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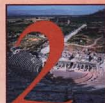
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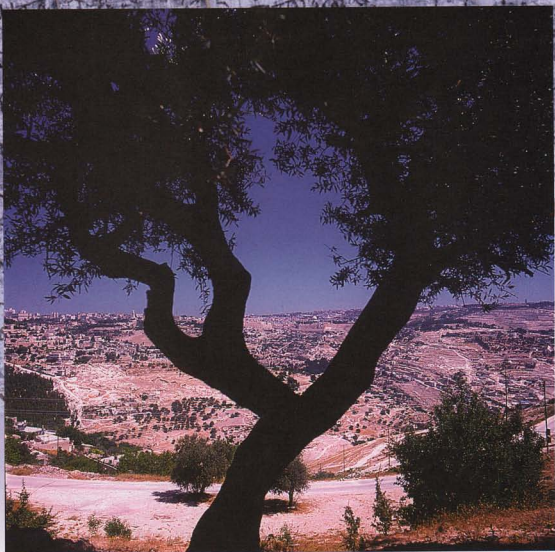
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# 2 The Gospels:

Central Sources for Understanding Jesus

## In This Chapter . . .

- How Do We Read the Gospels?
- The Development of the Gospels
- The Gospels: Four Portraits of Jesus

**T**HIS is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. (John 21:24–25)

## How Do We Read the Gospels?

The previous chapter listed the Gospels as part of the faith sources of information about Jesus, meaning that what we learn about Jesus from the Gospels is revealed through the eyes of people who believed him to be the Christ. Before taking a general look at the origins, development, and key characteristics of the four Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, it may be helpful to take a fuller look at what it means to call the Gospels *faith* sources rather than *historical* sources. **1**

Understanding the Gospels involves understanding the time, place, and culture of the Gospel authors.

*Photo, facing page:* The old city of Jerusalem and the Kidron Valley,

as seen from the Mount of Olives. *Background:* A fragment from an ancient Greek papyrus manuscript containing the Lord's Prayer from Matthew's Gospel.

**1**

Choose any public figure—for example, an athlete, a musician, or a politician—and list at least ten items of information you would expect to find in a thorough biography of that person.

## Objectivity: The Only Test of Truth?

Some people have the mistaken notion that because the Gospels were written by believers in the risen Jesus, the accounts are unreliable sources of information about Jesus. They think that in order to be acceptable as true, the information that comes to us about Jesus has to be totally accurate and objective.

Other people believe that because the Gospels were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they are exact factual accounts of the people and events they describe. These people read the Gospels in much the same way they read newspaper reports of current events.

Both of these positions emphasize *objectivity*—the reporting of facts alone, without interpretation through a personal viewpoint—as a measure of the truthfulness of the Gospels. But as will be seen shortly, objectivity is not the only test of the truthfulness of a story. A clearer understanding of what is meant by the term *history* will help to show why this is so.

### What Do We Mean by “History”?

History can be viewed as the simple recording of observable facts and events, as if these facts and events were captured accurately by movie cameras or transcribed into words by reporters. This is a simplistic understanding of history, however, because life is too complex for this kind of objective description.

To demonstrate this point, think of one event that happened in the world today and compare the reports of that event as given by two television stations and two newspapers. Obviously all these news stories will share some similarities, but some of the differences in reporting and understanding may be truly startling. Discrepancies might appear



in the basic details of the reports, and various understandings and opinions on the *meaning of the event* are likely to be presented as well. Why would supposedly “objective” recordings of historical events contain such differences?

All historical information is interpreted through the eyes and perspective of the person doing the recording. For instance, two reporters covering the same event might focus on different details, interview different people, and convey the collected information in different styles. Even the firsthand knowledge we gain through our own experiences is interpreted by us. We see it from a certain per-

spective, which is influenced by our past experiences, our family and community, the culture we live in, and so forth. No one’s perspective is totally objective, because this would require one to be without a point of view, which is impossible! **2**

## The Good News, Not the Daily News

A key point to remember when studying the Gospels, then, is that they were written from a certain perspective. That perspective was shaped in part by the culture the early Christians lived in—a culture with a different language, geography,

**Photo:** An alley beside the Church of the Nativity, in Bethlehem. This church is on the site traditionally held as the birthplace of Jesus.

**2** Imagine you are a person from first-century Palestine watching a television show from our time. What expressions, references to contemporary culture, and styles

of speaking and behaving might be confusing for you?

technology, history, and religious tradition than our own. (We will explore the culture of Jesus' time in greater detail in chapters 3 and 4.)

Even the literary style in which the Gospels were written differs from what we might expect to find in a modern newspaper account or biography of someone famous. The authors of the Gospels used writing styles and devices common in their own time, such as exaggeration, figures of speech, approximation, and poetry. The authors of the Gospels were writing for the people of their time, a fact that can sometimes make it difficult for us as twenty-first-century readers to understand exactly what they meant.

Furthermore, the Gospels do not include much of the kind of information one would expect to find in a historical account of a person's life. The Gospels do not provide precise dates of Jesus' birth and death, a description of what he looked like, or any detailed information about his childhood and adolescence, his education, or his parents. The authors of the four Gospels selected just some of what had been handed on to them by word of mouth or in writing, as the Gospel quote at the beginning of this chapter indicates. Sometimes they summarized the story of Jesus or combined certain elements. At other times, they explained the Good News in view of the situation of their own faith communities. So, in this sense, the Gospels are not biographies of Jesus.

