

Topic 11: The Witness of the Gospels

Jesus sent the apostles into the whole world to “preach the gospel to the whole creation” (Mk 16:15) The content of that Gospel is what Jesus said and did in his earthly life. The four accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are the result of a long process of composition. The Gospels are not books that present Jesus as a figure of the past: they are a living word, and in them Jesus is always alive.

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The oldest written record of the word “gospel” (“glad tidings” in Old English) in the Christian sense comes from Saint. Paul, although its use predates him. The apostle uses the term 20 years after our Lord’s death, without having to explain it (1 Thess 1:5; 2:4; Gal 2:5.14; 1 Cor 4:15; Rom 10:16). When Jesus uses the word “Gospel” it is often accompanied by an additional phrase: “Gospel of the Kingdom of God.”

In antiquity—in Homer and Plutarch, for example—the word “gospel” was used to indicate the reward given to the person who brought news of a victory, or the sacrifice of thanksgiving offered to the gods on the occasion of such good news. The Romans employed the term “gospels” to describe the benefits that the

Emperor Augustus had brought to mankind, as attested by an inscription referring to him: “The day of the birth of the god has marked the beginning of the good news for the world.”

But in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, the verb *euaggelidso*, which means “to give good news,” refers to the coming of the messianic times, in which God would save his people: “I am here, like a season upon the mountains, like the feet of him who brings good news of a proclamation of peace, like him who brings good news of good things, for I will make your salvation heard, saying to Zion: ‘Your God will reign!’”(Is 52:6-8; see also Is 61:1-2; Ps 96:2.10).

In the New Testament this messenger or herald who proclaims the kingship of the Lord and inaugurates

the messianic times with his word, is Jesus.

Composition and authenticity of the Gospels

The Gospels tell us that “after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God” (Mk 1:14). This good news is that in Jesus the Kingdom of God is made present. Jesus is not only the messenger of this good news, but the message refers to his own person. After the Resurrection, Jesus sent the apostles into the whole world to “preach the gospel to the whole creation” (Mk 16:15). The content of this Gospel was what Jesus said and did in his earthly life, as well as his Passion, Death and Resurrection. These words and deeds show that, in Christ, the promises of the Old Testament have been fulfilled.

The apostolic mission gives origin to the “Gospels,” so called because they

contain the preached Gospel in writing. Four accounts of the one single Gospel have come down to us: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These four books are the result of a long process of composition, usually divided into three stages:

1) Jesus' life and teachings in Palestine during the first three decades A.D. During these years, the disciples were hearers and witnesses of the signs and miracles performed by their Master. In addition, they were sent by Him to preach his message, which meant learning what they were to pass on. This is a period in which memory played a very important role.

2) After the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, the oral tradition developed. During this period, the apostles preached what the Lord had said and done. They did so with a deeper understanding of the events they had

experienced, and with the assistance of the Spirit of truth (cf. Jn 16:13). During this time of about 30-40 years, the tradition about Jesus spread orally from Palestine to many other parts of the Roman Empire. During these decades, surely the traditions about Jesus would have taken shape in written forms (teachings and sayings of Jesus, miracles performed by Him, the account of his Passion and Death, etc.) and were being adapted to the needs of listeners through preaching, catechesis and liturgical celebrations.

3) From the late 60s A.D. (when most of those who had directly witnessed the life and work of Jesus were disappearing and the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed) until the end of the first century, the evangelists put into written form some of the many things that had been handed down orally or in writing. In doing so, the Gospel

writers synthesised these traditions or developed others according to the new circumstances in which the various Christian communities lived. In this work, the evangelists preserved the style of the apostolic proclamation.

The texts of the Gospels do not indicate who their authors were. Some Christian writings from the late first century quote phrases or passages found in the Gospels, but do not refer to who wrote them. In any case, by the second century a consensus already existed that there were only four of these writings and that these texts had the authority of the apostolic figures Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. This awareness is recorded by Papias of Hierapolis (transmitted by Eusebius of Caesarea), Saint Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and the Canon of Muratori (the oldest list of the books

in the New Testament). For example, Saint Irenaeus writes:

“Matthew issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also handed down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by Paul. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast (Jn 13:23), published a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia” (*Against Heresies*, 3,1,1).

