



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.

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

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

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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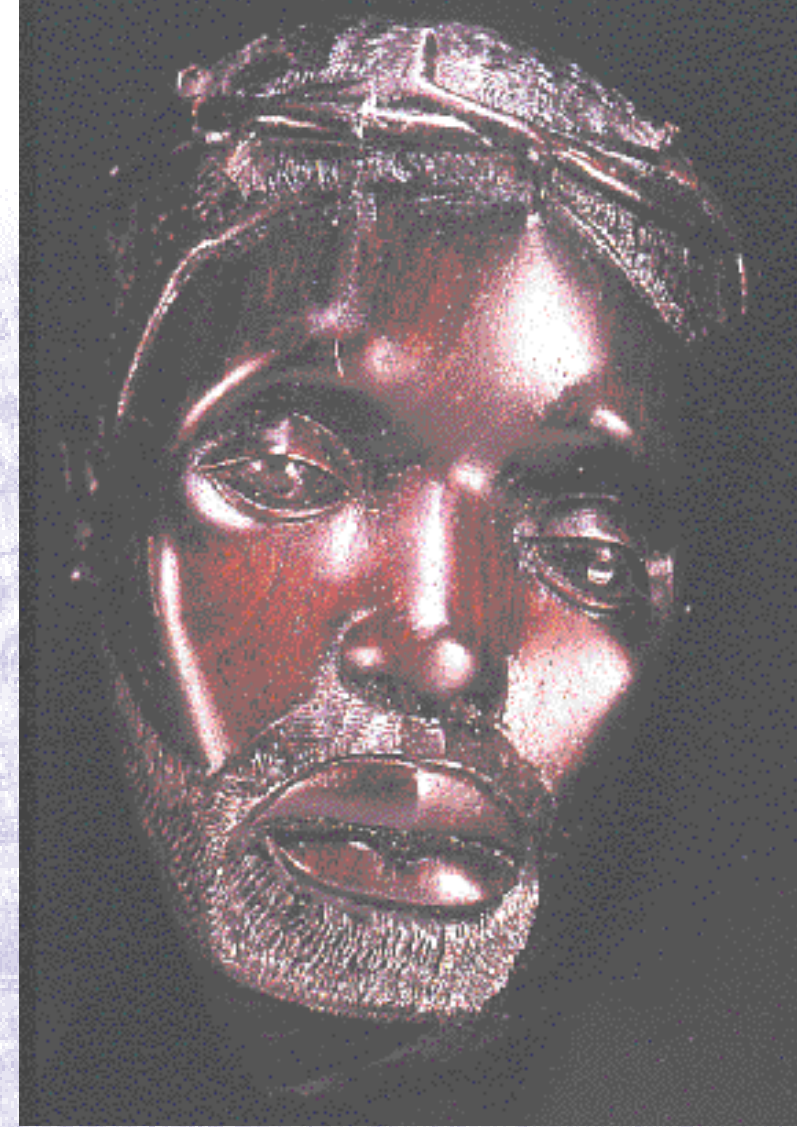
Like a Many-Layered Drawing

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.

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.

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?

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The Development of the Gospels

