

Essay on the Historicity of the Gospels

The three-stage process that ended with the writing of the four canonical Gospels, which *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* refers to as “Our Lords Teaching,” “The Apostles’ Teaching,” and “The Four Evangelists,”¹ can also respectively be referred to as the “Jesus” stage, the “Resurrection” stage, and the “Written” stage. In discussing this process I will begin by first identifying and describing each of the three stages themselves. To further understand this process, I will indicate how the four Catholic Fundamentals of *incarnation*, *remembrance*, *discipleship/ministry*, and *sacrament* are at work in each particular stage.²

The first stage of *Our Lord’s Teaching* takes place in the first third of the first century, from about AD 1-33. At this stage Jesus himself, along with his deeds and teachings, personified the Gospel as living and demonstrated. A Jewish peasant from a very rural part of Galilee, Jesus was active in Galilee and Jerusalem, saying and doing astonishing things. While it seems he began as a follower of the eschatological prophet known as John the Baptist, at a certain point they went their separate ways, and Jesus rapidly gathered disciples (or students), some of whom

¹ “Instruction of the Pontifical Bible Commission On the Historical Truth of the Gospels: *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, April 21, 1964.” Accessed January 11, 2025. https://www.catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_HistTruthGosp.htm.

² These Fundamentals are understood as follows: *incarnation*: God is constantly being revealed in the world around us. The pinnacle of that revelation is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Because God became human, God shows preference for human ways of revealing himself. Just as Jesus is the Word of God in human flesh, so too is the Bible the Word of God in human language. *Remembrance*: whenever we have an experience of God, we are created to respond to that experience. We do this in the mass, liturgical and personal prayer, all the arts and throughout the entire world. The Scriptures are the written remembrances and expressions of the experience of God in the world on behalf of humanity. *Discipleship/ministry*: anytime anyone engages in public remembrances as such constitutes ministry at some level. The experience of God precedes the documentation of experiencing God, which perpetually relates such experiencing in particular times and places. *Sacrament*: an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace. Catholic Christianity is a sacramental religion, and we recognize the external sign in the inward reality. The Bible itself is an outward sign of an interior reality. “Scriptural Foundations,” presented by C.T. Brown, S.C.J., Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology, Hales Corners, WI, January 17, 2013.

that were closest to him becoming apostles, meaning those who are *sent out*. Some of this “select group”³ of eyewitnesses was sent out to preach Jesus’ message of the kingdom.

Religious tolerance was normative in Rome, and provided one’s duties to the state were observed, problems were unlikely to occur because of spiritual practice. When Jesus cleansed and entered the temple however, it was seen as a critique so harsh to Judaism that it also became Rome’s problem. This is because they were the occupiers who had to govern the Jews, who were already seen as meddlesome atheists with whom the Romans found it convenient to be somewhat diplomatic due to requiring their wheat. Given that Jesus entered the temple over Passover, and that the Romans had to manage the resulting unrest in the seasonally overcrowded Jerusalem, it was seen as expedient to remove him.

This was accomplished by colluding with Jewish leaders, because if Rome took Jesus themselves without having procured the necessary alliances it would have been more difficult, considerably so in the event of a possible insurrection. Believing that in doing so a serious problem could be definitively resolved, the first stage concludes with Jesus’ humiliating crucifixion and death.

Analysis of how the Catholic Fundamentals are at work in this first stage needs to be done in light of the actual “pre-Easter”⁴ Jesus, who “existed in the first century Palestine,” and whose *incarnation* was “governed by chronological time, three-dimensional space, and the laws of causality.”⁵ He lived a human life, and during this stage “Jesus used the forms of thought and

³ Pontifical Biblical Commission, “*Sancta Mater Ecclesia*.” “And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message” (Mark 3:14); “And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles.” (Luke 6:13), *ibid*.

⁴ Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), XXII.

⁵ Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, XXI.

expression prevailing at that time.”⁶ He also learned about being Jewish from his parents, hence being on the receiving end of both *remembrance* and *sacrament*.⁷

Jesus was undoubtedly a person of spirit and we rightly understand him as God, but people who go on spiritually transformative quests most often undertake their journeys from a perspective of deep dissatisfaction – Jesus is no exception. Among the dozens of serious criticisms of his religious leaders the scribes and Pharisees, were that they were “hypocrites,” who were guilty of locking “people out of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 23:13).⁸ In addition to being acutely aware of serious leadership problems, he was from Nazareth of Galilee, a backwater that many Jews would have thumbed their noses at, all the while living under the mandates of an empire that saw Jews as troublemakers, and with a questionable parentage to boot.

In forming and revealing his identity, eventually adopting the self-appointed title “Son of Man,”⁹ *discipleship/ministry* was both the paradigm from which Jesus preached about the kingdom, and how he reconciled a sense of *otherness*. This otherness was inseparable from having a different kind of parental and sibling dynamic than normally found in other families of origin: “‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’” (Matt 12:48-50). First as a disciple himself, and later as a

⁶ Pontifical Biblical Commission, “*Sancta Mater Ecclesia*.”

⁷ *Remembrance* as reliving and preserving the experience of God through handing on traditions, liturgy, Scripture; and *sacrament* as related to Jewish practice at the time: the existing Scripture as sacramental, celebrating the Passover, the overall view that life itself is created by God. While personally baptized by John the Baptist (Mark 1:9-11, Matt 3:13-17, Luke 3:21-22), baptism did not possess the same understanding we have of it as a sacrament *per se*.