With these words, the bishop of Lyon establishes the apostolic origin of the four canonical Gospels. These writings are truly part of the authentic tradition of the apostles. It is important to note that the term

“authentic” indicates the original character or the conformity to the original of a certificate or document. Because of this characteristic, the certificate or document can bear witness or offer proof. A document is therefore said to be authentic in order to denote that its author is indeed the person to whom it is attributed. But the term “authentic” is also used in the plural to refer to the authoritative representatives of Tradition who have been universally accepted by the Fathers of the Church. In this sense, the apostles (Matthew and John) and apostolic men (Mark, a disciple of Peter, and Luke, a disciple of Paul) are “authentic” because they provide a guarantee of the authenticity and veracity of the Gospels which bear their names. Such a guarantee does not necessarily mean that these figures personally wrote, with their own hand, the Gospel narratives.

In fact, we do not know the specific way in which these accounts were composed. The first three Gospels are known as “synoptic Gospels,” because if they are placed in parallel columns one can see concordances as well as discordances at a glance (*synopsis*, meaning “*seeing together*,” is a Latin term coming from ancient Greek). The similarities and differences between these three writings have given rise to various hypotheses about their origin.

For a long time it was thought, following Saint Augustine, that the first Gospel to be composed was that of Matthew, and that Mark later abbreviated it. Later, Luke, knowing both writings, would have composed his own account.

It has also been proposed, following Clement of Alexandria, that Matthew would have been the first to write his Gospel for Christians coming from

Judaism, and then Luke would have adapted it for Christians of pagan origin. Later, Mark would have made a compendium of the two.

However, the most widely supported explanation today is that Mark's work established the relationship between oral and written Gospel and became the prototype Gospel. The other evangelists would have adopted the outline of this first account. They would also have added material which was held in common among them that was not present in Mark, as well as material of their own. In any case, from among the various traditions associated with the apostles, each evangelist had to select what was available to him, frame it into a narrative and abbreviate or expand it, taking into account the circumstances of the communities he was addressing.

According to this understanding, it seems that Matthew and Luke, perhaps without consulting with one another, used Mark's Gospel. On the other hand, what is common to Matthew and Luke, but not found in Mark, is usually identified as a collection of sayings of Jesus (usually called source Q). But no evidence has come down to us confirming the existence of such a source. In addition to these sources, each of the three synoptic Gospels presents traditions that are unique to each work and that do not appear in the others. John, on the other hand, was aware of the traditions collected by Mark, although he presents the narration of the life and work of Jesus with his own characteristics.

In any case, these early documents bring together traditions dating back to the apostolic preaching. They are not biographies of Jesus in the sense that is currently given to the term,

although they truly narrate the earthly life of our Lord. Rather, the Gospels give apostolic testimony regarding Jesus Christ. In fact, Saint Justin refers to them as “the memoirs” (or recollections) of the apostles, which “are called Gospels” (*Apology*, 1, 66, 3). This name would come to be used for these writings. The term “gospel” shows both the originality of these works as well as their connection with apostolic preaching. This connection extends to the way in which each account is structured.

In fact, the outline of the four Gospels is the same as that of the apostolic proclamation (known by the Greek term *kerygma*). This proclamation is summarised, for example, in Peter’s discourse in the house of the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10: 37-43): Jesus is baptised by John, preaches and performs miracles in Galilee, goes up to

Jerusalem, where after his ministry in the holy city he is led to his Passion and Death. After he rises from the dead, he appears to the apostles and ascends to heaven to be with the Father, from where he will come as judge. Those who believe in him receive forgiveness of sins.