But if the Gospels are not biographies of Jesus, then what are they? Chapter 1 described the Gospels as faith sources, writings that came out of the community of Jesus' followers. The word *gospel* itself is derived from the Middle English word *godspell*, which means "good news" or "glad tidings." That word, in turn, is a translation of the

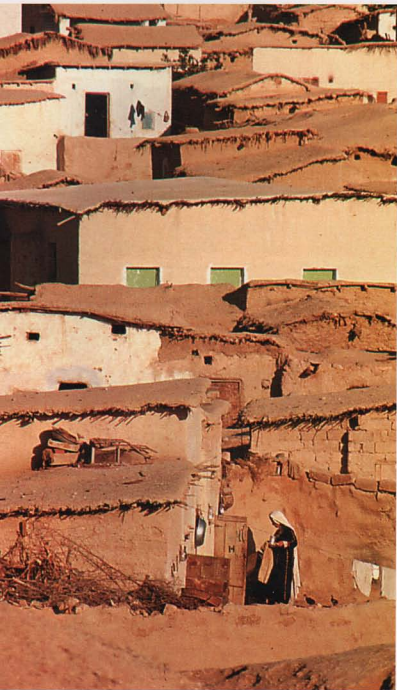
Greek word *evangelion*, meaning "the proclamation or announcement of good news." (Note also that we call the authors of the Gospels the **Evangelists**, based on the Greek word *evangelion*. The authors of the Gospels are, literally, proclaimers of the Good News.)

So from the origins of the word *gospel* we learn that the purpose of the Gospels is to proclaim a message of faith in Jesus. The Gospels are, in other words, **testimonies of faith**. As such, their primary purpose is not to provide accurate historical accounts of the day-to-day life of Jesus. Rather, they are attempts by the early followers of Christ to share their experiences of Jesus with the world.

What was done by the early Christians in sharing the story of Jesus is not much different from what we do in telling others about a significant happening in our own life. Sharing precisely every last detail is often not our main concern. Instead,



■ **Photo:** The Gospels are meant to be "good news" or "glad tidings" for us.



we want to give whatever information will best help us convey the meaning and significance of the event in our life. Leaving out many of the details does not lessen the truth of our story. **3**

Likewise, the fact that the Gospels are not historical biographies does not automatically make them untruthful. Rather, because the Gospels were written from a certain cultural and faith perspective, understanding them requires more than simply reading them as if they were newspaper or biographical accounts of Jesus. We must keep in mind the perspectives of the people who wrote them.

### Searching for Religious Truth

A view of the Gospels that takes the perspective of the Evangelists into consideration does not place too much emphasis on the strict objectivity of their accounts. Instead, such a view focuses on the Gospels' main message, which does not involve looking for historical truth as much as it involves looking for what is called **religious truth**. For Christians, religious truth is the deeper meaning that God intends to reveal to people through historical events.

It is religious truth that the Scriptures—both the Old Testament and the New Testament—are primarily filled with. The authors of the biblical literature were far less concerned with the historical facts, or what an event might have *appeared* to be on the surface. In fact, the biblical writers set out to do precisely what modern reporters supposedly try to avoid: they interpreted events in light of their own faith convictions. Because Christians believe the biblical writers were guided by the Holy Spirit, they are confident that the Scriptures contain the essential truth about Jesus.

■ The Gospels offer a portrait of Jesus from the perspective of the people of his time.  
*Photo: An ancient village near the Dead Sea and Jericho.*

**3**  
In a short essay, briefly summarize a favorite story that has been told over and over by one of your relatives. Then respond to the following questions: *To what degree do you think the story has*

*been changed or exaggerated over the years? If the story has been changed, does that lessen or cancel out the value or meaning of the story itself? Why or why not?*

### The Stories of a Community

Although the Gospels do not provide a totally objective and fully detailed understanding of Jesus as he lived and preached some two thousand years ago, they do offer some basic information about Jesus and his message. Together with the rest of the New Testament, the Gospels also reveal the meaning and significance of Jesus for the people of his time. They tell us the story of the one whom Christians believe to be the Son of God—the one

who fully reveals to humanity the very nature of God in his person. Ultimately, is this not of much greater significance to us than mere historical facts? Hearing a person's words firsthand is valuable, but understanding the meaning of those words is far more important.

In seeking the religious truth of the Gospels, Catholic Christians are careful not to rely solely on the interpretations of one person, or even one group of persons, from a particular time. As the

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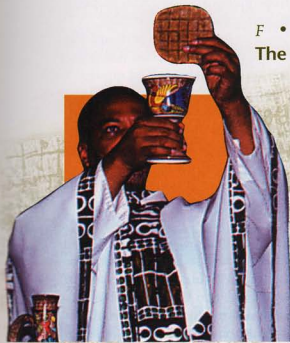
### The Roman Catholic Church's Tradition and Jesus

Many Protestant churches rely almost entirely on the Christian Scriptures as the basis for their teachings and practices. The Catholic church, on the other hand, believes that the same Holy Spirit that guided the authors of the Scriptures continues to guide the church as it moves through history, leading it to clarify, develop, and preserve particular teachings and practices. These official teachings and practices in the Catholic church are known as its **Tradition**, with a capital *T*, and Catholics view Tradition along with the Scriptures as companion, authoritative guides to truth. (The truth contained in the New Testament was actually part of the

Tradition of the first generation of Christians before it was written down.)

On the basis of Tradition, Catholics accept as part of God's revelation some things implied, but not mentioned explicitly, in the Scriptures. For example, the commitment to Tradition has guided the Roman Catholic church to have more sacraments than Protestant churches do. Protestant churches generally accept only Baptism and the Eucharist as sacraments because only these two can be found explicitly in the New Testament.

