

Introduction to the Gospels

The Gospel and the Gospels

The word *gospel* appears in many places in the New Testament, but always in a singular, never in a plural form. For the earliest Christians the word *gospel* (from the Greek *euangelion*) referred to the “good news” of what God had done in Jesus. The word *gospel* therefore is singular in all its seventy-six occurrences in the New Testament because it refers to this singular event and not to a written book as many contemporary readers might assume. It was not until the second century that Justin Martyr first used the plural form of the word to describe the narratives of Jesus’ life and ministry that circulated among the early Christians. Properly speaking, each of the four narratives is an account of the one Gospel, the “Good News” about Jesus Christ, and only in a secondary sense are they written documents named “Gospels.” The superscriptions “According to Matthew,” “According to Mark,” and so on, were added to manuscripts after the books themselves were in circulation.

Before we can engage in any serious study of the Gospels, we need to consider their literary genre. Although the other books in the New Testament adopted an already existing literary genre—usually a letter (e.g., Galatians), an epistle (e.g., James), or an apocalypse (Revelation)—many biblical scholars believe that the Gospels are best understood as unique creations that embody a distinctly new literary genre. This new genre can best be described as a highly stylized and heavily symbolic theological narrative of historical events in the life of an individual—Jesus of Nazareth (though Luke’s account of the Gospel also encompasses the life of the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles). Yet other scholars contend that while these narratives are in many ways unique, they also strongly resemble Hellenistic biographies of the same period. Whether or not the Gospel genre is utterly original, the response these narratives seek to evoke is unique—faith in Jesus (John 20:31).

The Formation of the Gospel Accounts

Based upon our brief description of the Gospel genre, the reader, or more precisely, the hearer of the Gospel accounts, did not think of these narratives simply as historical records. These texts certainly contain much historically reliable information about events in the life of Jesus and the early Church—a judgment widely accepted even by non-Christian scholars—yet the precise relationship of these books to the events they purport to narrate remains a point of disagreement. Some scholars argue that these books contain material created almost entirely by the early Church and thus bear little relationship to the events of Jesus’ life. Other scholars believe that these books faithfully preserve the memory of what Jesus said and did even though material created by the early Church has also been inserted in places. Both groups of experts generally agree that some material in the Gospels comes from Jesus himself, and some material reflects the concerns of the early Church. Distinguishing between these two types of material is part of New Testament study and is usually associated with what has come to be known as “historical Jesus research.” While some Christians find this area of study troubling, for Roman Catholics the distinction between the life and ministry of Jesus and the proclamation of the early Church has been affirmed by the teaching office of the Catholic Church. Such a distinction, however, in no way detracts from the more fundamental conviction that the Gospels are true to the message, mission, and identity of Jesus.

Since the early twentieth century, biblical scholars have wrestled with how the Gospel tradition was formed. In 1964, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, then a teaching office of the Vatican, outlined the Roman Catholic Church’s understanding of the development of the material in the Gospels (*Sancta*



Mater Ecclesia). This account, reaffirmed at Vatican Council II in the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum, no. 19)*, states that the Gospels developed in three distinct yet interdependent stages. What follows is a summary of how New Testament scholarship generally views these three stages.

Stage 1: The early followers of Jesus witness his proclamation of the nearness of God's Kingdom by word (pronouncements and parables) and action (symbolic actions and miraculous signs). Jesus' own role in the coming Kingdom is central. Jesus challenges the contemporary boundaries of Judaism, including prohibitions against table fellowship with known sinners and outcasts. He also calls into question the function of the Temple and confronts the religious and political establishment.

Stage 2: The early followers of Jesus, almost all of whom had abandoned him at his hour of need, now proclaim him "Lord" and "Savior" in light of their experience of his Resurrection from the dead and the outpouring of the Spirit. Saul of Tarsus is converted to become a follower of Christ and embarks on a missionary career, leaving behind letters that he had written to various churches giving instructions on a wide variety of issues. Much of the apostolic preaching, or *kerygma*, contains little information about Jesus' life and ministry, though many remembrances of his pronouncements, miracles, and controversies are preserved in a variety of contexts by the early Christian Church.

