

Johannine Studies

Lecture 1 Study Notes – January 29, 2008

1. What are the Gospels? (see 1 Corinthians 15 as definition of the Gospel)

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have been called the four witnesses. (“The Four Witnesses” by Robin Griffith-Jones). Together, they give us the greatest story ever told. Yet, the Gospels don’t always include the same material or the same versions of the same material. They often describe strikingly different versions of the same events. Each one offers a little different answer to the question Jesus asked Peter, “Who do you say that I am?”

Griffith-Jones sees Mark as portraying Jesus as a Rebel, Matthew as a Jewish teacher-Rabbi, Luke as Chronicler, and John as the Mystic. Each one like an artist trying to paint a portrait of Jesus—not necessarily contradicting one another, but trying to express how the historical Jesus was meeting the needs of their community.

We know that every community and every church didn’t have access to all of the Gospels after they were written. They were written by different communities at different times.

It is unbelievable how diverse the early Christians were. We think we are diverse in denominations, non-denominations and our screwed-up beliefs, but in my opinion, we are mildly confused compared to early Christendom. During the early years, say the first three or four hundred years before there was a Canon as we know it, we could not always agree on the number of Gods; whether Jesus was human, divine, or both; who created the world; whether the Jewish scriptures were inspired by God or an evil god (“Lost Christianities” by Bart D. Ehrman).

Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the synoptic Gospels because they are thought to be similar. In other words, they seem to have the same approach to the life and the ministry of Jesus and contain similar material (Similarity of wording—Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17; Order—Matthew 16:13-20:34, Mark 8:27-10,52; Luke 9:18-51,18:15-43; Parenthetical material/Biblical quotations—page 785, Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels).

2. How did the Gospels come about?

No one really knows for sure, but we are certain the Bible and the Gospels did not drop down from heaven into hands of the authors like the Moslems believe the Koran did. It was written by human beings under the inspiration and leadership of the Holy Spirit. I believe that each Gospel was written to needs and edification of each writer’s community of believers having had their concerns and needs in mind—much like Paul’s letters were written to his churches with their problems and concerns in mind.

3. Timeline of Gospel formation and oral tradition (see handout):

Stage 1 - Composition (Timothy Johnson’s *Stages of Canonization* – “Jesus and the Gospels” vol. 3)
After the Christ event, there was a period of 30-50 years in which we believe the four canonical Gospels were written. Jesus’ life and ministry were kept alive by stories of what He did—handed down to different communities, person by person—oral tradition. Once the Apostles began to die out,

and Jesus tarried in His second coming (they believed that he would return in their lifetime. See 1 Corinthians 15: 50-51; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18), realized the need of something to preserve their tradition. The results were the Gospels, not just our Canonical Gospels (canonical meaning *inside the church, official church writings*), but Apocryphal (meaning simply *non-canonical*).

Apocryphal writings were not necessarily bad (unless folks were misled into believing that they were equal to scripture or orthodoxy), but not regarded as early or authoritative gospels. Some apocryphal writings were very popular, especially the Infancy Gospel (see books of Eden) which told about the early life of Jesus. Some scholars have likened them to “early Christian fiction,” stories which filled in the gaps and maybe even entertained rather than inspired. One thing most scholars believe is that there was no hidden conspiracy to keep these books from being canonical (such as *The DaVinci Code* would suggest), but a very hard long process of canonization. According to Timothy Johnson, no historian has ever been able to say that our four Gospels were not the earliest copies of any gospel found... which was one criteria that was used for canonization (“Jesus and the Gospels” page 11 vol. 3).

Stage 2 – Exchange

One community begins to share writings with other communities. We find a trace of this in Paul’s letters where Paul writes to the Colossians, and he says: “After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea” (Colossians 4:16). This is the shift from local writings to universal writings and very important because more people begin to recognize and accept the local writings as authoritative. For example, we know that Matthew and Luke used Mark, assuming Mark was the oldest by the material shared by all three. This couldn’t have happened unless communities of faith began to share with other communities of faith. In addition, it was the time in which there was a shift from historical to nominative. In other words, what was once said to the Corinthians in the past is going to be useful for all Christians in every generation.

