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The Origin of the Gospels

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When the author attended college some years ago, he was taught a theory of the formulation of the writings of the New Testament which may be summarized as follows: St. Paul's writings were doubtless the earliest of Christian documents, as he does not mention the gospels or even hint of their existence. Thus, Paul must have learned of the life and ministry of Christ from the preaching of Jesus' followers, and not from the written word. Instead, the gospels were formed like any folk tradition, having crystallized in the Christian community over a period of decades into pre-gospel and gospel-forms.

The reason for this lengthy period of story-telling (in some cases, thirty years or more) was twofold: (1.) Since the end of the age, the *parousia*, was expected to come soon, there seemed little point in making permanent records of the words and actions of Jesus. (2.) In those times, few people could read or write. Thus, the most effective method of preserving the recollection of Christ in the early church was by "word of mouth."¹ For decades this theory or a later refinement has been given something close to biblical authority. Volume after volume has been published, schools of criticism have developed, and the New Testament has been scrutinized, dated, and understood—all on the foundation of this underlying assumption.²

In recent years, however, the author has come to question this theory, for several reasons. First of all, it seems unlikely that the tradition surrounding the life, ministry, and person of Jesus could have "crystallized like any folk tradition." Such a process may certainly have been the case if Christianity had, in some way, idealized the past through its preaching. But if the core of the Christian message was really the reflection of God's unique revelation in history, that is to say, if something really happened outside the normal flow of human events (Mark 2:12b), then it stands to reason that the gospels did not arise in this leisurely manner, by virtue of the profound excitement at what had occurred.

Secondly, while the end of the age was expected to come soon, the ancient church would have felt called to greater evangelical activity instead of less. As Jesus states in Matthew 24:14, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." Or as St.

Paul states in Colossians 1:23, ". . . the gospel which you heard . . . *has been preached* to every creature under heaven . . ." Such an enormous undertaking must have relied on the written word, as did the Jewish synagogue.

Thus, the theory of an "oral stage" lasting for several decades is clearly inadequate. In the years following the resurrection the church must have been busy with its major task of evangelizing the world prior to the coming of the new age or, for that matter, prior to the personal death of anyone who could be saved through the gospel. Documents must have been necessary for this work, not only for letters and epistles, but for preaching as well, as will be explained below.

Thirdly, the notion that few people could read or write in this period of the history of the church is doubtful. The lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea—with Rome, Athens, Jerusalem, and Alexandria—represented the quintessence of the civilized world. For many centuries writing had been used not only in academic work and documentation, but also in the conducting of daily business (as appears from the archaeological discoveries at Oxyrhynchus).³ In the Old Testament writing is mentioned from the time of Moses, pen and ink from the time of Jeremiah.

In addition, for the Hebrew community, God's revelation through the law meant that, from the time of Moses on, reading and writing would attain an important place in the life of the religious community. The New Testament also bears witness to the abundance of letters being written and the number of people, even common people, who possessed the ability to read and write. Examples include Peter, once employed as a fisherman (2 Peter 3:1), and Jesus, who was once a carpenter (Luke 4:16; John 8:6, 8). When Zechariah asks for a "writing tablet," he receives one without much ado (Luke 1:63).

Thus, it is unnecessary to assume that the "oral stage" in the formulation of the early Christian writings existed to the *degree* that it is described by modern theories. It is likely, to be sure, that the early church spread its message by "word of mouth," but in many cases this word of mouth was probably words read from documents,

especially gospels and letters. There is a largely overlooked body of internal evidence in the New Testament suggesting another origin of the gospels, one quite different from the theory of an "oral stage" and documents of late date. The alternative may be described as follows: Prior to, during, and after the missionary journeys of St. Paul, other apostles and evangelists were also busy disseminating the various versions of the same good news of Jesus Christ throughout the known world. The journeys of St. Paul may have been more the rule than the exception. Writing and reading from documents also played a significant role in the evangelistic work of the early church. Such a scenario would imply that some gospels, at the very least, existed in their earliest forms *prior* to the letters of Paul and that the gospels were more the basis of preaching than the result.