Stage 3: The proclamation of Jesus' saving work begins to take on a more narrative structure and gives way to the formation of the written Gospel accounts. These narratives incorporate material from both of the previous stages; however, they build a distinct portrait of Christ for the contemporary Christian Church.

These three stages illustrate the movement of the Gospel from the Apostles' experience of Jesus to an oral proclamation of the Good News, and then to a literary proclamation as well. This process or movement was accompanied by the development of a theology that sought to integrate more closely the life of Jesus with the proclamation of his Resurrection.

Upon reading the first three canonical narratives about Jesus, commonly called the synoptic Gospels, the reader is struck by both the great number of verbal and structural similarities and by the uniqueness of many of the stories (the word *synoptic* means "seen together"). The precise nature and extent of the literary relationships among these texts has been an issue for centuries and is called "the synoptic problem." In the nineteenth century the long-accepted priority of Matthew fell under suspicion, and Scripture scholars like K. Lachmann began to argue for the priority of Mark over Matthew and Luke. These scholars believed that Matthew and Luke started with the Gospel of Mark, which Matthew and Luke revised and to which they added material. This theory helped to explain the material common to all three synoptic accounts, yet there remained the problem of the two-hundred-twenty verses shared only by Luke and Matthew. In an effort to account for these verses, C. Weisse erected the so-called two-source hypothesis. He posited the existence of a collection of sayings from Jesus that circulated in the early Church, and this source was eventually designated by the letter Q, an abbreviation for the German word *Quelle*, which means "source." According to the two-source hypothesis, Matthew and Luke had access to Q as well as Mark, when they composed their Gospels. While some scholars are skeptical about the existence of Q, the two-source hypothesis is generally the preferred solution to the synoptic problem.

The Q source is not the only hypothetical source posited by New Testament scholars. There is much material in the New Testament, the origins of which are difficult to determine. The fourth Gospel (John) stands apart from the synoptic Gospels as part of an early and unique tradition of Jesus' life and ministry, even though there are still some important points of contact with the synoptics (e.g., the cleansing of the Temple, walking on the sea, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem). This uniqueness has caused some to consider the material in John to be far removed from the life and ministry of Jesus, yet others (e.g., John Meier) have argued that some of the unique material in John may indeed go back to stage



1. But virtually all scholars agree that the vast majority of the material in the Gospel of John reflects the unique theology and concerns of the late first-century Christian Church. In addition to the fourth Gospel, scholars struggle to account for special material in Matthew and Luke that is not related to Mark or Q (this material is often designated with the letters M and L). Like the Johannine material, the special Matthean and Lucan material reflects each of these authors' theological tendencies.

Christology in the Gospels

As one reads through the Scriptures, it is apparent that images of God and understandings of how God works in the world have developed over the course of time. For the earliest Christians, all of whom were Jewish, the experience of Jesus both confirmed their prior experience of God but also challenged it. In the first century, Jewish men recited the *Shema* from Deuteronomy 6:4–9 (which begins “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone!”). While the *Shema* was an affirmation of Israel's fidelity to Yahweh and not primarily a statement of monotheism, the prayer certainly illustrates that the declaration “Jesus is God” (i.e., Yahweh) would have been a difficult statement for early Jews. The fullest articulation of the Son's divinity, though powerfully implied in Jesus' own activity and broadly alluded to in the New Testament, awaited theological developments that did not take place until the fourth century (the Council of Nicaea). However, it is within the pages of the New Testament that we begin to see the early Christians wrestle to find the precise language to articulate Jesus' relationship to God—a relationship made powerfully evident in the disciples' own experience of the Resurrection and the conversion it engendered within them. Their lives had been changed radically. They shifted from fleeing naked in the face of persecution (see Mark 14:50–52) to offering bold witness in the face of death for the sake of Christ—to whom the earliest Christians “sang songs as to a god” (Pliny, *Letters*, 10.96).

