must be read in the context of great tumult and ferment brought about by political and historical events including the destruction of the Temple, competition for the "heart and soul" of Jewish life, accommodation with Roman rule, the great success of Paul and other Apostles preaching to Gentiles and their subsequent joining of this Jesus movement. All of this makes it clear that a fundamentalist, literalist reading of the Gospels is not an option for Roman Catholics in light of church teaching and scholarship over the last 60 years.

However, it must also be remembered that the gospels provide us with an entrée into the faith of the first community, which is presented in a rich and diverse manner. Each evangelist provides a rich tapestry of insight into Jesus and his teaching. This rich portrait of Jesus has been the source of inspiration and reflection for Christian believers for nearly 2,000 years can never be exhausted in its ability to comfort, to challenge, and to lead believers in new ways of life and discipleship.

This text was prepared by members of the Catholic-Jewish Conference to aid both Christians and Jews in understanding the importance of historical context in interpreting the Scriptures.