

Why the Gospels were Written

'These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.' (John 20.30)

The message which the first followers of Jesus proclaimed was that in Jesus Christ God had fulfilled the promises He made to Israel. He had opened the way of salvation for everybody. This was the good news, the gospel. The word 'gospel' did not originally refer to a book about the life and death of Jesus. It meant the good news that was preached. Even now there is only one gospel. The four books that we call 'Gospels' are really four accounts of the one gospel. Their full names show this: 'The Gospel according to St Matthew'. 'The Gospel according to St Mark', etc.

THE NEED FOR THE WRITTEN GOSPEL

In Volume 1 of this Introduction to the New Testament we saw how the Church began, and how it had two main jobs to do. The people who had known and followed Jesus when He was alive had to proclaim to others the good news of what God had done. When those who heard the message believed and were baptized, they had to be taught what it meant to be a follower of Jesus. We saw how the New Testament letters were a part of the Church's teaching ministry. They were all addressed to Christian groups or individuals, and were written to meet immediate needs, and answer immediate questions.

The Gospels contain material for both the preaching ministry and the teaching ministry of the Church. They were written as handbooks. One of their main purposes was to provide material for Christians who were preaching the gospel to outsiders.

STRUCTURED ACCOUNTS IN BOOK FORM

The Gospels are real *books*. They were not written in the heat of the moment, as at least some of the letters were. There is a sense in which we may say that the Gospels 'grew'. They were developed over a number of years to meet the preaching and teaching needs of the Church. Probably there were several editions of all of them, before the final editions which have come down to us. We could compare them with this book, which began as teaching notes. The teaching notes were revised, and some of them revised again. Then, because of a need, a

WHY THE GOSPELS WERE WRITTEN

book was planned. A first draft was written, then a second draft. The one book was divided into two books, and finally they have been published. Once that has happened there is no more need for the teaching notes, or for the earlier drafts of a book, and they can be thrown away. Writing a book is entirely different from writing a letter.

A CHANGING SITUATION

The first Christians had no need of written accounts of Jesus's life. They had known Him. They had seen Him die, and then had experienced His risen presence. The people who heard the first disciples preach and were baptized also had no need of such accounts. They heard about Jesus from those who had known Him. The apostles were with them all the time, and they provided a living contact with Jesus. All of those very early Christians were waiting impatiently for Jesus to return and judge the world. So they were busy proclaiming the gospel to others before His expected coming. They had no time to spend writing down what He had said and done.

As the years went by, however, the situation gradually changed.

1. THE RAPID SPREAD OF THE CHURCH

As the good news about Jesus spread beyond Palestine into the towns and villages of the Roman Empire, it was no longer possible for every new Christian to be taught by one of the Twelve. Many Christians never even saw an apostle. If their teacher had himself been taught by an apostle, that was something to be proud of. A new generation of Christian preachers and teachers began to grow up who had never met an apostle. They needed to be provided with good reliable information about Jesus's life, death and teaching.

2. THE SECOND COMING DID NOT HAPPEN

As we saw in Volume 1, the *parousia* did not happen as soon as Jesus's followers had expected (Vol. 1, pp. 123, 125). When Christians realized that Jesus's teaching about His return could be interpreted in other ways, they began to make longer-term plans for life on this earth.

3. THE DEATH OF THE APOSTLES

Some of the Apostles had died fairly soon after the death of Jesus Himself. James the son of Zebedee had been put to death by Herod Agrippa (Acts 12.2; see also Vol. 1, ch. 2), and only a miracle had prevented Peter from being executed at the same time (Acts 12.3-11). We have very little information about the death of the apostles. According to the tradition of the Church Peter and Paul both died as martyrs in Rome, probably when Nero was emperor (see Vol. 1, ch. 8). Some probably died natural deaths, from illness or old age, others died

THE NEED FOR THE WRITTEN GOSPEL

as martyrs. Certainly the apostles were not going to be with the Church for ever to keep a check on the stories that were told about Jesus.

This changing situation meant that as time went by Christians began to have more need of information that was written down.

THE NEEDS OF PREACHERS AND TEACHERS

When the apostles themselves proclaimed the good news about Jesus they had all the information they needed, since they had been eyewitnesses of the events which they proclaimed. However, even among the first converts there were people who had never seen Jesus. They could only tell the stories which they had heard. Possibly Christians collected and wrote down information about Jesus at a very early date. No one knows exactly what they wrote, or how early they wrote it. However some of the following may have been written down within twenty years of Jesus's crucifixion.