As the earliest Christians struggled to find the language to express the relationship between Jesus and God, they employed and reinterpreted biblical imagery and vocabulary to express their convictions about Jesus. Some of this vocabulary took the form of Christological titles (i.e., statements that were used to express faith in Jesus) or categories (i.e., a stock figure or image), including the following:

Lord. The Greek word *kurios* has a wide range of meanings, from “sir” (John 4:11) to Yahweh—the name of God—in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint). At the close of the Old Testament period the divine name “Yahweh” was never pronounced (except by the high priest on the Day of Atonement). Instead the word *Adonai* (the Hebrew equivalent of “Lord”) was pronounced. The title “Lord” was used to evoke the name of Israel's God, but it could function in other ways as well: (1) it was a way of referring to the glorified risen Christ, particularly with reference to Psalm 110:2; (2) it expressed the fact that this figure was due the same worship and honor as Yahweh (Philippians 2:11); and (3) it expressed Jesus' dominion over all of creation.

Messiah and Christ. The Aramaic word *messiah* simply means “anointed one”; it is translated into Greek as *christos*. It was customary in the ancient world to anoint people when they assumed important new positions in the community (i.e., king, priest, prophet). The title gradually became more associated with the king of Judah, though not exclusively. Following the Babylonian Exile (586–539 BC) it began to be used in conjunction with Israel's hope of future restoration and deliverance, particularly the deliverance of Israel from Gentile oppression. Yet, it is clear from the New Testament itself that Jesus subverted the political expectations many had associated with the term *messiah*. It is perhaps the novelty, or the scandal, of calling the crucified Jesus Messiah that made it difficult for so many to respond to his disciples' proclamation of faith.



Son of God. In the Old Testament the title “Son of God” is (1) a title given to angels (see Job 1:6); (2) a collective title for the people of Israel (see Exodus 4:22; Hosea 11:1); and (3) a title of adoption for the king (see Psalms 2:7). The dominant view in the Old Testament is that a “Son of God” was someone who had received a God-given task. In the prologue of John’s Gospel (see John 1:1–18) and in John 3:16, Jesus is also called “the Father’s only Son” (*monogenēs*), emphasizing the uniqueness of his relationship with the Father and signaling a fuller understanding of Jesus’ sonship as ontological—Jesus’ very nature is the same as that of the Father. In Mark 1:11 the word *son* is used to translate the Hebrew word for “servant” and thus provides a link between “Son of God” and another popular category for understanding Jesus, that is, that of “servant of God” in the servant songs found in Isaiah.

Son of Man. In Daniel 7:13, the “Son of Man” or “one like a Son of Man” (i.e., one who looks like a human being) is part of the heavenly court and helps to bring about the subjugation of the world and inaugurates the salvation of Israel (see also two Jewish apocalyptic works written around the time of Jesus, Enoch 46:1–4; 48:2–10; and 2 Esdras, chapter 13). The phrase, “Son of Man,” appears to be Jesus’ preferred self-designation since it is found in no early creedal formulae and only on his lips in the New Testament. Although this phrase is also used in Ezekiel when Yahweh addresses the prophet (3:17), in this context it simply differentiates the mortal prophet from the immortal and transcendent God (Yahweh) for whom he speaks.

These titles and categories, however, are not the only way the New Testament, and the Gospels in particular, express the religious significance of Jesus. The authors of the Gospels have selected specific narrative moments to express their convictions about Jesus. The late Raymond Brown called these literary scenes “christological moments.” They are scenes taken from the life and ministry of Jesus that become the means by which New Testament authors give expression to their convictions about Jesus—convictions informed by the experience of the Resurrection. One of the clearest examples of a Christological moment can be found in the opening chapters of two Gospel accounts—Matthew and Luke—where one finds two very different stories about the birth of Jesus. While some basic details of these stories may have some root in stage 1 (see above), neither of these stories are historical accounts of Jesus’ birth; rather, they offer portraits of Jesus as Davidic king (Matthew) and lowly, but universal, savior (Luke). Other examples of Christological moments include the Virginal Conception, Jesus’ Baptism, and the Transfiguration scenes. Each of these Christological moments clearly and artfully point to the conviction of the early Church that in Jesus no less than God was present, bringing about the redemption of the world distorted by sin. Some readers may get mired in the question: “Did this event really happen?” However, the purpose of the Gospel accounts is to proclaim what God has done in Jesus.

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