

In the last class we discussed the backgrounds of the four Gospels, covering who the writers were, their backgrounds, who they were written to and the major points and emphases of the four Gospels. Today we'll continue with some other aspects of the background of the Gospels before we get into reading the Gospels themselves.

Let's shift gears now and talk about some other issues and questions. What exactly are the Gospels? There are known as *Gospels*, a word that means "good news" or "good message." And certainly they contain good news about the coming, the ministry, and the death and resurrection of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

But those titles are somewhat misleading. What we're really looking at is the *testimony* of these men to the events that took place during the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ. These four books of the Bible bear witness to those events. They weren't the *only* witnesses, because there were 12 who were chosen specifically to be witnesses.

You might write down **Acts 1:22**, where the apostles were choosing someone to replace Judas, who had committed suicide after betraying Jesus. And Peter says here but they must choose someone to "become a witness with us of his resurrection." And then Matthias was chosen to replace Judas. The point here is that one of the responsibilities of the apostles was to be *witnesses*. And indeed they were. They were teaching about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.

It was important that there be not one, not two, not four, but *12* men designated as witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus. These men were the official witnesses, because in fact there were others who saw Jesus alive after he had died—in one case 500 people saw Him at once. It was important that there be ample testimony to the resurrection of Jesus. After all, people would not easily believe that a man had been dead for three days and three nights and then came back to life. So it was necessary that there be *multiple eyewitnesses* to that fact.

As we know, the idea of witnesses was central to the biblical legal system. You might write down **Numbers 35:30** and **Deuteronomy 19:15**. The law God gave the Israelites required that there be two or three witnesses to an event. One witness was not enough to establish truth. So with the Gospels God actually gives us *double* the legally required amount of witnesses, and puts that witness into writing.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus did not write His own gospel? Why did He leave it to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to write this down 30 years later? Jesus himself says it in **John 5:31**—"If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true."

He's not saying that He's lying, His point is that it's *not legally valid*, which is the way some other translations put it. Jesus was saying that a person can stand up and make any claim that he wants, but that doesn't establish whether it's true. You have to have *independent* witnesses. There had to be independent witnesses of what Jesus said and did, especially of His death and resurrection. Again there were 500 people who saw Him after His resurrection on one occasion, so there were ample witnesses.

So this, in a nutshell, is why we have four Gospels. God is consistent. Two would've been legally required, and we have twice that number in written form.

Now let's address another question: *When* were the Gospels written? I asked two questions to

make you think. The answers give us a pretty narrow window into which the Gospels—at least Matthew, Mark and Luke—must have been written. One question was why does Paul only quote from the Gospels once in all his letters? What's the answer? The simplest, most straightforward answer is that *they weren't written yet*. Paul wrote his letters from around A.D. 50 to about 66 or 67. 1 Timothy 5:18 quotes from Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7. This was written around 65 A.D. So for most of Paul's ministry, it appears that the Gospels simply hadn't been written yet.

But just a year or two before his death, he quotes from the Gospel of Luke. And that's his only quote from the Gospels. So the logical conclusion is that *they weren't written before the late 50s to early 60s*, assuming it took several years for them to be distributed. Also, the book of Acts ends abruptly at about A.D. 63. Luke wrote the book of Acts, but he also says that he wrote it *after* he wrote the book of Luke.

Luke was with Paul in Rome when Paul is under house arrest there where the book of Acts ends in 63 A.D. But Paul was later released and was free for several years before he was re-imprisoned in the reign of Nero and executed in 66 or 67 A.D. So if the book of Acts was written and ended by A.D. 63, then Luke had to be written before that—probably the very late 50s or early 60s. That's what most scholars who believe the Bible conclude.

But what about a date later than that? Some scholars argue that the Gospels were written in the 70s or 80s A.D. or even later. I asked another question to make you think: What major event took place in Judea after Christ's death and resurrection that helps us understand when the Gospels were likely written? Any answers? *The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D.*

Why is it unlikely that the Gospels were written after that? Because the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple are nowhere mentioned as having happened. The Gospels describe the temple many times and include Jesus saying it would be destroyed, but there's no mention of that in any of the Gospels. Therefore they were probably written before 70 A.D. while the temple was still standing. Otherwise the destruction of the temple surely would have mentioned as a fulfillment of several of Jesus Christ's Olivet prophecy.