In Paul's Epistle to the Galatians we find an interesting datum as to the method of evangelism that Paul used. He writes, ". . . you know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first; and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus" (Galatians 4:13-14). One question which comes to mind is this: why did Paul "preach the gospel . . . at first" in the trying way to which he refers? Could it be that his optical condition made it impossible to preach the gospel as he was accustomed to doing, from a manuscript? This deduction would appear to be confirmed by what follows; Paul continues: "For I bear witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me" (Galatians 4:15b).

It was said of Paul after all: "his letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account" (1 Corinthians 10:10). Paul, therefore, may have read his gospel from a manuscript, at least when he had the choice. While such an interpretation may be open to debate, it remains a curiosity as to why this incident should be mentioned at all. Obviously Paul's eyesight must have been necessary for the task that he was performing. And the demand on one's eyes most appropriate to such a context would be the task of reading. Since Paul was not a good extemporaneous preacher—and was even called a "babblor" (Acts 17:18)—the idea of Paul reading from a manuscript can hardly be

discounted. Paul, like others at this time, evidently carried parchments and, indeed, books with him (2 Timothy 4:13) from place to place and may have read from them as presentations to all who would listen, just as preachers and those on the lecture circuit follow manuscripts today. In the same way, presumably, Matthew would have read his gospel, Luke his, and John his. And the associates and followers of these men would also be sent out with these same gospels. The fact that others were active at the same time spreading the word is apparent from many references in Paul's letters (for example, Romans 15:20, 23; 16:7; 1 Corinthians 9:14; Galatians 6:7 and following; Colossians 1:5b-7a, 23), not to mention the Book of Acts.

The basic question concerns the gospels themselves. When were the four gospels written? Many scholars are of the opinion that it was several decades or more before the products of the "oral stage" crystallized into final documents. These scholars cite references in the gospels to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and reason that the gospels must have followed this event. It is apparently assumed that, as many times as Jerusalem and the temple had been plundered and destroyed in the past, Jesus could not have predicted such a thing happening again. Thus, references to such an event could only be included in the document after the fact.

If Christianity is based upon God's revelation in history, however, it does not follow that the disciples merely sat around the campfire and reminisced for thirty years or more before someone had the idea of writing things down. Rather, it can be argued that the gospels were among the earliest documents in the New Testament. The purpose of writing them was that of evangelism (as can be seen from John 20:30-31), to tell the whole world the good news of the "things accomplished among us" (Luke 1:1). Thus, as the word spread, converts added, and new churches established, the manuscripts would have been copied and copies left with the new churches to insure an on-going believing community and consistently sound doctrine.

In this way, after all, Christianity would have followed the pattern of most historical movements. Everyone from Moses to the Mormons to Marx has begun with documentation and proceeded to

implementation. Forcing Christianity to go through the reverse of this process is a highly questionable enterprise. If, however, the gospels were written at an early point in the life of the church, how can the New Testament (as we now call it) be silent on something so important? Surely the New Testament writers would have left some hint as to which writings came first. Perhaps they did, and perhaps we do not recognize what is plainly before us because of the "interpretative glasses" we are wearing.

Paul's letters presuppose a thorough knowledge of the life and teaching of Jesus now found in the gospels. Paul's theology, indeed, builds upon such material. Hence, it is not surprising to find in the *Oxford Annotated Bible* over forty references in the Pauline epistles to the themes present in the four gospels. Other Bibles list more. Such references may reflect more than similarities in thought; they may reflect origins as well.

In Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians we find several points worthy of note. In the first place there is the passage often quoted in the eucharistic liturgy (1 Corinthians 11:23-25):

For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you: that the Lord Jesus, the same night in which He was betrayed, took bread; and when He had given thanks, He brake it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body, which is broken for you; this do in remembrance of Me." After the same manner also He took the cup, when He had supped, saying, "This cup is the new testament in My blood; this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of Me."

