

The Gospel: A New Kind of Literature

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Introduction

In this presentation my main focus is the issue of what a Gospel is and how it is a distinct form of literature from anything that has gone before it. This literary achievement is worth noting because Mark's Gospel is often compared unfavourably to the more developed and literary Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John. But the writer of Mark's Gospel - we'll just call him Mark, had significant and unique themes in his Gospel, which also brings an urgent power to the story of Jesus, and this contributes significantly to our understanding of Jesus. But more than that, it is very likely that he was the one who developed this form of literature, which is at the heart of our biblical faith.

What I want to do first is to consider the evolution of the Gospel as a written form.

Then I want to briefly revise the order in which the synoptic Gospels came to be written. (We have looked at this in previous seminars, so I won't spend long on this.)

The third thing I want to do is to look at how the Gospel is a distinct form of literature: historical but not a history, biographical but not a biography, similar to Hebrew biblical texts such as the Book of Exodus, but with at least one key distinguishing element.

And finally, if we have time, I want to think with you a bit about reliable the Gospels are in the picture they give us of Jesus.

i **3 steps in the evolution of the term Gospel:**

Originally the term 'Gospel' or 'good news' (*euangellion* in Greek) was a term used by the New Testament writers to refer to Jesus's message to the people of his day;

It became the term for the kerygmatic preaching (the preaching of the apostles and others that called people to decision and faith in Christ);

Thirdly it became the term used to describe the organised literary works formed from oral traditions and stories about Jesus, his life, teaching, death and resurrection, and formed through the purposeful editorial input of the Gospel-writer.

ii **Mark very probably the first Gospel**

The 2-source theory (review details from the Matthew or Luke seminar). Ask questions here.

Which of the Gospels was the first to be written, according to most scholars?

What sources did Mark use for his Gospel?

What sources did the other Gospel writers use?

What else do you know about Mark's Gospel or is distinctive about it?

iii What were the antecedents of, or influences on, the literary genre of 'Gospel'?

This has been the subject of a lot of scholarly debate.

1 Similar to Greco-Roman history/biography, similar but distinctive. The Gospel writers are not interested in telling all the significant facts, as would be typical in a history. For example, Jesus's infancy and childhood not even mentioned - and a lot of other things left out. John 20:30 says it well: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book"). There is a limit to what can be conveyed, and more information is not necessarily an improvement. History is a component but it is not an end in itself. It is to contribute to a greater purpose, which I will speak about later. The Gospel writers are not intent on developing a detailed picture of Jesus's character or focusing on the essence of the person, as would be typical in a biography. Of course, plenty of information comes out about Jesus's character and his essence as human and divine, but the purpose of the Gospels are not just to paint a picture of Jesus. Core issues in the Gospels are what Jesus did (history), who he was as Messiah (biography), how his death and resurrection showed his Messiahship (theology) and, supremely, the issue of how we will respond to him (kerygma). The kerygmatic element of the apostolic preaching is retained in the Gospel genre.

2 Hebrew literature (e.g. Exodus or the historical books of the Hebrew Bible). We are getting warmer' here, because Hebrew biblical literature includes the concept of the Messiah, which is a key element in the kerygmatic preaching. But although this is closer and we find in the Hebrew Bible both the words and works of the prophets as in the Gospel of Mark we find both the words and works of Jesus, there is a key difference. Still In the Hebrew Bible texts there is not the same kerygmatic element - the urge to see Jesus not only as an example to be followed, but as the living Lord whose life, death and resurrection we share through a faith commitment to him.