Bible critics believe Jesus couldn't have prophesied the fall of Jerusalem before it happened, so they say the Gospels had to be written after 70 A.D. That's why you'll see some dates from 80 A.D. on up until the mid-100s A.D. When you see dates such as those, you know that the source doesn't believe that Jesus was a prophet and the author doesn't really believe the Bible. It's the same with the way they date the book of Daniel. They can't believe that Daniel prophesied in the 500s B.C. of the rise and fall of the Persian empire, of Alexander's Greek empire and the rise of the Roman empire before these things happened, so they redate the book of Daniel to around 100-200 B.C. and say that Daniel wrote *after* these events, but pretended he was writing several centuries earlier so it would look like he was a prophet. Again, when you see things like this, it tells you that the writer doesn't really believe the Bible.

So back to the dating of the writing of the Gospels. If they weren't written until the early 60s A.D., why did they wait so long? Why did they wait about 30 years to write the Gospels? There are several things to consider.

One is that they may have felt they should *not* write the story down. This may sound a little odd, but put yourself in their place. They had the books of the Old Testament, which was their Bible. When they needed an authority to back up what they said, they quoted Moses or the prophets.

Today if we need an authority we'll quote Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but Matthew, Mark, Luke and John quoted Moses and the prophets. That was their Bible. That was their authority.

For them, the idea that they would write something that would go alongside Moses or the prophets was unthinkable. They wouldn't have even considered writing Scripture. That would be like us today sitting down and thinking we were going to write another book of the Bible. It simply didn't cross their minds. To them, the idea was probably bordering on blasphemous. What are the books of the New Testament that we have today? With the exception of Revelation, none of the authors seem to have thought they were writing new books of the Bible. That's why what we have are mostly letters to individuals and church congregations, collections of instructions, and memoirs.

Another consideration is that there were plenty of witnesses alive who could testify to these things, so why should they write them down? There were the 12 apostles. There were various other individuals we find mentioned in the Gospels. There were the 500 eyewitnesses who saw Jesus after He was resurrected. With all of these witnesses walking around, why write the story down? The witnesses were alive and you could go up to them and talk to them directly about these events. So early on they didn't see any need to write these things down.

But as time passed, *conditions changed*. The apostles scattered to the four winds. Some of them were killed. The other witnesses scattered too, and they began to die off. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were themselves getting on up in years and not getting any younger, and they didn't know how much time they might have left.

At some point, they decided they'd better start writing these things down. And so they did. These men were scattered and living in different places, so they weren't able to sit down and collaborate on a combined work that was the collective memory of all of them. So what we have is their individual recollections—four different sets of memories or testimonies of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.

Another factor in why they didn't write down these things earlier is that initially they thought that Jesus Christ would return soon, within their lifetimes. We see from Paul's writings that he clearly believed this when he wrote of Christ's return and talked of "those of us alive and who remain." But at some point it must have become evident to them that Jesus Christ's return was in the future, and they might not live to see it. And so they concluded they'd better start writing this down. They realized they'd better record what they knew so that future generations would have it. There was also the factor of increasing persecution, and as they saw church members being martyred, they realized that might happen to them also, so they'd better write it down.

When these men finished writing their Gospels, what happened? As soon as they finished and handed the scroll to another person, no doubt that document began to be copied multiple times. There were no printing presses then, no photocopy machines, and no computers with spell checkers and grammar checkers.

So to make new copies, this involved one of two methods that were common in the day. One was for a person to simply sit down with the scroll of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John and some blank papyrus or parchment in front of him and to begin copying it word for word. Another was for a person to take it into a room where there might be four or five or a dozen scribes, and he would begin reading it while the scribes and the room furiously made copies as he read.

All the copies were made by hand, and because the Gospels weren't considered to be Scripture yet, the exacting process for making copies of the Bible, with its meticulous checking for errors,

was not in place this early on. They were making copies for themselves or for other church congregations in Egypt or Syria or Asia Minor, and they didn't see themselves as making copies of the Bible, for which there was a much more rigorous standard for copying and error checking. Their purpose was to make as many copies as quickly as possible and to spread them widely. It wasn't to make sure that every copy was exactly the same.

You've probably heard that there are differences in different manuscripts of the Gospels, or maybe even that there are mistakes in the Gospels. But it doesn't take a scholar to realize that when copies of the Gospels were made this way, there are naturally going to be some differences introduced through this copying process. Again, they didn't have photocopiers or computers to make perfect copies. It was all done by hand. If you've ever tried to hand copy or to even type something while copying out of a book, you know how easy it is to make mistakes while copying it.