1. *Collections of Old Testament quotations* which the Christians thought pointed to Jesus. Some biblical scholars call such texts 'proof texts', because they were believed to 'prove' who Jesus was, e.g. 'Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, Nor let thy Holy One see corruption' (Ps. 16.10 as quoted in Acts 2.27). Peter quoted this verse from the Psalms to 'prove' the resurrection of Jesus. The first two chapters of Matthew's Gospel contain a great many proof texts.

2. *An account of Jesus's suffering and death*. The proclamation of Jesus's death and resurrection was the central feature of the *kerygma* (see Vol. 1, pp. 60, 61). Preachers were telling what God had done, and they needed to know about the main events.

3. *Stories about the miracles of Jesus*. The miracles fulfilled the promises of the Old Testament, and pointed to Jesus as the Messiah.

4. *Collections of the sayings of Jesus*, to be used in teaching new Christians.

GOSPELS COMPILED AND EDITED

'Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you' (Luke 1.1-3). This introduction to St Luke's Gospel is worth careful study. To 'compile' is to gather information or stories together into a useful form. According to Luke, 'many' had compiled a narrative 'of the things which have been accomplished among us'. They collected their information from 'those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses'. Luke said that it seemed good to him also 'to write an orderly

WHY THE GOSPELS WERE WRITTEN

account'. We might deduce from this that he did not consider those early compilations to be 'orderly'. Luke himself was not an eyewitness, so he had to depend on other people for his information. He probably used some of the accounts which other people had compiled.

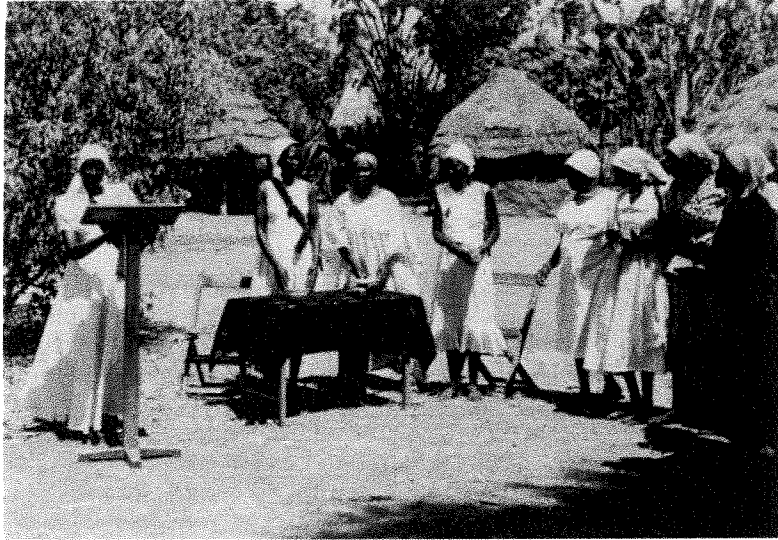
We have no way of knowing how many accounts Luke knew. One of them may have been made by Mark. Luke and Mark were both with Paul when he was in prison (Philemon 23). Nor have we any way of knowing how many drafts of his Gospel Luke may have made before the final one that we have in the New Testament. Luke and the other Church leaders who collected and wrote down stories about Jesus did not think they were writing 'Scripture'. They were simply providing tools for the men and women who would preach and teach in the future. If Luke obtained some new information, or thought of a different way of presenting his material, he could revise what he had written. In some of the Gospels there are clues to what an earlier edition may have been like, but generally speaking we cannot tell how many stages the Gospels passed through. All we have are the finished products, and they may have reached their present shape over many years. Other people may have edited the Gospels besides the original authors. As in the case of the New Testament letters, possible editorial additions to the Gospels are called 'redactions' (see Vol. 1, p. 88).

THE GOSPELS AS KERYGMA

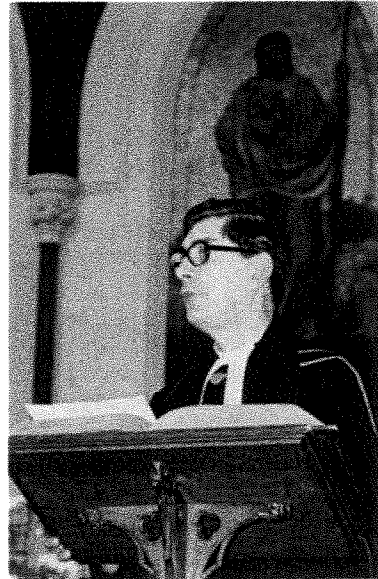
The greater part of each of the four Gospels is devoted to an account of the last week of Jesus's life, and especially the events of the final twenty-four hours. We call such an account of Jesus's suffering and death a 'passion narrative'. This was the heart of the message which the Christians proclaimed to non-believers. St Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians of the message he had proclaimed: 'I would remind you brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel . . . For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scripture' (1 Cor. 15.1-3).