How could Paul have received this material "from the Lord"? As far as we know, Paul had no association with Jesus or the disciples prior to the resurrection. Whence, then, did he receive it? Not least among the alternatives is the possibility that he received it from a written gospel which he "delivered" to the Corinthian church. For the version of the institution of the sacrament in Luke's gospel (22:17-20) is very close to Paul's version. It stands to reason that Paul, as a companion of Luke, would have access to the latter's gospel.

In 1 Corinthians 4, secondly, Paul makes some interesting

comments. In verse 5 of that chapter Paul addresses the "wise" and judgmental Corinthians in this way: "Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God." *The Jerusalem Bible* in its cross-references to these three teachings cites respectively Matthew 7:1-2 (where Jesus commands us not to judge), Luke 12:2-3 (where Jesus states that what is concealed will be disclosed), and John 5:44 (where Jesus speaks of the true praise that comes from God). Then, in the very next verse (1 Corinthians 4:6), Paul states: "Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, 'Do not go beyond what is written.'" Now, "what is written" ordinarily refers to Scripture, and certainly to written documents. Could "what is written" here refer to the gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John? If not, it would at least be a reference to Christian scriptures in existence at the time of the writing of 1 Corinthians—that is, approximately in the mid-fifties of the first century A.D.—since it is the teaching of Jesus that is being discussed.

Of significance, too, is the passage in 1 Corinthians 9 where Paul states: "It is written in the Law of Moses, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.' . . . In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (verses 9, 14). Later, in 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul refers to these sayings again with these words: "The scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain,' and 'The laborer deserves his wages.'"

The first "scripture" is, of course, a passage from the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 25:4). Significantly, however, the second passage, to which Paul refers in a matter-of-fact way as "scripture," is apparently quoted directly from Luke 10:7, for the Greek wording corresponds exactly (except for the appearance of *gar* in the Lukan account). Here Paul calls "scripture"—in the same breath as a reference to the Old Testament—a verse which, according to many scholars today, could not have had such authority at this early date in the history of the church. First Timothy 5, however, and already,

indeed, 1 Corinthians 4 provide evidence to the contrary.

The implication is, then, that the earliest form of an official body of writings—in other words, a canon of the New Testament—may have emerged by the time of the writing of 1 Corinthians and definitely had emerged by the time of 1 Timothy—that is, approximately in the mid-fifties and early sixties of the first century A.D. Paul's quotation would also suggest that Luke's gospel must have been written some time prior to this date when it is given equal footing with the Old Testament.

Luke himself, it may be argued, suggests an early date, since he refers to "those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word" (Luke 1:2) as being his source. Eyewitnesses, after all, are in any research a diminishing resource, as people have a habit of forgetting, disappearing, and "falling asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:6). Conversely, the author may have to leave the area in which eyewitnesses are available. In all likelihood, then, Luke's gospel was written much earlier than the eighties of the first century A.D. which many critics currently suggest as its date of origin.

Another possible interpretation of Luke 1:2 is to take it not as a general reference to any number of people, but as a specific reference to Peter and James and John, the sons of Zebedee. These are the first disciples mentioned in Luke's gospel (5:1-11). And they were also eyewitnesses to a number of events in the ministry of Jesus, including the transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36). The transfiguration remained a major "eyewitness" event in their lives, as was later recalled by Peter (2 Peter 1:16-18). If Luke 1:2 is referring specifically to Peter, James, and John, it is noteworthy that Luke calls them not only "eyewitnesses" but also "servants of the word." Could these disciples have been entrusted by Jesus with the responsibility of record-keeping? What else would the role of "servant of the word" entail?