And this is how some differences and mistakes were introduced. For instance, if you were copying a document by hand, you might skip a word or sometimes even skip a line. If you were listening to someone reading, and you were copying from that, you could easily misspell something. You could misspell a name or a place or write down a number wrong. Your quill could run out of ink and you might miss a word or two while you dipped it in the ink and were trying to catch up. You could leave out a letter or two.

These are the kinds of differences and mistakes that scholars find in the early copies of the books of the Bible. And every copy that's made of those copies with minor mistakes in them will also have *those* minor mistakes copied into them. This is why we have variations in some of the early documents. Reputable scholars agree that the number of significant differences is very small, only about one in a hundredth part to one in a thousandth. And they affect virtually no significant biblical teaching.

Scholars in general believe that of the four Gospel accounts, Mark was the first. They believe that because so much of Mark's Gospel is repeated in Matthew and Luke, that they were using Mark as a source for their accounts. But there's a bit of a problem with that, because if Matthew and Luke had Mark's Gospel there shouldn't be the variations that we see between Matthew, Mark and Luke. If Matthew and Luke were copying directly from Mark, then all three of them should be exactly the same where they overlap. But they're not.

Scholars refer to Matthew, Mark and Luke as the *synoptic Gospels*, meaning to see with one eye, or to have the same viewpoint. And yet there are differences in their accounts that are hard to explain if they're working from written records. But there are clear similarities—in some cases, word-for-word similarities. This is why some scholars believe that Matthew and Luke copied portions directly out of Mark's Gospel.

Many years ago scholars saw these similarities between Matthew, Mark and Luke and decided that they must all have been taking material from an earlier source, from an earlier gospel. How many of you have heard of the gospel "Q"? That's what this is referring to. Scholars concluded that there must have been an earlier source, and they called this earlier source *Q*, from the German word *quelle*, meaning "source." Now mind you, they've never found any hard evidence of an earlier gospel, such as any manuscripts or anyone referring to it or quoting from it, or anything like that. It was all strictly theoretical, their explanation to account for the similarities between Matthew, Mark and Luke.

But scholars are now beginning to realize there may be a better explanation for the similarities and in some cases exact overlap between Matthew, Mark and Luke. And that better explanation

is *memorization*. Memorization was the common way to learn in that day, and particularly in the Jewish culture. So this earlier source wasn't a written source, but most likely one or more memorized *oral* sources.

I've mentioned to some of you before that Jewish boys were expected to memorize the Torah by age 12. And I don't mean just the names of the books—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy—I'm talking about memorizing *the whole five books*. This is what was expected of a serious Bible student. An individual like Paul, who was a student of the famous Rabbi Gamaliel, would've been expected to memorize all of the books of the Old Testament. This is why he's constantly quoting from the Bible in his letters. He had probably memorized the entirety of the Old Testament as part of his training to be a rabbi.

This is simply how they learned the Bible in their day. People didn't have their own copies or scrolls of the books of the Old Testament. Paper and parchment were expensive, and it was far too expensive for the average person to own a copy of any book of the Bible, much less the entire thing. So the way they learned the Bible was to go to the local synagogue and study it for hours on end. That was what "going to school" consisted of for a Jewish boy or girl of that day. It consisted of going to the synagogue to study and memorize Scripture under the direction of a Rabbi or teacher. Jesus and the apostles would have done this. All of the Jewish boys of the day would have done this, and we'll see hints of this as we go through the Gospels themselves.

So was there an earlier source that Matthew, Mark and Luke used for their Gospels? Yes, there almost certainly was. But it wasn't a *written* source. Most likely they were all drawing on memorized stories, or a memorized collection of stories, about the life and ministry of Jesus the Messiah. Most likely these stories were being told again and again by the apostles to the members of the early Church, who would go up to Peter or John or Matthew and say, "tell us again about the feeding of the 5,000," or "tell us again about that time Jesus walked on the water on the Sea of Galilee" or "tell us again about how Jesus healed the blind man."

And over time there likely came to be a memorized collection of stories of the life of Jesus that became basically *an oral gospel* that would become the basis of parts of the accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke. And this is probably why we have a lot of similarities between those three Gospels, as well as some of the differences. It's probably because these were *oral traditions* and stories passed along over about 30 years, and not something that was written down.