There are sixteen chapters in St Mark's Gospel. Ten of them are devoted to an account of Jesus's life and teaching. Six are devoted to the passion narrative. The other three Gospels are all longer than Mark. Their writers have included more stories about Jesus's ministry, and more of His teaching, yet they have also told the story of Jesus's passion in great detail.

The authors' stated intentions also show us that the Gospels were written to proclaim the good news. Luke stated that he had written his orderly account 'that you may know the truth' (Luke 1.4). Mark began his Gospel with the words, 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ' (Mark 1.1). The writer of the Fourth Gospel stated his aim even more



'The Church leaders who recorded the events of Jesus's life, and wrote down His sayings, were providing tools for those who would preach and teach in many different situations in the future' – a Church leader of today expounding a Bible lesson in a local Church in Britain, or Mothers' Union members in Southern Sudan, who have travelled many miles through areas torn by guerilla fighting to preach and pray with fellow-members in isolated villages.



WHY THE GOSPELS WERE WRITTEN

clearly: 'that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name' (John 20.31).

THE GOSPELS AS THEOLOGICAL BOOKS

The Gospels are about God, and what God has done. They are 'orderly accounts', but they are orderly *theological* accounts, written for theological purposes. We may understand this more clearly if we notice what the writers *did not* intend their books to be.

(a) The Gospels are not detailed biographical accounts of Jesus's life. If we go to the biography section of a library, and choose a book about Mahatma Gandhi, for example, we expect to read about his home and his childhood, what he looked like, the friends he made as he was growing up, and the various influences that affected his life and character. When we read the Gospels we find very little information of this sort. The Gospel writers were not interested in such information. Only Matthew and Luke tell about any of the events surrounding Jesus's birth. Luke alone records a single incident from Jesus's childhood. The Gospel writers tell us nothing about the greater part of His life. We discover almost by chance that Jesus had 'brothers and sisters', and that He had worked as a carpenter.

(b) Gospels are not books written by professional historians. The Gospels are full of historical events, but Luke was the only Gospel writer who was really interested in the details of history. He gave a rough date for Jesus's birth, and a more precise date for His baptism (Luke 2.1-2; 3.1-2). Yet even Luke was more interested in theology than in history.

When God's Son was born as a human being, He entered human history, and so the Gospels and the creeds contain many historical facts. When we say 'crucified under Pontius Pilate', it is a way of saying that the crucifixion was a real event in history. Since Jesus lived in Palestine in the first century AD, we can find the names of people like Herod and Tiberius Caesar in the Gospels (see Vol. 1, ch. 2). As the Gospel writers worked to carry out their main purpose, they were bound to include historical facts. But their main purpose was always to show that God was in Jesus Christ, so that people would believe in Him and become His followers. It was not the Gospel writers' main concern to tell historical details, or to tell the events of Jesus's life in the order in which they happened.

THE EVANGELISTS

'*Evangelion*' is a Greek word meaning 'good news'. An 'evangelist' is someone who brings good news. Timothy was told. 'Do the work of an evangelist' (2 Tim. 4.5). The writers of the Gospels brought good news through their writings, so they are also called evangelists. Just as

THE NEED FOR THE WRITTEN GOSPEL

modern evangelists are different from each other, all having their own individual approach, so the writers of the four Gospels were all different. They told the same good news, and wrote about the same Jesus, but each one of them wrote from his own point of view, and had in his mind the particular needs of the people for whom he was writing.

STUDY SUGGESTIONS

WORDS AND MEANINGS

1. Which of the following sorts of book are usually 'compiled'?
(a) A hymn book (b) A poem (c) A dictionary (d) A concordance (e) A collection of short stories (f) A novel
2. What does it mean when a book is described as having been 'revised'?
3. What is meant by 'long-term plans'? In what way are they different from 'short-term' plans?
4. In the study of the Gospels, what is meant by the phrase 'passion narrative'?
5. Explain why the writers of the four Gospels are also called 'evangelists'.

REVIEW OF CONTENT

6. What do biblical scholars mean by the term 'a proof text'?
7. (a) Give two reasons why the early Christians did not feel the need for a written gospel.
(b) Give three reasons why the Church began to need written accounts of the gospel.
8. Which of the following details about Jesus can be found in the Gospels, and which cannot?
(a) His mother's name.
(b) His date of birth.
(c) His appearance.
(d) Stories about His birth.
(e) An account of His circumcision.
(f) The name of the rabbi who taught Him at school.
(g) An account of His life as a young man.
9. Why is such a large part of each Gospel devoted to the last week of Jesus's life?
10. Which of the four Gospels gives a date for the beginning of Jesus's ministry?

BIBLE STUDY

11. Read the account of an apostle being chosen to take Judas