Stage 3 - Collection (around 95 to 120 AD)

A good example of this stage is 1 Clement, written around 95 AD, in which Clement refers to 1 Corinthians, to the letter of Hebrews, and to the letter of James.

Ignatius of Antioch, writing around 110 AD, refers to 1 Corinthians, Romans, and Ephesians.

Polycarp, writing around the year 130 AD, refers to Galatians and the pastoral letters of Paul.

Some scholars see II Peter as being written sometime around the end of the first and the beginning of the second century. It is seen as the last of the New Testament to be written. See 2 Peter 3:16 as referenced to Paul’s letters and their collection as Scripture. The dating of 2 Peter as 60-64 AD is much too early, especially for Paul’s letters to be thought of as Scripture.

What about the Gospels? They are harder to find quoted. Clement does talk about the words *our Lord*. According to Timothy Johnson, when Clement quotes Jesus, it appears closer to Matthew than the others. Polycarp does mention sayings that might have come from John and Matthew. So, we have not so much stories of Jesus as sayings of Jesus being quoted by the early Christian writers. What is interesting is, according to Johnson (“Jesus and the Gospels” page 13 vol. 3), “in all of these writings there is no quotation of Jesus from any other source, nor is there any other Gospel referred to as authoritative, so these seem to be the only gospels at the beginning of the 2nd century.”

Stage 4 – Selection

This is the most critical stage of the process, starting in the middle of the 2nd century and continuing on until the Canon was agreed on around the 4th—325 AD Council of Nicea called by Emperor Constantine to help unite the Empire. The long stage of selection is brought about by a crisis of identity. Every group of people, really every person, has to test and develop their own identity usually brought on by a crisis. In this instance, it was a crisis of the community's beliefs. The crisis of identity in most of these writings was brought about by competing notions and ideals of the Christian faith.

One was the notion of contraction. These ideals were expressed in additional writings that began to surface in the 2nd Century. According to Timothy Johnson, Tacian, writing around the year 170 AD, thought that the Four Gospels were too many so he composed a writing called the Diatessaron, which in effect was the first harmonization of the Gospels. This is interesting because it speaks to the growing popularity of the Four Gospels as authoritative for certain groups of Christians. Marcion, the famous and very popular heretic of the 2nd century, believed that there were two distinct gods, the God who created the world who was not very good, and the good God who was the true spiritual deity represented by Jesus. Marcion held that only 10 of Paul's letters and one Gospel (Luke) were authoritative. Everything else was thought to have too much Jewish influence in them and rejected.

The other side of the coin was the notion of expansion. This challenge to the Gospels was new compositions claiming to be the authority of divine revelation. Gnosticism was the big attraction here along with an assortment of other Apocryphal Gospels.

What is Gnosticism? The word Gnostic means *knowledge* or *to know*. This knowledge is based on certain assumptions:

One, while there is just one main God, he or she is quite unknowable.

Two, the god of the Old Testament is a lesser deity who created the world. This lesser god has made a flawed creation, therefore is flawed or evil himself.

Three, as human beings, we are trapped in this world and the only way we can escape this world and its evil influences is to receive the knowledge given to us by Jesus—a Jesus who gave this special knowledge by this unknowable higher spiritual reality that had nothing to with this evil world.

The Gospel of John was also a favorite of these folks because it was thought, and is still thought, of having Gnostic leanings. The best to illustrate this is to compare it to the Gospel of Matthew. Look at Matthew 5:17-20. Clearly Matthew underscores Jesus' allegiance to the Law, but John never has this kind of saying. Instead, for Jesus in John, the greatest works someone can do is believe in Him. There is an emphasis on knowledge and believing in John that there is not in the Synoptics. But clearly, numerous writers other than John made sure that there was no shortage of full blown Gnostic literature to be called scripture (see handouts).