One evidence of this is in the way Matthew, Mark and Luke quote Jesus. They are apparently quoting Jesus word-for-word, but they have Jesus saying slightly different things. The meaning is the same, but the wording is different between the three accounts. If they were working from a *written* source, the wording should be identical—but it's not. Probably they were drawing from one or more *oral* accounts.

There's probably another reason that easily accounts for some of these differences. What language are the Gospels written in? (Please don't say "English"! ) They were written in Greek. What language did Jesus and the apostles speak? Probably Hebrew or Aramaic or both. If any of you have ever tried to translate from one language to another, you know that word-for-word translations are almost impossible. So if three different people sat down and tried to translate what I'm saying now into another language, you'd end up with three slightly or considerably different translations.

And I think that is also part of what is going on in the Gospels where Jesus' words are different from one gospel to another. He originally spoke in Hebrew or Aramaic, but the Gospels are written in Greek—and so the translations are a little different. In fact, there are early historical

statements and other indications that indicate that Matthew may have written his gospel in Hebrew, and it was later translated into Greek. This may also account for some of the differences in the way the Gospels record Jesus Christ's words on various occasions.

What about some of the occasions when the gospel writers record events in different order? Matthew may say that it happened in the order A, B and C, and Mark may say A, C and B. they don't have the same order of events. These things are troubling to some people.

I guess it depends on how you view your understanding of biblical inspiration. Some people believe that the Bible writers were inspired by the Holy Spirit word-for-word. They believe that essentially the Holy Spirit *dictated* every word to the writers, and the writers were essentially taking dictation. But if you've read the New Testament all the way through, that doesn't work. There's a problem with that view when the Gospels quote Jesus Christ and they use different words. The sense is the same and the meaning is the same, but the words are different. They are clearly giving us *indirect* quotations of Jesus rather than direct quotations, and that's why the words are different.

And what about when the Gospels put the sequence of events in a different order? These are things that biblical critics will bring up. And sometimes people are caught flat-footed by them because they haven't really thought it through. But these things don't pose a problem when we understand the reason why God the father and Jesus did this the way they did.

Let's consider what it means to bear testimony to the life and ministry of Jesus. Let's consider the matter of *evidence*. Let's view this as though we were going to be sitting in a courtroom listening to witnesses of an event. It will be your job to believe, as a member of the jury, what took place. For our example, let's say we're sitting in a jury determining guilt or innocence in the case of a man accused of shooting a cashier at a convenience store. We'll listen to four witnesses, all of whom were there when the crime take place.

The four witnesses take the stand one after another, and they all give testimony that is identical, word for word. Even their grammatical mistakes are the same. Now if you're a member of the jury, you've got a problem. It's clear that these are not *independent* witnesses. Their testimony is exactly the same even down to grammatical mistakes. It's clear there is some kind of collusion between these four witnesses.

On cross-examination, it comes out that the four witnesses have been *coached* by the prosecution. They've all memorized the same account even down to the grammatical mistakes. What you really have been is *one* witness, not four. Is the prosecution's case credible? Probably not, because they've been tampering with the witnesses. The witnesses are not credible or believable.

So let's say the scenario is different. Again we have four witnesses, and we're on the jury. Witness A was standing at the counter when the defendant burst through the door, shouted at the cashier, fired a shot into the ceiling, then shot the cashier dead, grabbed the cash from the cash register and ran out the door.

Witness B takes the stand. He was standing nearby when the defendant burst through the door, shot the cashier, grabbed the money from the cash register, fired a shot at another customer, then ran out the door. Note that there are differences in the order and in what happened. He didn't notice the defendant shouting at the cashier, and he says the gunman shot at another customer instead of into the ceiling.

Witness C takes the stand. She was part way down one of the aisles. According to her, the

defendant was in the store, started an argument with the cashier, shot him twice, and slowly walked out the door. Again, there are differences in the order and what happened. She thought the man and the cashier had an argument and that he shot at the cashier twice.

Witness D was outside the store gassing up his car. He heard several gunshots inside the store, heard several people yelling, looked up and saw the man walked out the door, point his gun at him, then get in a waiting car which drove away. Again, there are differences in the order and what happened. He heard the gunshots, then the yelling, and says the man fled in a car, which no one else inside saw.

You have four witnesses, but the testimony of all four witnesses differs in the order of events and exactly what happened. There are differences in their testimony. So are they all telling the truth? Yes, they are. They are all telling *what they remember*—even though *what* they remember differs in some ways. It doesn't mean they are lying or not telling the truth. It simply means *they remember it different ways*.

