

How to start reading the Bible

Session 4: New Testament – The Gospels

The four Gospels

First of all, what is a “gospel”? You will have heard the word used, perhaps of the New Testament books Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but perhaps also to refer to a style of music or when someone is swearing to you that they are telling the truth. In fact, the word “gospel” is an old English invention meaning “good news”, and it corresponds with the Greek title “euangelion” for each of these four books. The piece of news in question was of course Jesus Christ, and each of the gospel authors was writing to tell their audience about a wonderful person who was also God, who had come to transform people’s lives, then and for all time.

This is perhaps the key to the question why there are four gospels. At the time of Jesus’ life, there were concepts of “history” and “biography”, but they were different to ours. It was common to report on the speeches of great generals at battles by composing words which were in character, or by collecting together many of their noted sayings. A reader at the time would be expected to realise that the author had not actually been present taking dictation, but was giving an essence of the great person in order to inspire others to emulate their example. Hence the gospels can be seen as the response of people who heard Jesus’ preaching, saw his disciples on The Way, as Christianity was beginning to be called at the time, and wanted to tell their vision of Jesus to the world.

Probably quite soon after the shocking events of the crucifixion and resurrection, some selections of Jesus’ sayings and parables were circulating amongst his followers. As the news spread, there needed to be writings that could be taken to other cities, to tell more people. We do not know this for sure, but there were probably several of these, and it is likely that the authors of the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke saw some of these and based their accounts on them. It is important to note that we do not have copies of any of these hypothetical materials, so this remains a theory until such time as anything turns up to prove or disprove it. What is important is that many people’s recollections and understanding went into the material we now know as the gospel. Some writers have used the metaphor of “evidence after an explosion” – we know that a huge explosion took place (the life of Jesus), but we do not have a video of events taking place, instead we have some circumstantial evidence, conflicting eye witness accounts and some debris. Others use the metaphor of a portrait – no two portraits of the same sitter by different artists will look the same. If the painters are trying to represent what they see of the person, even being as objective as possible, their impression will be different, so we see the person through the lens of the first viewer, the painter.

We do have some material on Jesus' life and sayings besides the four gospels currently in the bible. During the long discussion of which books should be included in the bible, the four gospels we know today were almost always seen as giving vital true information about Jesus, and as necessarily being included. Other accounts are often more obviously slanted e.g. written by the sect called the Gnostics, or contain very little that is not available elsewhere. Some of these are of historical interest, but none is worth seeking out until you have a good grasp of the bible as we know it today.

The Gospels in context

It might be instructive to consider the difference between the way the sayings of Jesus are handled in the gospels with the nearest Old Testament parallel: prophetic books like Amos. These books consisted of collections of sayings of the prophet, and some of the material circulating about Jesus may have been similar lists of sayings, in the Aramaic he originally spoke, or translated into Greek. In the Synoptics, the sayings are not only repeated in slightly different wordings, but are depicted as said in different contexts.

We have to consider two levels of context here – the physical, contemporary context of the first century AD in Palestine, with all the different cultural knowledge which we do not necessarily share, and the context of each individual gospel i.e. the reason why the author was writing it and his intended audience.

Matthew

Matthew wrote for a Jewish audience, and was concerned to prove that Jesus was the Messiah the Jews expected. In order to do this, he frequently quotes the Hebrew scriptures on various incidents which are expected to happen in the life of the Messiah and argues that Jesus does indeed fulfil these.

One key component of Matthew's gospel are the five topical collections of sayings on different aspects of the kingdom.

Topic	Reference
Life in the kingdom (the Sermon on the Mount)	Chs 5 – 7
Instructions for the ministers of the kingdom	10:5-42
Parables of the kingdom at work in the world	13:1-52
Relationships and discipline in the kingdom	18:1-35
Eschatology, the consummation of the kingdom (the end of the age)	Chs 23-25

Mark

This is the shortest gospel, and has an immediate and punchy style. Mark is concerned to talk about the momentum of Jesus' ministry, and shows him and his disciples travelling around Galilee at a break-neck pace.

It is likely that this was the first Gospel to be written down in its final form, and hence it also has a feeling of being close to the origin of Christianity. For a long time, it was somewhat neglected in church readings and in theological study, as much of its material is repeated word for word in the other gospels, but new theories of its age make it of much more interest.

Luke

Luke is writing for the benefit of Gentiles, so he is careful to explain Jewish customs that may be unfamiliar to them. He is also writing a two-volume history both of the life and teachings of Jesus (the gospel) and the history of the very early church from the moment of Jesus' ascension (Acts of the Apostles).

John

This is almost certainly the last of the four gospels to be written down in its current form, and it has a different emphasis to the three Synoptics.

Comparing the Synoptic Gospels

The first three gospels have striking similarities, hence all the theories about their authors sharing various early sources. They are therefore known as the Synoptic Gospels. It is possible to compare some incidents and teachings that are in two or all three of the synoptic gospels, to get an idea of the different interests and methods of the writers. For this it is possible to obtain books called "Gospel parallels", which cross-reference the synoptic gospels and show their treatment of the same item side by side to make word for word comparison easy. On a first reading, it is probably best to notice what you can about the styles and interests of the different authors without worrying about such fine details.

It is thought that many of the sayings were circulating in the oral tradition and then in the form of individual items or small collections for up to 30 years before being

incorporated into the gospels. We can see the same set of saying used in very different ways, e.g. we could consider how the sayings about money which Matthew places in one context (Ch 10) are mostly replicated in Luke but scattered throughout his gospel.

The Johannine writings

The Gospel of John is very different to the others. Linguistic analysis has shown that it is very likely that the traditional theory that one author wrote the fourth gospel, and also the letters ascribed to John, and the book of Revelation (rather than some of these being written by other persons). Tradition has it that this person was the apostle John, known as the beloved disciple.

We shall be considering the letters of from John in our session on Epistles, however the complicated and mysterious book of Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse of John, is outside the scope of this course.

Parables and other teaching methods in the Gospels

Jesus did not only teach in parables but in many related forms. Here is a quick guide to the forms, although we should note that commentators do not always agree about the division of individual sayings or stories into these exact forms.

Type	Reference	Summary
Parable	Matt 18	Lost sheep
Hyperbole	Matt 5:29	
Proverb	Matt 6:21	
Simile or metaphor	Matt 10:16 or 5:13	
Poetry	Matt 7:6-8	
Questions	Matt 17:25	
Irony	Matt 16:2-3	
Similitude		The yeast in the dough
Epigram		"do people pick grapes from a thorn bush?"

When trying to interpret a story of Jesus' teaching, it is a good idea to consider the audience who are said to be present when it is told. For example, was this a story told to his core group of disciples, or to a large crowd of more or less committed followers, or to an individual or group of his opponents?