Also of interest here are two other passages in Paul's letters to Timothy which refer to "scripture." In 1 Timothy 4:13 we read: "Till I come, attend to the public reading of scripture, to preaching, to teaching." *The Oxford Annotated Bible* has this footnote: "The church adopted many liturgical practices of the synagogue including

the public reading of scripture, preaching, and teaching," implying that the "scripture" mentioned here was the Old Testament alone.⁴

The question arises, however, of what scripture was, in fact, read and used as the basis for preaching and teaching in the early church—the Old Testament, material now contained in the New Testament, or both. We have already found "scripture" referring to both in 1 Timothy 5:18. Admittedly, if we come to 1 Timothy 4 wearing the "interpretative glasses" of the modern theory of an "oral stage," we should have to conclude that the reference is to the Old Testament alone. If this theory is incorrect, however, the conclusion may differ.

We may find some help in 2 Timothy 3:14-15, where Paul states: "as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Again the *Oxford Annotated Bible* interprets this verse as referring to the Old Testament. Significantly, however, the text speaks of "the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Now the Old Testament instructs us in many things, but the Old Testament nowhere speaks of Christ as "Jesus." While the coming of the Messiah is certainly foretold in the Old Testament, He is never specifically given the name of "Jesus."

If we assume that 2 Timothy 3:14-15 embraces also scriptures of the New Testament, we should thereby place the date of some of these writings back in the early forties or late thirties of the first century A.D. by virtue of Timothy's knowledge of them from childhood. Apparently Timothy was a believer prior to Paul's first missionary journey in 46-48 A.D. (2 Timothy 3:10-11).⁵ The Christian faith had been handed down to him from his grandmother, Lois, and his mother, Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5). The fact that Timothy was uncircumcised (Acts 16:3) would tend to support his early exposure to Christianity.

Thus, there is a body of evidence in the primary documents themselves to suggest that prior to St. Paul's writing, at least some gospels—perhaps all—were already in existence. We do well to

remember that Paul, as one "untimely born," appears late on the Christian scene—so late, in fact, that upon occasion others had already preceded him in missionary work (e.g., Romans 15:20). Likewise, also according to various current theories, Luke's gospel was not the first to be written, but followed on Matthew and Mark. We may conclude that by the time St. Paul wrote to Timothy late in his career, after the gospel had "been preached to every creature under heaven" (Colossians 1:23), what he had first received "from the Lord" had now been included in the official writings of the early church. Apparently Paul's own writings had also achieved such a status, given Peter's statement allying them with the "other scriptures" (2 Peter 3:16). These "other scriptures" may be another reference to scriptures of the New Testament, since Peter deals here with the "twisting" of the Christian message by false teachers.

The evidence in the primary documents, then, may be summarized as follows: (1.) Paul may have preached the gospel from a manuscript when he was able. (2.) Paul's letters and theology presuppose considerable knowledge of teaching, ministry, and life of Jesus. (3.) Paul mentions a body of scriptures of the New Testament in existence in the mid-fifties of the first century A.D. (4.) Paul apparently quotes from Luke's gospel and refers to it as "scripture" in the early sixties of the century. (5.) Luke's gospel itself suggests an early date with its reference to "eyewitnesses." (6.) Paul refers to the "sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus," the name "Jesus" providing *prima facie* evidence of early scriptures of the New Testament. (7.) Peter refers to Paul's various writings as "scripture." (8.) Peter's reference to "the other scriptures" may also embrace writings of his century, given the context.

In order to maintain the existence of an "oral stage" and the late date of the gospels, critics have attacked this evidence on several fronts. It has been argued, for example, that 1 Corinthians 4:6 must be a "scribal addition later incorporated into the text" and that such books as 1 Timothy and 2 Peter must have been written by "pseudonymous authors" years later than the death of the apostles. In the case of Paul's letters to Timothy, some scholars cite differences in language from Paul's other letters. Some suggest that a member of

