

THE GOSPELS

INTRODUCTION

Practically everything we know about the life of Jesus we learn from the four Gospels. The first three, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are called *synoptic* (“with the same eye”) because many of the same events are recorded in them. The Fourth Gospel, John, has a different literary flavor and adds details and emphases missing in the Synoptics.

These four works are not biographies. They are biographical sketches that deal primarily with Jesus’ ministry of approximately three and one-half years. They climax in Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection. Christians were fascinated with the personal life of Jesus in the early period of the church. Some persons were not satisfied with the canonical Gospels.

Apocryphal gospels were also produced in the early centuries, emphasizing the childhood of Jesus, because the Bible is silent on that period. But the church soon rejected these other works.

BEFORE THE FOUR GOSPELS

The preface of Luke’s Gospel tells us about the process by which the Gospels were written. Some of the words of Jesus and accounts of his deeds were kept alive orally by his devout followers. Luke emphasizes that he talked with eyewitnesses (1:1-4). Since there was no scribe to record the words of Jesus, our knowledge of what he said depends on the memories of the witnesses and the faithfulness with which the words were passed down until they were written. However, the problem of accuracy is not as large as it may at first appear. In almost every instance a number of people heard and witnessed each saying and event.

Jesus spoke Aramaic, but the oldest copies of the Gospels are written in Greek. Thus the sayings of Jesus were

translated into Greek, although here and there an Aramaic word was left untranslated. One example is *Abba*, meaning “father.” A tradition from the second century states that Matthew wrote his Gospel originally in Aramaic, but the only copies we have now are in Greek. These sayings of Jesus and recollections of his deeds became the raw material that went into our Gospels.

SIMILARITIES IN THE FOUR GOSPELS

Remarkably, the four Gospels have much in common. The four pictures the Gospels provide are consistent. All four tell about the ministry of John the Baptist, the controversies that Jesus confronted with his opponents, the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus’ walking on the water, the anointing of Jesus by a woman, the cleansing of the Temple, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and the Resurrection. The four mention twelve disciples, the multitudes who witness the miracles, and Jesus’ teaching in stories, sermons, and debates.

DIFFERENCES IN THE FOUR GOSPELS

All the Gospel writers intend to tell their readers what they consider to be the most important information about Jesus. The four writers probably wrote to four different social groups. So the various audiences and purposes of the writers explain the differences in the accounts.

Mark was probably the earliest Gospel. The writer was at one time a companion of Paul on his first missionary journey and is said to have been an associate of the apostle Peter. The book was likely written for Gentiles living in Rome, to show that Jesus was the Messiah, and to encourage Christians suffering from per-

secution in Rome. Because of Mark's close association with Peter, it may be that the apostle dictated the account to Mark.

Matthew was writing largely for Jewish Christians. He included more details on Jesus' life than Mark. He emphasized that Christianity is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and the Jewish Law. Matthew was a former publican who became a disciple of the Lord.

Luke was a Greek physician. Perhaps he was converted by Paul, who took Luke with him on many of his missionary journeys (Acts 21:15-18). Luke wrote the Gospel and the Book of Acts as companion accounts. Both books were addressed to a certain Theophilus, perhaps a Roman official. The books may have been written to

convince the Roman Empire that Christianity was not a subversive sect. They emphasize that the gospel message is for Gentiles as well as Jews and is universal.

The Gospel of John was the last written of the four. It was written around A.D. 90 by the aging disciple. John had been with Jesus from the beginning of Jesus' ministry. His Gospel is more theological and philosophical than the other three. This tendency may reflect the interest in speculations about Jesus on the part of his audience. John shows that Jesus is the eternal Word of God and the power of God. Seven signs and seven sayings confirm who Jesus is. The book is written that the readers may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. (See John 20:30-31.)