The important thing is that they all remember that the defendant sitting there at the table is the one who shot the cashier, and they've all pointed him out as the one who did it. So although there may be discrepancies in their testimony, the discrepancies don't discredit their testimony, they actually show that there are or four *independent* witnesses who can testify as to what happened and that the defendant did what he did.

Testimony from different witnesses is not really testimony unless it is *independent*. That's the whole point of the biblical requirement that there be at least two or more witnesses to establish a legal fact. That's the reason that Jesus didn't write His own gospel. That's the reason that there is not *one* single gospel. That's the reason there were 12 eyewitnesses to His life and ministry and death and resurrection in the 12 apostles. That's the reason we have *four* written Gospel accounts, all written by *different authors*. They are all *independent* witnesses of these events, or they give us the testimony of others who were eyewitnesses to these events.

So why would God, through the Holy Spirit, dictate four different accounts if all four accounts were identical? That would be no different than having just one account. It's important that we have witnesses. It's important that they be independent. And that's why we have *four* Gospels instead of one.

Now let's consider the four Gospels again. We have four witnesses who are all in agreement on the central events. They differ only in insignificant detail. How important is it that one healing took place before another event in one Gospel, but it's recorded as being *after* the event and another gospel? How important is that? Not very. If you are a juror in a courtroom, you're going to look at the evidence and realize it's clear that these men are telling the truth. The point is that these events happened, not necessarily that they happened in a specific order.

As we talked about in the last class, these men organized their material differently. Matthew organized his Gospel around five long discourses by Jesus Christ. Mark seems to have organized his Gospel chronologically. Luke organized his geographically. John's Gospel has very little overlap with the others. So naturally there will be some differences in the Gospels. We need to also realize and recognize that they weren't writing a history as we would write a history today. That concept would come along later. They weren't using word processors so they could arrange and rearrange events. They were using collections of events to paint a picture and tell an overall story.

With this in mind, we should consider the importance of the biblical word *belief*. We have in the

Gospels four accounts of witnesses. At the end of the day, we either *believe* them or we *don't* believe them. That is why the Bible continually stresses *belief*. None of us were there. So either we believe the testimony of those who give us their accounts, or we don't. The witnesses—not one, not four, not three, but *four*—are the proof.

We should expect that there *should be* some differences between four independent accounts. If they were identical, we would suspect the writers of colluding with one another. Because of their differences, the four Gospels actually give us a fuller and richer picture of Jesus.

Let me give you an example. Imagine if four people wrote a biography on your life—your son, your father, a coworker, and a good friend. They would each focus on different aspects of your life and write from a unique perspective. Your son would be writing about you as a parent, your father would write about you as a child growing up, your coworker would write about you as a peer, and your friend would write about you as a friend. Each would include different stories or see the same event from a different angle, but their differences would *not* mean they are in error. When we put all four accounts together, we'd get a richer picture of your life and character. That is what is taking place in the Gospels.

So we understand that *differences* do not necessarily mean *errors*. Skeptics have made allegations of errors for centuries, yet the vast majority of charges have been answered. The fact that we have four Gospels means that we have *complementary*, not a *contradictory*, accounts.

As an example of resolving supposed contradictions, let's look at an example of this on page 126 of your Harmony of the Gospels. Consider how the four Gospels record the words that Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, ordered to be placed on the sign above Jesus' head at His crucifixion. This is about halfway down the page on page 126.

**Matthew 27:37** reads, “*This is Jesus the king of the Jews.*”

**Mark 15:26** says, “*The king of the Jews.*”

**Luke 23:38** reads, “*This is the king of the Jews.*”

**John 19:19** states, “*Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews.*”

At first glance, it might appear that none of the authors copied the words on the sign properly, because all of them record it somewhat differently. But when we read each account, we find each writer adds a bit more information from the others. From John we read that Pilate composed the message. From Luke we have additional information as to why these words are different: The inscription was originally written in three languages—Greek, Latin and Hebrew.

So the variation of the wordings logically would have to do with the three languages used as well as the different point of view of each biographer, stressing slightly different aspects of Christ's life and ministry. Adding up the wording of the different accounts, we see that the complete message recorded by the signs was probably “This is Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews.”

None of the Gospel accounts *contradicts* the others; they simply *complement* each other to provide increased understanding. We'll see more examples of this as we get into reading the Gospels in future classes.

Any questions?

Class is dismissed.