Upon this basic outline, each evangelist composed his own narrative. Matthew and Luke placed the infancy narratives before the account of the public ministry of Jesus. John begins his Gospel with a prologue stressing the pre-existence of Jesus, the Logos made flesh. Mark stresses the need for conversion so as to receive the Messiah, and he also emphasizes the role of Peter. Matthew structures his account of the ministry of Jesus around great discourses. Luke highlights the ascent of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. John gradually reveals the messianic identity of Jesus through

“signs” or miracles up until Christ’s death, which the Evangelist portrays as a glorification.

Historical reliability

To understand the historical truth of the Gospels, it is necessary to understand their genre. These texts are not contemporary chronicles of the life of Jesus written by an eyewitness. Rather, they are accounts faithful to the apostolic tradition, which in turn is faithful to the preaching and life of Christ. That is, the apostles did not simply repeat what Jesus had said or merely narrate in detail what He had done. Instead, they conveyed the life of Jesus and also explained the meaning of his life. This latter aspect is clear in the earliest confession of faith, which Saint Paul records in 1 Corinthians 15:3 and which he himself had received by tradition: “Christ died for our sins in

accordance with the scriptures.” Here, the apostolic preaching narrates certain indisputable historical facts: “Christ died,” a historical event that took place under the authority of Pontius Pilate. At the same time, the profession of faith also acknowledges the salvific meaning of the same event, which directly affects men and women of all times – “for our sins” – and which had been announced in the sacred writings of Israel – “according to the Scriptures.”

What is narrated in the Gospels, therefore, refers to the truth of what happened. This truth is what the apostles witnessed and preached, in order to communicate to people of all times that salvation is to be found in the crucified and risen Christ, as foretold in the Scriptures of Israel. Therefore, we should not look for just the bare, objective facts in these writings, devoid of the meaning

given to them by the evangelists. Besides, such objectivity would be impossible in an ancient account. The historical reality of the Gospels cannot be separated from the teaching of the apostles, which each evangelist presents in his own way.

These characteristics of the Gospel accounts do not mean that it is not possible to have access to the historical events described in these writings. Nor does it imply, because these narratives are inseparably linked to a specific teaching, that these narratives are not trustworthy. Over the centuries, the historicity of the Gospel accounts has been examined according to the various conceptions of history held at each particular time period. In modern times, the Gospels were examined through a historical-critical analysis of ancient documents which were not considered objective. From this perspective, a distinction was made

between the “Jesus of history” and the “Christ of faith.” This approach separated the figure of Jesus, as reconstructed by historians, from what the Church teaches about Christ. For Christians, there can be no such dissociation, since the historical Jesus is the same Lord Jesus Christ whose person and teachings the Church faithfully passes on. Still, the issue raised by the modern historical-critical approach is inescapable. The question of how to know Jesus from a historical point of view cannot be ignored. Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, was and is a true man. He is a historical figure and his redemptive work was carried out through actions which took place in human history. As Benedict XVI teaches, if Jesus were an idea or an ideology, Christianity would be simply gnosis, or esoteric spiritual knowledge. Therefore, historical research into the Gospel accounts is a

necessary requirement, not only to provide a solid grounding to faith, but also in order to have a better knowledge of our Lord's Sacred Humanity.

Knowledge of Jesus must start from the Gospels: they are the primary source for our information about Jesus. At the same time, historical testimony has come to us from other non-biblical sources that support what these four accounts contain. For example, archaeological discoveries from ancient Palestine have brought to light valuable data that support or contextualise what the Gospels tell us. The texts found at Qumran, the translations of the Jewish Scriptures into Aramaic, the Jewish oral tradition and its modes of transmission, as well as the rabbinic sources, help us to know better the religious vitality of the time and the way in which the sacred writings were used. The testimony about

Jesus of the Judeo-Roman historian Flavius Josephus, other testimonies from pagan sources (Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny), together with information from Greco-Roman rhetorical texts, and the study of Hellenistic education and the influence of Greek schools of thought, also help to frame and better understand historical elements present in the Gospels. In the face of the claims about the subjectivity of the Gospels, the aforementioned external sources are complemented by a set of criteria that ensure the historical reliability of the four evangelists' accounts. Some of the most important of these criteria are:

1) The criterion of discontinuity. Expressions and actions that do not fit into the Judaism of the time, and which would not have been invented by the early Church or by the evangelists, are considered to be

authentically historical. For example: “Kingdom of God,” “Son of Man,” “Abba,” “Amen,” the baptism of Jesus by John, the defects of the Apostles.