Paul's following may have dispatched the correspondence at differing times in the fifties and early sixties of the first century A.D. (e.g., Jeremias, Kelly, Holtz, Dockx, Lestapis, Reicke, Metzger). Others see developments in ecclesiastical orders and domestic codes as suggesting a date in the second (70-100 A.D.) or third (100-130 A.D.) generation of the church (e.g., Harrison, Easton, Campenhausen, Barrett, Dibelius and Conzelmann, Hanson, Hultgren).⁶

But such scenarios remain purely speculative. With no real new evidence, such ideas remain open to conjecture. In fact, a number of considerations support the traditional belief in the Pauline authorship of these letters. Among them are the following: (1.) Unlike other writings of the New Testament to which authorship is attributed by tradition (e.g., the gospels), Paul's pastoral letters, like 2 Peter, incorporate an assertion of authorship into the body of the text itself (1 Timothy 1:1; 2 Timothy 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1), a formidable obstacle to late dating. (2.) The authenticity of Paul's authorship of 1 and 2 Timothy has been accepted in the church since the time of Irenaeus and Tertullian. Doubting Pauline authorship has become popular only in quite recent times—that is, since F. D. E. Schleiermacher (1807) and F. C. Baur (1835).⁷ (3.) Differences in language may be attributed to any number of factors and do not, of themselves, indicate pseudonymity. Indeed, this study has highlighted a significant example of similar vocabulary and thought in the pastoral epistles (1 Timothy 5:18) and one of Paul's earlier letters (1 Corinthians 9:9, 14), thereby supporting the Pauline authorship of the pastoral epistles. (4.) Developments in ecclesiastical orders and domestic codes may have occurred at different times and places in the early church; but it is certainly within the realm of reason to believe that the apostles were involved in the implementation of such changes for at least a decade prior to the writing of 1 Timothy (as appears from Acts 14:23). (5.) The letters of 1 and 2 Timothy contain material of such personal affection, concern, faith, freshness, and urgency that suggestions that they are not directly attributable to St. Paul simply fail to convince.

Given the entirety of the foregoing discussion, then, it is quite in order to conclude that certain gospels, at the every least, were

written early in the life and ministry of the church, perhaps in the earliest form thereof only a few years following the resurrection. They were followed some years later by the missionary journeys and epistles of St. Paul. A case may be made for this construction based on the witness of the New Testament alone (*sola scriptura*). Such a process would correspond to the practical development of other historical movements in which documentation precedes implementation.⁸ Indeed, it would appear that a primary canon of the New Testament had emerged in the early church by the early sixties of the first century A.D. When "scripture" is mentioned as of this date, the term may refer to the Old Testament, material now contained in the New Testament, or both.

Endnotes

1. Howard Clark Kee and Franklin W. Young, *Understanding the New Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1957), p. 68.
2. During the past thirty years, the conventional wisdom on the dating of the gospels has remained consistent. Assuming the primacy of Mark's gospel with a date between 64 A.D. and 70 A.D., Matthew's gospel is placed between 70 A.D. and 90 A.D. Luke's gospel is usually dated in the eighties and John's gospel in the nineties of the first century A.D. However, scholars often add caveats allowing for greater time-frames, such as 70-110 A.D. in the case of Matthew and 70-140 A.D. in the case of Luke, with a similar range for John. One may consult, for instance, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Abingdon, 1962); *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary* (Abingdon, 1971); *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1973); *The New Jerome Bible Commentary* (Prentice-Hall, 1990); and *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Doubleday, 1992).
3. Robert W. Funk with Mahlon H. Smith, *The Gospel of Mark: Red Letter Edition* (Sonoma, California: Polbridge Press, 1991), p. 23.
4. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *The New*

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- Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 1443.
5. M. J. Mellink, "Lystra," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, III (New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), p. 195.
 6. David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, VI (New York et al, 1992), p. 568.
 7. F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 1360.
 8. Such a conclusion lends qualified support to the findings of J. A. T. Robinson (*Redating the New Testament*, 1976) who held that all the writings of the New Testament originated before 70 A.D.

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