A summary of the development of the Roman Catholic teachings about Jesus will be offered in the last chapter of this textbook.



The Roman Catholic church is often distinguished from other Christian churches by its commitment to both the Scriptures and Tradition as major sources for understanding Jesus and his message.

■ The Roman Catholic church believes that the same Holy Spirit that guided the authors of the Scriptures has continued to guide the church throughout history.

*Photo:* In Catholic parishes today, priests represent the teaching voice of the church.



earlier discussion of the differences between media accounts of the same event showed, it is important to read more than one newspaper or watch more than one news program. Doing so gives the reader or viewer a more balanced, fuller, and truer understanding of events in the world. Similarly, figuring out religious truth is the responsibility of the whole community of believers, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The ongoing task of the Christian church is to reassess the significance of Jesus' life and message for each new age and culture.

A personal and prayerful reading of the entire Bible is encouraged for all Christians. But it is important as well for them to look to the church for guidance in properly understanding the meaning of the Scriptures for today. Even this course, for instance, is not based on the personal opinions of one person. Its information and insights come from a whole host of sources from within the Christian community, including the official teachings of the Catholic church, which were developed with the help of respected biblical scholars and theologians.

### For Review

- Is the record of past events that we call history a totally accurate description of the events as they actually happened? Explain your response.
- What do the origins of the word *gospel* suggest about the purpose of the Gospels?
- Briefly explain what is meant by the term *religious truth* and discuss its relationship to the Scriptures.
- What can we gain from the Gospels besides some basic information about Jesus and his message?

## The Development of the Gospels

Perhaps the most effective way to understand the Gospels is to look at how they came to be written. Scholars who have studied the New Testament have identified at least three major stages in the Gospels' development:

1. During the time that Jesus lived and worked, he had a profound effect on his disciples.
2. After the death and Resurrection of Jesus, the disciples and the early church proclaimed the Good News throughout the Roman Empire.
3. Later, the Gospels were actually written by the Evangelists, who likely served as editors or collectors of material that had gradually developed through the years.

### Stage 1: Jesus of Nazareth and His Disciples

It would seem to go without saying that the Gospels are based on the words and works of Jesus of Nazareth, a historical figure from the land of Palestine who lived some two thousand years ago. However, the recognition and acceptance of this truth is central to our understanding and appreciation of the Gospels. For if the Gospels are not based on historical realities—if Jesus' proclamations and Resurrection never happened—then all that they teach is little more than a flight of fancy or an idealistic vision. It is essential to recognize that the foundation of the events and meaning recorded in the Gospels is Jesus of Nazareth, a man, a historical figure, one whose blood flowed through flesh as truly as does our own.



### The Basic Facts

What can we say about Jesus that can be accepted even by those who do not accept him as the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God? From the Gospels and other sources, we are certain of the following points:

- Jesus was born a Jew sometime around the year 5 B.C.E. “in the time of King Herod . . . in Bethlehem of Judea” (Matthew 2:1). He was raised in the small village of Nazareth. As he grew, he learned and practiced the trade of carpentry.
- At about age thirty, Jesus began a public career of preaching and teaching, proclaiming the beginning of a new era, which he called the Kingdom of God. He apparently demonstrated some unusual powers and was referred to by historians of his day as a worker of wonderful deeds.
- Jesus’ preaching and actions stirred great interest among the Jewish people, leading some to proclaim him as a great prophet and others to reject him as a sorcerer, a magician, someone who lacked reverence for God, and a threat to

■ We know that Jesus was born a Jew sometime around 5 B.C.E. in Bethlehem of Judea.  
*Photo: The town of Bethlehem at sunrise.*

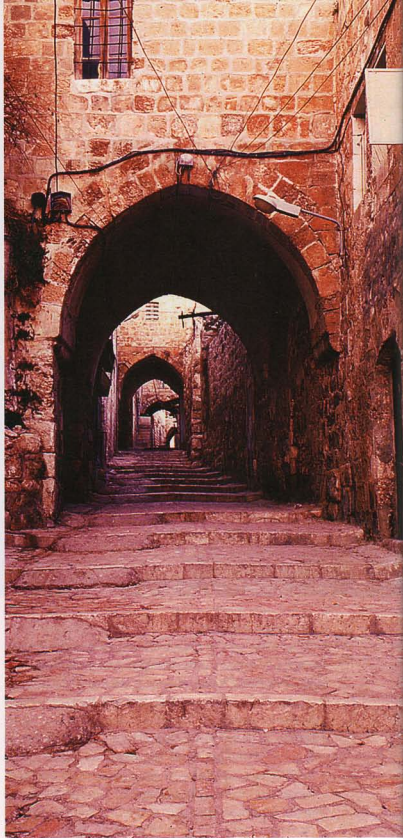
the Roman state. Those in power eventually brought him to trial, found him guilty of crimes under Roman law, and had him executed by crucifixion sometime around the year 30 C.E.

Virtually all people of any religious persuasion or belief could accept this much about Jesus simply by being open to historical records. However, the early Christians—both Jesus' immediate followers and those who had not known him while he walked the earth—clearly believed him to be much more than just a man, more than just Jesus of Nazareth. They also believed him to be the awaited Messiah of Israel and God's only Son.

### The Resurrection: The Pivotal Event

That which led the early Christians to believe that Jesus was more than just an extraordinary person was the event that his followers claim to have experienced *after* his death. This event completely and radically changed their understanding of everything Jesus had said and done while he walked the dusty roads of Palestine. What the followers of Jesus claimed was this: He did not remain dead. About three days after he had been savagely executed on the cross, they experienced him alive again and present among them.