2) The criterion of multiple testimony. Characteristics of the person, preaching and activity of Jesus that are attested to in all the Gospels, and in other writings of the New Testament or outside it, are authentic. For example: Jesus’ stance towards the Law, sinners and the poor; his resistance to being recognised as a political messiah-king; his preaching of the Kingdom, and his healing activity and miracles.

3) The criterion of coherence or conformity. Elements of the Gospels that cannot be established as historical by other criteria, but which are consistent with what we reliably know about Jesus’ preaching and his announcement regarding the Kingdom of God, are considered

authentic. For example: the Lord's Prayer, the parables, and the beatitudes.

4) The criterion of necessary explanation. Events that give meaning to and illuminate a set of elements that otherwise would not be understood, are also considered authentic. For example: the success of the beginning of Jesus' ministry, his activity in Jerusalem, and his private teachings to his disciples.

To these criteria are added the so-called "signs" that something narrated is probably true. Details such as Jesus sleeping at the head of the boat, or the indication that an event happened, for example, "near Jericho," are signs that an eyewitness account underlies the narrative.

All these criteria show that the Gospels, although they are testimonies of faith, are historically reliable. They prove that the

theological and salvific perspective, through which the Gospels present Jesus, does not distort historical reality by exaggerating him. This does not mean that the image of Jesus conveyed by the evangelists is exhausted in these written accounts. As Saint John writes, “Jesus did many other signs” that were not recorded in the Gospels (Jn 20:30-31; cf. 21:25). But the limits of the Gospel accounts are mainly due to the truth that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, who exceeds all human attempts at a complete understanding.

Portrayal of Christ in the Gospels

Although incomplete, the depiction of Christ conveyed through the Gospels is not the only one that God wanted to reveal to us. Rather, the Gospel’s portrayal of Christ is at the basis of all the other representations of Him that have been proposed and developed throughout the history of

the Church, especially by means of her saints. All of these depictions are rooted in the portrayal of Jesus found in the Gospels.

Jesus is presented by Saint Matthew in all his majesty, for he is the Son of God (cf. 1:20; 27:54). He is also the promised Messiah. In him the prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled, as is shown by the frequent references to the fulfilment of “what the Lord had spoken through the prophet” or similar expressions (1:22-23; 2:5-6,15,17-18,23; 3:3-4; etc.). But at the same time, Jesus is the Messiah whom the authorities of Israel would refuse to accept. As a result, as Matthew bears witness, God has willed to form a new people who would produce the fruits He desires (21:43). This new people is the Church. In the Church, Jesus is the teacher, but, above all, he is the Emmanuel – God with us – from before his conception (1:23). He

continues to be present in the midst of his own people until the end of time (18:20; 28:20). Jesus is, finally, the Servant of the Lord foretold by Isaiah, who with his words and miracles fulfils God's plan of salvation for mankind (8:16-17; 12:15-21).

For Saint Mark—it could not be otherwise—Jesus is also the Messiah announced in the Old Testament. This Evangelist places emphasis on how Jesus carries out the works of the promised Messiah, rather than on the texts that are fulfilled in Him. To avoid the impression that he is a political Messiah, Jesus asks those who benefit from his deeds to remain silent. Thus his role as Messiah can be understood not in a temporal sense, but in light of the cross (1:44; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26). To prevent this misunderstanding of Christ's mission, the evangelist refers to the title by which Jesus preferred

to call himself: the “Son of man” (2:10.28; 8:31:38; etc.). The title evokes the vision recounted in the Book of Daniel, which announces that a heavenly being, “like a son of man,” will come from on high and receive power over all nations (Dan: 13-14). This scriptural image manifests the transcendent condition of the Messiah. Furthermore, Mark emphasises that Jesus is the “Son of God.” Jesus receives this title right from the beginning of the Gospel (1:1). He is proclaimed as such by the Father at his Baptism and at the Transfiguration (1:11; 9:7). And he is given this title by the centurion standing before the cross (15:39).

