

Why, How and When the Gospels?

[In accordance with the Clementine tradition]

For two hundred years those aiming to destroy Christian civilization have been undermining belief in the historical reliability of the Gospels. They have had much success and, even in devout Christian Circles, they have brought about an attitude of widespread hesitation. This has led to the comprehensive historical evidence, regarding the writing of the Gospels, to be rarely publicized today.

Yet when we go back to the original sources we find that it is easy to build a clear picture of what occurred. The evidence of ancient historians, modern literary analysis and church documents is available in the booklet: 'The Authors of the Gospels', available elsewhere on this web site. However, when examining this evidence in detail, piece by piece, it is easy to lose sight of the overall picture. This article aims to provide this overall picture while keeping references to a minimum.

Whilst the first followers of Jesus continued to attend the Temple, they also held meetings of their own. These consisted of prayer, the singing psalms, listening to teaching from a disciple, meditating on the meaning of the life of Jesus, and breaking bread together.

Matthew, a former tax collector, would have been educationally equipped to provide a structure for the meetings, and this appears to have been the origin of the first Gospel. All the ancient historians affirm that Matthew wrote this first Gospel.

The Jews in Palestine spoke Aramaic although Hebrew was still a living language [1]. We do not know whether Matthew used Aramaic or Hebrew but versions in both languages would have soon have been put into circulation. Modern analysis has concluded that our Greek Gospel was translated from a Hebrew version [2]. As Matthew would have checked all versions, they would be of equal authority; and since the apostles were still living together, we may presume that several or all of them would have read Matthew's versions before publication.

The first part of Matthew's Gospel shows how the birth of Jesus fulfilled the prophecies regarding the coming of the Messiah. The concluding section shows how Christ's death and resurrection fulfilled more of them. This was crucial for the first Christians as they were all Jews.

The middle section is divided into five parts, each consisting of a narrative and discourse [3]. These open with a unique formula in the Gospels: 'And it came to pass when Jesus had ended these words ...'. To develop his five themes, the author took events and stories from various parts of Jesus' public life. So by ignoring chronology his writing gives the impression that the public life of Christ lasted one year only.

As missionaries travelled throughout the Roman Empire, they would go to the Synagogues to preach first to the Jews. Most of the Jews living outside of Palestine spoke Greek, not Aramaic or Hebrew. So the Greek version of the Gospel would have been ideal for forming these Jewish Christians. They in turn would then preach to the local Gentiles.

For a time this was satisfactory; but Paul, who took the lead in preaching to the Gentiles, saw the need for an account of the 'good news' written in a way more meaningful for them. Several attempts had been made to produce a chronological account suitable for the Gentiles. Eventually, however, Paul's secretary, Luke took the matter in hand. According to the oldest Christian tradition, this was the second Gospel to be written [4]. Luke aimed to produce an account in order (i.e. chronological) and to separate the stories of what Jesus did from what he taught [5].

As part of Luke's aim to produce a chronological account, he gathered the teaching materials together and placed them in a central section. When borrowing verses from Matthew's thematic work for his account, it was necessary for him to change many of the introductions so as to prevent apparent contradictions of timing.

Luke had not been a companion of Christ, so his Gospel did not possess the authority of that composed by Matthew. So when Paul and Luke arrived in Rome, they saw the opportunity to have it authenticated by Peter. This appears to have been done by Peter giving a series of talks in Greek based on the two Gospels. He blended them together by quoting from them alternatively, while adding comments of his own.

The infancy narratives, Luke's central section, and the accounts of the Crucifixion were omitted from the talks because they were too dissimilar to enable blending.

According to the practice of the time, Peter's secretary, Mark, arranged for the talks to be recorded verbatim in shorthand. The existing Gospels had been well planned to fill the length of a standard papyrus roll. But this new script was much shorter and in the unedited spoken Greek of a man who was not a native speaker in that language.

A large audience attended the talks and, when some of them asked for copies of the shorthand notes, Mark provided them. He provided them without editing out errors of memory, grammar and mannerisms. This is why this Gospel has been judged by many to be in 'poor' Greek. We know that Peter at first was indifferent to the transcript being distributed but, when he saw that it was producing good results, he supported its wider dissemination.

Two versions of the talks, known today as Mark's Gospel, were distributed. Both versions exist today, with our bibles containing the longer one. The shorter version replaces the last twelve verses with a brief ending. It is suggested that Peter was asked questions at the end of his series of talks and the final verses report his replies. These replies were seen as an appendix to the main report and were not always copied.

A short time later, the bishops of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), together with Andrew the Apostle, asked John to answer heretics who were spreading Gnostic versions of Christianity. The Gnostics, with their beliefs in Aeons (demigods) such as, Light Monogenes, Word (Logos) and Life, were challenging the teachings that Christ was God, and therefore creator of the world. They also claimed that John the Baptist was superior to Christ, and in their preaching made use of some ambiguities in the existing Gospels. He answered these points and closed his Gospel at the end of chapter 20.

But about 95 AD he answered further questions regarding the authority of Peter, and a rumour that he (John) would never die. When further copies of his Gospel were made these verses were added to his original writing.

It is interesting that eyewitnesses of Christ's life wrote two of the Gospels. This fact is part of the doctrinal teaching of the Catholic Church [6]. The third was the transcript of talks by another eyewitness, and the same eyewitness confirmed as authentic the Gospel produced by Paul's secretary.

Luke had written a second volume which we call: 'Acts'. It provides accounts of the life of the early church and of the missionary work of Paul in Asia Minor [Today's Turkey].

When we read the Epistles (Letters) of Paul we can see how they fit in with the record of his travels with Luke, as recorded in Acts. Luke often says 'we' but occasionally uses 'they' for those occasions when he was not accompanying Paul. After the death of Peter, Paul fulfilled his ambition to visit Spain and, on his return, continued to work in or near Asia Minor.

We have some letters Paul wrote to Titus and Timothy who were working in the area during this period. The missionary background to them does not appear in Acts because this book had been concluded by the time Luke and Paul arrived in Rome.

- [1] Acts 21: 40, 22: 2 and recent research.
- [2] Books by Claude Tresmontant, Jean Carmignac and others..
- [3] A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture, 1953, section 678c
- [4] Saint Clement of Alexandria and others.
- [5] Luke 1: 1- 4 and Acts 1: 1-2
- [6] 2nd Vatican Council, Dei Verbum, paragraphs 7 and 18.

This leaflet is based on the free internet booklet: 'The Authors of the Gospels' .
The booklet is available in html or pdf from: www.churchinhistory.org

Also in an A5 printed edition from CIHIC, 757 Borough Road, CH42 6QQ.
£5 post free within the U.K. Cheques payable to D. Barton
Overseas customers please add extra for additional postage
and pay in \$ bills or Euro notes.

<http://www.churchinhistory.org/>

Version: 4th September 2006