3 The preaching of the apostles. Here we are warmest of all. An important aspect of the preaching was understanding who Jesus was - the Son of God, the Messiah (cf Mark 1:1: 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Messiah, the Son of God'). Of course, this is a biographical and historical issue of immense significance. The apostles also focused on recalled words and actions of Jesus (historical and biographical elements) to back up their claims that Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God. As a result of the preaching of the apostles, and the writing of the Gospel-writers and St Paul and St Peter as well, our faith in Jesus is very powerfully based in the historical circumstances of Jesus's life, death and resurrection. So that is the basic material of the apostolic preaching and of the Gospels, but it is not the purpose of the Gospels or the apostolic preaching, not even of the Gospel that most consciously identifies itself as historical research, the Gospel of Luke. The purpose of all of the Gospels is to bring the hearer or reader to a commitment of active faith in Jesus the Messiah as Saviour and Son of God and to discipleship to him. (E.g. John 20:31, "[This Gospel is written] that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." Or consider the apostolic preaching of St Peter on the Day of Pentecost, recorded in Acts 2. Once Peter has told the listeners of the significance of Jesus's life, death and resurrection, the listeners respond to the apostles, "Brothers, what then should we do?" (Acts 2:37). And Peter replies, Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ,

so that your sin may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Here 'gift of the Holy Spirit' signifies that God would be alive and at work in them through faith in Christ.

So I think that the literary genre "Gospel" is best understood as a unique written form of the oral preaching of the apostles, making use of biblical and literary elements familiar to the Gospel writers and their community of faith. This fits well with a tradition that Mark was using material from the apostle Peter in his Gospel. The 3rd century church historian Eusebius said that Papias, a Bishop in the early part of the 2nd century recalled that he had been told by an elder of the church (possibly the writer of John's Gospel) that "Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not indeed, in order, of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded but not making, as it were, and arrangement of the Lord's oracles, so that Mark did nothing wrong in writing down single points as he remembered them." I understand that to mean that Peter preached all sorts of sermons and quoted the words and works of the Lord Jesus in them, but that he did not prepare a series of sermons about Jesus's life in any chronological order. So it was up to Mark to fit all of the elements that he had heard from Peter's preaching (and of course from other people) into a logical and plausible order.

This connection with St Peter cannot be proven, and of course other hypotheses have been put forward. But there are some elements within Mark's Gospel that do suggest a possible connection with St Peter and I think they are worth noting in this seminar:

- i the vividness and detail of the second gospel argue for eyewitness elements within it. Only Mark, for instance, mentions that the grass on which the five thousand sat was green (6:39);
- ii the specially critical light in which the disciples are displayed suggests that this is an account that comes from one of them, because they were held in such high regard by the early Church that anyone else would criticise them in this way. While found in all four gospels, the picture of the disciples as cowardly, spiritually blind, and hard of heart is particularly vivid in Mark.
- iii Peter figures prominently in Mark and some of the references are most naturally explained as coming from Peter himself (e.g. the references to Peter 'remembering' [11:21; 14:72]).
- iv An eminent scholar of the 20th century, C. H. Dodd, has pointed out that Mark's gospel follows a pattern very similar to that found in Peter's rehearsal of the basic apostolic message (kerygma), the evangelistically oriented recitation of key events in Jesus's life, found in Acts 10:36-41.
- v There is also a mention of a certain Mark in Peter's first letter, where he calls him "my son".

While this evidence does not 'prove' anything, it is consistent with the early tradition that Mark's Gospel was drawn largely from the reminiscences and preaching of St Peter - the rock on which the Church was built.

I have intentionally refrained from covering what others will say about the themes of the Gospel, but what has struck me strongly as I have done this thinking is the importance of the message that the apostles brought and that Mark's Gospel brings. It was received by the apostles as transformative. It was received by the early Church as a transforming message. It is intended and needs to be a

message that transforms us today. I want to invite you now to get into groups of 4 or 5 and to discuss two questions.

“Often when people listen to a sermon they are only expecting interesting thoughts about Jesus, not anything that would change their life and behaviour. “ How valid do you think this statement is?

If this Jesus whom we worship is Messiah and Son of God as Mark’s Gospel tells us, if he is God who came and lived among us, died and rose again to bring us to eternal life with God, what do you think God expects us (you and me and the people of this parish) to do in response to that?

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