

## Why Compose Gospels?

### Lecture 7

In fact, the word gospel meant originally, as used by Paul, the word *Euangelion*, good news. It had nothing to do with a story about Jesus and what Jesus said and what Jesus did.

The composition of full narrative Gospels represents a fundamental shift in early Christian consciousness. When Paul speaks of the “good news” (*euangelion*) by which humans are being saved, he refers not to stories about Jesus, but to the *kerygma*, the proclamation of what God had done through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The term *euangelion* takes on a whole new dimension, referring formally to a written composition and materially to what Jesus did and said in the power of God. The ministry—and, eventually, the birth and infancy—of Jesus are now included in the meaning of the “good news.”

The transition to written Gospels did not happen without preparation and did not entirely end oral tradition. We have described some of the probable stages of composition toward full Gospels: the compilation of sayings and, possibly, of miracles, the virtually certain stabilization of the passion story. Even when Gospels are composed, oral tradition continues. See the “longer ending” of Mark found in many manuscripts (Mark 16:9–20). Another example is the “pericope of the adulterous woman” in John 8:1–11. The “longer ending” of the Lord’s Prayer probably derives from liturgical usage (see Matt. 6:9–13 and the *Didache*). The “sayings of Jesus” found in the so-called *agrapha* and in apocryphal Gospels may well have roots in oral tradition.

The reasons for finally composing full narrative Gospels after such a long period of oral tradition must have been real and weighty. Some proposed causes are insufficient because they were either local or temporary or were already being dealt with through the means of letters. The “delay of the *parousia*” is sometimes invoked, but it is not clear how fervid and universal was the expectation of an immediate return of Jesus, nor how much of a “crisis” this delay really was. Issues pertaining to right morals or the proper understanding of Jesus are already addressed in the epistolary literature.

The most probable incentive to composing Gospels was a combination of factors connected to the Jewish War with Rome in 67–70. By the year 70, many eyewitnesses—especially such leaders as Peter and Paul—had died. In the Jewish War, the Christian community abandoned the city of Jerusalem, meaning that the symbolic center of the movement was lost along with the rootedness of the Jesus tradition in Palestine. Relations between messianist and non-messianist Jews were exacerbated by the events of the war. Christianity was becoming increasingly Gentile in makeup, again threatening the Jewish roots of the movement. This cluster of circumstances made it important to “remember Jesus” in a new and more authoritative manner, both to preserve the best of the oral tradition and to enable future generations to encounter a Jesus who was recognizably the one proclaimed by the first generations.



Saint Paul defined gospel as the proclamation of what God had done through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Understanding the “pre-history” of the Gospels helps present-day readers appreciate two important features of these compositions. We can appreciate the complex, multilayered character of the Gospels, recognizing that they always address three levels: the events of Jesus’s life, the concerns of the church that remembered and transmitted those events, and the concerns of the evangelist who has organized the memories in a sustained narrative. And we can appreciate the choices made by the evangelists (both canonical and apocryphal) in their compositions, because the oral tradition made possible a number of different selections of material, yielding a number of different portraits of Jesus: sage, thaumaturge, revealer, martyr. ■

#### Essential Reading

C. H. Talbert, *What Is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

### Supplementary Reading

D. Catchpole, *The Quest for Q* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993).

### Questions to Consider

1. In what ways did the composition of Gospels change the Christian understanding of the “good news”?
2. Why is the year 70 C.E. both literally and symbolically pivotal for Jews and Christians?