Belief in the Resurrection of Jesus became the identifying mark of all those who claimed Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Jesus' rising from the dead made his whole earthly existence—all that he had said and done prior to this event—believable and acceptable as truth. Without the Resurrection, the followers of Jesus would likely have run away in fear of their own execution. But with the experience of the risen Jesus, they burst forth from their places of hiding and began proclaiming that by raising him from the dead "God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts of the Apostles 2:36).



**Photo:** A stepped street in Jerusalem, leading off the Via Dolorosa, the path believed to have been taken by Jesus on the way to the Crucifixion.

Calling Jesus “Lord” was a radical expression of the first Christians’ belief in the divinity of Jesus. When the Jewish people spoke of God, they used the title *Lord* instead of *Yahweh*, the name revealed to Moses, because God’s actual name was considered too sacred to be spoken. So to call Jesus *Lord* was to say that he had a divine identity—a claim that shocked many Jews who heard the first Christians’ proclamation. (The uppercase use of the word *Lord*, which is a divine title, should not be confused with the lowercase use of the word *lord*, which is another word for “master.”)

The Resurrection and its meaning will be discussed more fully in chapter 10 of this course, but this much can be said now: the belief in Jesus’ living presence after death is so central to the lives of Christians that Saint Paul, one of the most influential of all the early Christians, was led to say, “If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:14).

### Christ: Not Jesus’ Last Name

Some people in Jesus’ time immediately rejected the proclamation of the Resurrection. They thought the news foolhardy, ridiculous, insane. For them, Jesus would remain only the carpenter’s son who preached a radical message and paid for it with his life. But others were nearly overwhelmed by the conviction that the proclamation of the Resurrection was true—that Jesus had in fact been raised by God from death itself and that he truly was, and would be forever, Lord and Savior. For these people, Jesus was clearly much more than a carpenter’s son. For the early Christians, Jesus was also truly the Christ.

Unfortunately, over the years many people have come to think of the title *Christ* as simply a kind of last name or family name for Jesus. In fact,

however, he was never known by that name during his earthly life. The name *Jesus* was a common one for Jewish boys. It is our translation of Jesus’ Hebrew name, *Yeshua*, which he would have heard when called by his parents and others. The name *Yeshua* means literally “Yahweh (God) saves” or “Yahweh (God) is salvation.” But the title *Christ* means literally “anointed one.” It is based on the Greek word *Christos*, which is itself a translation of the Hebrew word *messiah*.

As will be discussed in more detail later, the Jewish people had long awaited the Messiah, “the one sent from God,” the one who would save them from all oppression. To those Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah after his Resurrection, he became known as Jesus the Christ, which in turn became rather quickly shortened to what we now know as a single name: *Jesus Christ*. This development may have been an unfortunate one, for it clouds to some degree the recognition of a tremendous conviction held by Christians—that the Jesus of History is truly the Christ of



**Photo:** Jesus’ living presence in the world was obvious to those who believed in his Resurrection.

part in Palestine named after him.  
Bosch's original Augustus Canal.



Faith. This realization of Jesus as the Christ overwhelmed the disciples, and the whole of their experience of his life, death, and Resurrection marks the first stage of the development of the Gospels.

■ *Photo: A cross of victory leads the way during an Easter Week procession in Jerusalem.*

## Stage 2: The Disciples and the Early Community of Faith

### What Would You Do?

Try to imagine yourself in the position of an early disciple of Jesus. You, along with the rest of the disciples, walk with Jesus; you hear his inspiring message proclaimed from the synagogues and hillsides; you touch him and are touched by him; and you witness the marvelous effect he has on everyone he meets. Gradually you find yourself captivated by this man and his message. You find in him the answer to all your hopes and dreams, and you are certain that in this man from Nazareth you have discovered true freedom, joy, peace, love, and fullness of life.

But then you see the horror of Calvary: Jesus, whom you so deeply love, stretched out against the sky, nailed to a beam of wood, carrying all your dreams and hopes along with him to his death. You and so many who believed in him run away in fear—shattered, hopeless, convinced that all he promised was a sham, a lie, or at the very least a terrible mistake.

But then comes Easter. Suddenly you have the overwhelming experience of Jesus present again, alive and truly with you—in fact, even more truly with you than he was before. He is risen! Even death is conquered in this man! Incredible joy and peace surge into your heart, and you run from your place of hiding, shouting from the rooftops: “He’s alive! Everything he told us is true!”

Now, what will you do next? It is doubtful that you will immediately sit down and begin to write an essay on what you have experienced. For one thing, you need some time just to sort out the significance of the incredible events that have taken place. Also, because of Jesus’ promise at the time



of his Ascension into heaven—that he will come again to fully establish God’s Kingdom—many of his followers are anticipating the almost certain end of the world as they know it. Perhaps based on a misunderstanding of some of the things Jesus taught, they believe that he will come back soon—within their lifetime. These people believe that they have little time to make up their mind about him. They suppose that either they will turn from their past ways, repent of their sins, and accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, or they will perish. Some Christians are even advising against marriage, and some are refusing to take jobs, feeling that these are silly considerations when the end of the world is right around the corner. With all of this commotion and speculation, writing about your experiences seems to be unnecessary. You have more important things to do.