Saint Luke emphasises that Jesus is the Prophet *par excellence* (1:76; 4:24; 7,16.26; 13:33; 24:19). No one can speak in the name of God like He does. Like the prophets in the Old Testament who were guided by the Spirit of God, Jesus was anointed by

the Spirit in his Baptism (3:22). He was led by the same Spirit into the desert to be tempted (4:1) and impelled to begin his mission in Galilee (4:14.18). For the third evangelist, Jesus is also the Saviour, because he will save his people from their sins. In him are fulfilled the promises of salvation made by God to the patriarchs and prophets of Israel (1:47.69.71.77; 2:11.30; 3:6; etc.). The reality of this fulfilment is revealed in Jesus' saving actions, especially in his gestures of mercy towards the weak and sinners (7:50; 8:48.50; 18:42; 19:9-10). Jesus is also the Lord. The Jews used this title to refer to God in order to avoid pronouncing his holy name. At the same time, "lord" was a form of respect in addressing a person. Luke makes abundant use of this title in reference to Jesus, thus indicating Christ's divine condition from birth until his full manifestation in the Resurrection (2:11; 5,8.12; 7:6; etc.).

For Saint John, as for the other evangelists, Jesus is the promised Messiah of Israel and also the Prophet (4:19; 6:14) and Teacher or Rabbi (1:38,49; 3:2; etc.; 6:3,69; 7:14,28; 8:20). But in the fourth Gospel, this revelation acquires greater theological depth. John recognizes that Jesus is the Son of God, as do the other Gospels. But John stresses that Jesus is “the Son,” the only begotten (1:14.18), the only true Son, of whom God is Father in a different manner than of other men (20:17). In fact, the only true Son is one with the Father (10:30; 5:19-21.23.26; 14:11). Moreover, as the Son of God, Jesus has existed before the moment of the Incarnation, and even before Abraham (1:30; 8:58). He became flesh and dwelt among men (1:1-14). He is the everlasting Word of the Father, the Logos, who has created and sustains the world (1:1-3). He has been sent as the final and decisive

Word of God to humanity to reveal to mankind who God is (17:25). He is the one in whom various characteristics of God in the Old Testament are fulfilled. Jesus is the Bread of Life (6:35.51), the Light of the world (8:12), the Door (of the sheep) (10:7.9), the Good Shepherd (10:11.14), the Resurrection and the Life (11:25), the Way, the Truth and the Life (14:6), the Vine (15:1.5). He is, therefore, the one who can use the expression “I am” in the absolute sense, without a qualifier (8:28.58; 18:5), to indicate his divine condition. But he is also the “Son of man,” truly man, who came down from heaven to die for us (1:51; 3:13; 6:62), and the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world by dying on the cross (1:29.36; cf. 19:14).

The Gospels are not books that present Jesus as a figure of the past. They are a living word, in which Jesus remains always alive. As Saint

Josemaría advised: “Live close to Christ! You should be another character in the Gospel, side by side with Peter, and John, and Andrew. For Christ is also living now: *Iesus Christus, heri et hodie, ipse et in saecula!* — Jesus Christ lives! Today, as yesterday, he is the same, for ever and ever” (*The Forge*, 8).

Basic bibliography

Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, 18-19.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 124-127.

Recommended reading

“Introduction to the Gospels” and “Introduction” to each Gospel, in *The Navarre Bible. The New Testament* (Four Courts Press, Dublin; Scepter Publishers, New York).

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