### Spreading the Word Near and Far

The situation just described is exactly the one the early Christians found themselves in after the Resurrection. Rather than write about their experiences with Jesus, they began an intense missionary campaign to proclaim his life, death, and Resurrection to all people. In a matter of decades, the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus spread like wildfire throughout the Roman Empire—from Palestine, where it had begun, out to Egypt, Syria, Greece, Asia Minor, and ultimately into the capital city of Rome itself (at that time, Rome was often referred to as the ends of the earth).

Though it was clear to the early Christians that preserving their message for the future was not necessary—there was, after all, no “future” expected—they did not lose any of their love for the past. In fact, it was only in terms of history that Jesus’ followers could understand him. They began to see how so much of what he had said and done took on meaning only in light of the ideas and past events recorded in the Jewish Bible. As Saint Paul was to say to his fellow Jews, “And we bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus” (Acts of the Apostles 13:32–33). This idea of the promises of God fulfilled in Jesus became a fundamental part of the preaching of the early Christians as they spread the word across the land.

### Words and Deeds to Remember

It was within the context of preaching the Good News throughout the land that the process of picking and choosing what to remember about Jesus was begun. Incidents from his life and lessons from his teaching were used to instruct

The Good News spread like wildfire throughout the Roman Empire.

Photo: Caesarea, a Mediterranean port in Palestine named after the Roman emperor Augustus Caesar,

was a stop in the travels of the church’s early missionaries.



people who were interested in joining the community of faith. Reflections on his life in terms of the prophecies in the Jewish Bible became part of Christian worship services. And perhaps most important, Jesus' words were not only recalled but applied to the experiences of the early Christians as they began to share and celebrate and live out his message in their daily life.

In other words, Jesus' life and words and works were never recorded in a logical, day-by-day, biographical fashion. Not all the available information about Jesus was preserved, but only those events and works and teachings that had a particularly profound effect on the early Christians. In many cases this meant eliminating descriptive details from the accounts. For example, if we look at the Gospel stories of Jesus' miracles, we find

only the briefest descriptions, which often makes the stories seem stark and unreal. Or sometimes Jesus' words as recorded in the Gospels are so direct, so straight to the point, that they seem harsh.

For several decades this information about Jesus was shared primarily by word of mouth among the Christians, developing into what is called an **oral tradition**. On the basis of these carefully selected and highly polished recollections, and from their application to the early church's experience, the Gospels would eventually be written.

Many examples from the Gospels will be used throughout this course. In pursuing an understanding of Jesus and his message, it is important to not lose sight of this "oral tradition" stage in the development of the Gospels.

■ *Illustration: While sharing meals, the early Christians passed on stories about Jesus and his teachings, and reflected on the meaning of his message for their own daily life.*

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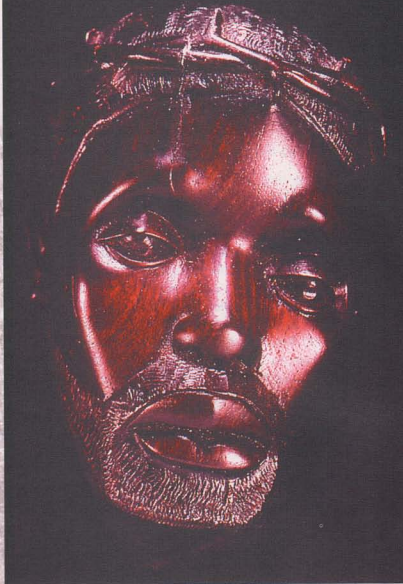
## Like a Many-Layered Drawing

One scholar describes the Gospels' development in this way:

When we have a complicated diagram to reproduce (an industrial design, for example, or the anatomy of the human body), we may sometimes build up a series of sheets of tracing paper. The first will contain a basic framework (perhaps the human skeleton), and on top of that we may put other drawings made to the same scale on tracing paper, representing the muscles, the various organs, and so on. In this way we can look at each drawing separately or, if we wish, we can put them together and see one superimposed on top of another.

We can understand the Gospels in the same way. On top of the portrait of Jesus of Nazareth that they had kept in their memories, the Evangelists superimposed their understanding of the risen Jesus as they had only begun to understand him after Easter. When we read the Gospels in a rather naive if not incorrect way, everything about Jesus as the Christ of Faith proclaimed by believers might seem very clear. It seems in reading the Gospels, for example, that Jesus often directly presents himself as the Son of God, and that many people immediately recognize him as such. In fact, the modern reader might be amazed that anyone in Jesus' time could have failed to recognize the Jesus of History as the Christ of Faith or as the Son of God.

Everything seems so clear to us, however, because we are looking at all the "drawings" together. This was not the case of the people



of Jesus' time, those who witnessed his life and ministry. The Gospels, therefore, can only be fully understood in light of faith in Jesus of Nazareth as the Risen One, the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God. (Based on Charpentier, *How to Read the New Testament*, page 19)

Each Gospel offers its own portrait of Jesus, emphasizing different aspects or dimensions of him. Together, the Gospels form a more complete portrait of Jesus.

Photo: A modern African wood sculpture, *Christ with the Crown of Thorns*, offers a distinctive outlook on Jesus.



### Stage 3: The Early Community of Faith and the Evangelists

Jesus died around the year 30 C.E., but it was approximately forty more years before the first Gospel was written. Only after proclaiming the Good News and developing an oral tradition did the early Christians decide that the free-floating stories and words and teachings of Jesus should be collected into permanent records by the editors we call the Evangelists.

It is generally held that the first Gospel written was Mark's, around the year 70 C.E. Luke's and Matthew's Gospels were perhaps written during the middle to late eighties; and John's Gospel, not until as late as 90 to 100. More will be said about the Evangelists and their unique Gospels in a moment, but first there is a more basic subject to address: What brought about this third stage in the Gospels' development, the actual writing of them? There seem to have been at least two major factors: the passage of time and the need for continued instruction.

#### The Passage of Time

By the latter half of the first century, the followers of Christ had begun to be recognized as a "church," that is, something more than just a radical Jewish fringe group. As Christians slowly realized that Jesus was not going to return in glory as quickly as they had hoped, it became clear that the community of faith would probably be around for a long time.

With the realization that the church did indeed have a future, it became necessary to find a means for preserving its teachings and passing them on to future generations. This was certainly one of the motives for developing the Gospels as we now have them.

#### The Need for Continued Instruction

The preservation of Jesus' message for future generations was not the only reason for collecting the available material about Jesus into the Gospels. There was also a continuing need to instruct and inspire the already existing communities of faith that had been formed throughout the Roman Empire during the previous decades of missionary activity.

Each of the Gospel writers gathered pieces from among all the stories about Jesus that had emerged since his death and Resurrection. Then the writer assembled these pieces into a coherent story that would respond to the needs of a particular audience in a particular location at a particular time. This accounts for the fact that each of the Gospels is unique and that certain activities and words of Jesus recorded in one of the Gospels appear to be described or expressed differently in another. **4**



#### 4

Fold a piece of paper in half to create two vertical columns. Title the left column "Oral Storytelling" and the right column "Written Storytelling." List at least five benefits and five

shortcomings of each type of storytelling. For example, what can be done with an oral story that cannot be done with a written one, and vice versa?

■ *Illustration:* Each Gospel writer gathered pieces from the stories told about Jesus and assembled them into a coherent story—a complete Gospel.

## Common Threads

No single Gospel provides a completely accurate understanding of Jesus. And, again, we cannot look at the Gospels as detailed biographies of Jesus. Rather, we must seek an understanding of the common threads of meaning that run through the Gospels and try to understand their significance for today. We can do this in part by studying their roots and implications in the historical, religious, and cultural times in which they were written.

### For Review

- Briefly describe the three major stages in the development of the Gospels.
- *Christ* is not Jesus' last name. Explain.
- What two major factors explain the transition from an initial oral telling of the Good News to the written form of the Gospels?

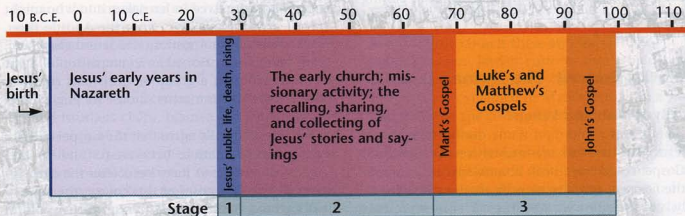
## The Gospels: Four Portraits of Jesus

The Gospels were not simply the result of four individuals named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John sitting down independently and writing about Jesus based on their own personal recollections of him. Rather, each Evangelist had a wealth of material available to him:

- stories about Jesus that were told over and over again in community worship
  - the words of Jesus, recalled day after day in prayer and then applied to life experiences
  - insights that were drawn by preachers about the relationship between the life and message of Jesus and the history of the Jewish people
- Each Evangelist also had a particular audience in mind when he began to collect this material into a coherent and understandable whole.

### F • O • C • U • S

## The Development of the Gospels



It is doubtful that any one person was responsible for the total development of any of the Gospels. It seems instead that the work was done by at least several people including friends or followers of the Evangelists who honored these men by attributing the work totally to them as individuals.

Even today, scholars are constantly studying and arriving at new speculations about the identities of the Gospel authors, their purposes in writing, and the dates when they wrote their accounts of the Good News. When reading the following very brief summaries of the most commonly held judgments about these issues, recognize that for each point mentioned here, scholars could be found who disagree. This fact can make the study and discussion of the Gospels a bit confusing, perhaps, but also as fascinating and challenging as trying to grasp the plot of a well-written mystery story.

Also note that while the following discussion identifies each Gospel as a separate and unique “portrait” of Jesus, no one Gospel tells us everything we need to know about Jesus. Rather, we need to view the Gospels as different portraits, each one offering different insights, each adding to our understanding of the truth about Jesus and his message. **5**

## Mark's Portrait: The Human Jesus

### By Whom and When?

Mark was a common name during the time of Jesus, and the Mark credited with writing the first Gospel could have been almost anyone. None of the Gospels actually identify their author directly, and the name we attach to each one represents the early church's traditional opinion on who the



author was. Some modern-day scholars believe the author of Mark's Gospel to have been a certain John Mark who lived in Jerusalem and who might have learned about Jesus from the Apostle Peter. In the Acts of the Apostles (12:25) and elsewhere, John Mark is mentioned as a companion of Saint Paul. In addition, a group of Christians regularly met at John Mark's mother's house for prayer (Acts 12:12).

Scholars generally agree that the Gospel of Mark was written sometime between 65 and 70 C.E., that is, thirty-five to forty years after the death of Jesus. For the purposes of this course, the year 70 will be used. Some suggest that an earlier version of the Gospel, one written before the year 65, was

### 5

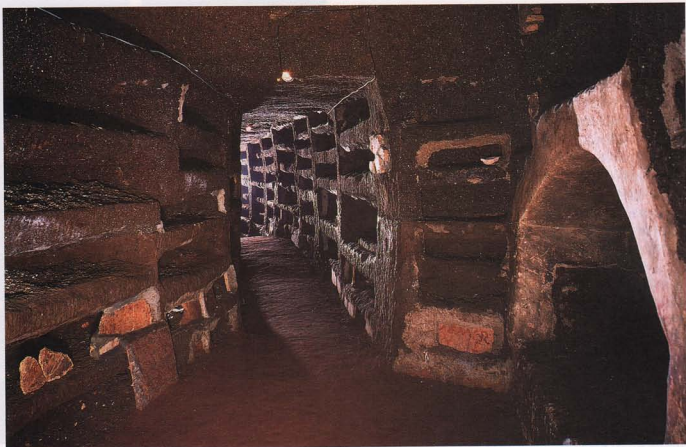
Write a paragraph describing the differences between a *painting* and a *photo* of someone. How do these differences relate to the notion of the Gospels as four “portraits” of Jesus?

Mark's Gospel was written against a backdrop of persecution.

*Illustration:* Some historical sources claim that the Emperor Nero blamed the Christians for

the burning of Rome in 64 C.E., leading to his persecution of them.

Complete Gospel



lost and that the one we now have is a revised version of the earlier one.

A heavy sense of suffering dominates the Gospel of Mark, with many references to trials and persecutions. This may reflect the persecution of the Christians by the Roman emperor Nero, who, some historians claim, blamed the Christians for the burning of Rome in the year 64 C.E. Also, we know that the Jews revolted against the Romans in a violent conflict between the years 66 and 70, and many scholars feel that Mark's account reflects an awareness of the suffering of that period as well.

### For Whom and Why?

Mark's Gospel seems to have been written in Rome for the church there and for **Gentile** (non-Jewish) readers. Jewish customs that would have been readily understood by Jews themselves, for instance, are explained in Mark's Gospel in a way that indicates the customs were not familiar to the intended readers.

Mark's Gospel stresses the human suffering of Jesus in his Passion and death, perhaps to encourage the Christians who were being persecuted at the time this Gospel was proclaimed. In fact, Jesus' death is such a central point of Mark's

■ The persecution experienced by the Christians of Mark's time would continue sporadically for more than two centuries to come.

*Photo:* During times of intense persecution, Christians in and around Rome often celebrated the Eucharist in underground cemeteries called catacombs.

Gospel that everything else that precedes it seems to be offered almost solely by way of introduction. It seems certain, then, that one of Mark's intentions was to explain to the members of the early church how suffering is an essential part of Christian life and to give them the courage to endure it as Jesus had.

An emphasis on the humanity of Jesus comes through in Mark's Gospel. For example, it portrays Jesus expressing strong emotions. Mark may have been trying to counter the claim of some Christians during his day that Jesus was not truly human but only divine and had simply pretended to be a man. Mark's account makes it clear that Jesus was truly a human being, or as the church would much later express this reality, that Jesus truly possessed both human and divine natures.

In summary, Mark's Gospel provides us with perhaps the most intimate portrait of Jesus. It is also the shortest of the four Gospels. For these and other reasons, many suggest that anyone just beginning to study the Gospels will find it helpful to read Mark first, preferably in one sitting. In this way the reader can gain a basic sense of how a Gospel proclaims the Good News of Jesus.

## Luke's Portrait: Jesus as the Compassionate Savior

The Gospel of Luke is actually the first part of a two-volume history of early Christianity. The second part is another book of the New Testament—the Acts of the Apostles. The Gospel of Luke is often referred to as the Gospel of Jesus, and the Acts of the Apostles as the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. Acts recounts the workings of the Holy Spirit in the life of the early church. The two books are best read together.



### By Whom and When?

A notion has persisted that the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles was a physician, a well-educated Gentile who had converted to Christianity. In the Letter to the Colossians (4:14), a certain Luke is identified by Saint Paul as a doctor, and some scholars have pointed out parts of Luke's Gospel that seem to indicate medical knowledge. This conclusion has probably been exaggerated, though, given the limited evidence.

Luke is mentioned three times in the New Testament, as a companion of Saint Paul. At one

■ Luke's Gospel emphasizes that God accepts persons cast out by society—persons least expected to receive God's favor.

Photo: A homeless man sleeps near the Washington Monument.

point Paul says that Luke is not a Jew. If what Paul says is true, then the author of Luke and Acts is probably the only non-Jewish writer of the New Testament. Luke did not know Jesus but had to rely on information received from those who were eyewitnesses to Jesus' life and ministry. Luke probably wrote his Gospel in Antioch, Syria, which was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire.

It is difficult to date the writing of Luke's Gospel. Much evidence suggests that Luke had Mark's Gospel available to him when he was writing—especially the fact that some of Luke's material comes directly from Mark's Gospel. Based on this, we know that Luke wrote after Mark's Gospel was in circulation, which means sometime after the year 70 C.E. Most scholars say that the Gospel of Luke was written sometime during the eighties. The rough date of 85 will be used in this course.

### For Whom and Why?

In the opening lines of his Gospel, Luke mentions a certain Theophilus, to whom he is addressing his Gospel. Luke tells Theophilus that he is writing "so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed" (1:4). Luke claims that he has studied all the available accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus and wants, "after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you" (1:3). So it seems that Luke was writing to offer those who were already Christians help in better understanding their faith and its roots.

Evidence in this Gospel indicates that Luke himself was unfamiliar with the land of Palestine and was writing to an audience made up mostly of Gentiles and perhaps well-to-do Christians. He sets out early in his writing to demonstrate the

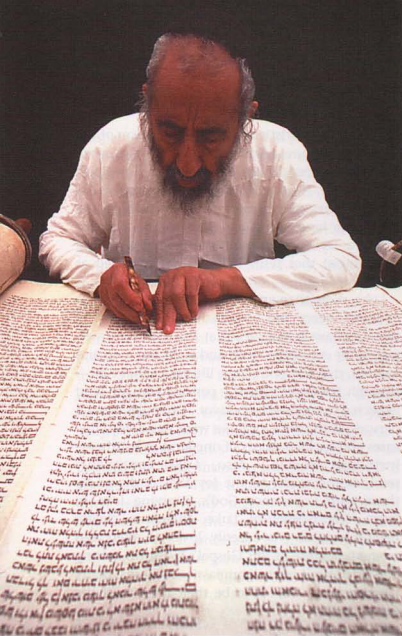
continuity of Christianity with the Judaism of the Hebrew Scriptures. And throughout his Gospel, Luke emphasizes the central role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life. He even closes his Gospel by stressing the continuing presence of Jesus through the Spirit after Jesus' death and Resurrection. Perhaps Luke was trying to support those readers who were discouraged that Jesus had not yet returned as they expected.

Luke, more than any other Gospel writer, stresses Jesus' mercy and compassion. Accompanying this emphasis is the idea that the Christian message is for everyone—Jews and Gentiles, men and women, rich and poor. Luke illustrates that God—through Jesus—accepts the persons who are least expected to receive God's favor. (Examples of such persons at the time of Luke were those with diseases and social outcasts of one kind or another—including women.) Also, Luke continually reminds the reader of the joy that is shared by those who experience God's forgiving love in Jesus. The Gospel of Luke, therefore, clearly depicts a Jesus who deeply loves all men and women. Because of this Gospel's beautiful writing and its portrait of the compassionate Jesus, many Christians consider it to be their favorite of the four Gospels.

## Matthew's Portrait: Jesus as the Messiah of the Jews

### By Whom and When?

There is no clear agreement on either the author or the date for Matthew's Gospel. Early in the history of the church, tradition held that the author was Matthew, an Apostle and therefore an eyewitness to Jesus' life and work. However, the author



Matthew's insights into the meaning of Jesus seem more developed than those of Mark or Luke.

### For Whom and Why?

The Gospel of Matthew is very different in structure from the Gospels of Mark and Luke. Some scholars suggest that its organizational pattern copies that of the first five books of the Old Testament, indicating a particular desire by the author to show the Jews that Jesus was clearly the Messiah they had awaited.

The Gospel contains five great discourses, or speeches, by Jesus, demonstrating his role as a powerful teacher. The Gospel also emphasizes that all of Jesus' life was a fulfillment of the promises made by God to Israel. Jesus, for example, is presented as a true teacher of the Jewish Law, or as "the new Moses." More than 130 passages in the Gospel of Matthew refer either directly or indirectly to the Old Testament.

The author shows interest in the church itself, which may provide a clue to his intent in writing. In fact, Matthew's Gospel is sometimes referred to as the church's Gospel. It is the only Gospel to use the word *church* (see 16:18 and 18:17), and it seems concerned with the church's organization and with the communal life and teaching among the believers.

Because the Gospel of Matthew contains Jesus' teaching in such a thorough, well-organized, and understandable manner, it quickly became the most popular and widely used of all the Gospels in the early church, especially when educating new Christians. Its sensitivity to the continuity between Christianity and Judaism also made the Gospel valuable for Jews who were inquiring about the faith. These qualities explain in part why the Gospel of Matthew appears first in the New Testament today.

seems to have used almost all of Mark's Gospel and relied on Luke's account as well. It would have been strange for an eyewitness of Jesus' life to rely so heavily on other sources. Perhaps the unknown author relied heavily on the stories used by the Apostle Matthew to teach about Jesus.

Regarding the date of Matthew's writing, the majority of scholars would opt for a date anywhere between 80 and 100 C.E. This course will settle on an approximate date of 90 because

**Photo:** A Jewish scholar studies the Torah. The organization of Matthew's Gospel seems to follow the pattern of the Torah, which is the first five books of the Old Testament.



## John's Portrait: Jesus as the Divine Son of God

### Different from the Synoptic Gospels

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are similar in so many respects that they are often referred to as the **synoptic Gospels**. (The word *synoptic* means "to see together.") It was noted earlier that the authors of the first three Gospels often seem to have used the same sources (stories told and insights drawn about Jesus) or one another's work in writing their accounts. Because of this overlapping, the synoptic Gospels can be fully understood only when seen or looked at side by side.

John's Gospel, on the other hand, is unique. Even just a quick reading of sections of it reveals this fact. Filled with symbolic language and images, this Gospel offers profound insights into the meaning of Jesus and his message. Some of its

language is beautiful, and it is often used as a basis for both communal and personal prayer.

### By Whom and When?

Wide disagreement persists over who authored the fourth Gospel, and we may never resolve the issue. At least some of the confusion is based on the fact that the name *John* was quite common, and it can be difficult to distinguish one John from another in the Scriptures. For years the church suggested that the author was the Apostle John. It was believed that the Apostle John wrote the Gospel at the end of a very long life, after much prayer, reflection, and personal experience of actually living out his faith in Jesus. This would account for the reflective, prayerful, and thoughtful style of the Gospel. The church has traditionally also held that the same John wrote the Book of Revelation.

■ Written for Jews, the Gospel of Matthew emphasizes that all of Jesus' life was a fulfillment of God's promise to Israel.

Photo: A Jewish man, wearing a prayer shawl, prays at the

Western Wall, in Jerusalem. The Western Wall is the only portion of the Temple that survived destruction by the Romans in 70 c.e.