⁸ Though I am referring to a stage at which the Gospels had not yet become books, a retrospective viewing through the themes contained within them nonetheless sheds light on the pre-written stages. This principle holds true for subsequent New Testament references until the formal written stage establishes it as a given point.

⁹ The title appears in the Gospels “eighty-one times – thirty times in St. Matthew, fourteen times in St. Mark, twenty-five times in St. Luke, and twelve times in St. John.” Catholic Encyclopedia. “Son of Man.” NewAdvent.org. Accessed January 11, 2025. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14144a.htm>.

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teacher of his own disciples, he not only demonstrated the value of chosen family, but shockingly broadened the horizons of what having a place in the world meant by identifying with all life and even directly with God.¹⁰ He communicated his teaching and healing *discipleship/ministry* with transformative results, and this stage of *Our Lord's Teaching* is indelibly marked by profound love of both God and neighbor.¹¹

The eyewitnesses from the previous stage were present at the second stage of *The Apostles' Teaching*, which spanned from around AD 33-65. Their perspectives were radically different now however, for they were claiming to see Jesus alive after he was dead. The God-event of the Resurrection enlightened the eyewitnesses, bringing them to a new understanding of everything about Jesus. Even if the titles of Lord, Son of God, Christ, and Savior were used in the first stage, they did not mean the same thing anymore. Post-Resurrection usage was radically different, taking on identification with Jesus Christ as *the* Lord, the unique Son of God and Savior, spreading out among a new group of non-eyewitnesses, most famously Paul the Apostle.

Up until and especially in AD 70 when the Romans destroyed the temple, Christianity became its own religious entity, very rapidly moving from a rural Jewish experience to an urban gentile experience. Perpetuating the experience of Jesus “after his death”¹² through formal eucharistic celebrations became a regular practice; and though Paul was evangelizing the Gospel, it was not yet written.¹³ “Most often ‘preaching’ serves as the umbrella term for this second stage of Gospel development.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Cf. Matt 6:9-13 (The Lord's Prayer).

¹¹ “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt 22:37-40).

¹² Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, XXV.

¹³ Paul was obviously writing his letters at this time however, depositing little creeds, with bits of written Gospel also being revealed in them. Written in the early 50s, 1 Thessalonians is the first Christian book.

¹⁴ Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: The Anchor Bible Reference Library, Doubleday, 1996), 108.

Applying the Catholic Fundamentals here necessitates understanding that the actual Jesus of history would forevermore be “proclaimed” as the *real* Jesus; that is, the glorified “post-Easter” person in whom Christian faith would be placed.¹⁵ *Incarnation* became a formal understanding that the person of Jesus was not merely born, but incarnated in a “transhistorical” manner as the Word of God¹⁶ who would forever be the source of holiness in the church, and whose life and death would be universally salvific. It would therefore be *remembered* as such, and because after his resurrection “Jesus Himself ‘interpreted to them’” his “own words,” the apostles utilized their enlarged comprehension to proclaim him according to the needs of the emerging Christian faithful.¹⁷

In terms of *sacrament*, the aforementioned eucharistic celebrations were taking place, and as Christianity moved further away from Judaism and into its own identity, baptism was beginning to replace circumcision as a fundamental sign of membership. *Discipleship/ministry* came more into its own as well, and in “devoting themselves ‘to the ministry of the word,’” the apostles preached and adapted their purpose to best resonate with “the mentality of their listeners.”¹⁸ They did this through the preaching categories of “catechetical formulas, narrative reports, eyewitness accounts, hymns, doxologies, prayers, and similar literary genres commonly found in Sacred Scripture and the speech of that period.”¹⁹

Comprised of 2nd or 3rd generation Christian non-eyewitnesses, the Four Evangelists wrote the Gospels between about AD 65-100. During this third *written* stage, “of the many elements at hand they reported some, summarized others, and developed still others in

¹⁵ Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, XXVIII.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Pontifical Biblical Commission, “*Sancta Mater Ecclesia*.”

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

accordance with the needs of the various churches.”²⁰ Drawing on available material, the Evangelists chose texts that they could best adapt to the purposes of their respective audiences. Narrating what Jesus said and did in varying contexts, they reported “the Lord’s words and deeds in different order.”²¹ They retained the same meaning however, and through not only communicating it literally but in a variety of ways, they sought to best transmit the Gospel in the most effective manner.²²

The Gospels are pastoral documents, and their role is not limited to historicity in relating to their audiences. Written in the late 60s or early 70s peripheral to the temple’s destruction, the earliest Synoptic Gospel of Mark has been interpreted as an anti-imperial book. Though likely predating the destruction in that Jesus predicted it, Mark could also have been written after the fact, with the prediction inserted later as a retrospective explanation. Drawing on both Mark and a common Gospel of sayings known as Q (German for *Quelle*, meaning “source”), Matthew and Luke/Acts were written from between AD 85-95 in Syria. Addressing their respective audiences, Matthew was more Jewish and presented Jesus as a new Moses, while Luke was more geared toward gentile converts, emphasizing Jesus as a teaching healer who identifies with the poor. John’s Gospel probably came from Asia Minor, was finished by AD 120, and was likely the product of about 35 to 40 years of church life.²³

In providing the textual Jesus, this written stage gives us the “Jesus of the first Christian communities. By ‘canonizing’” the Gospels, the “Christian community consolidated for itself what it considered to be the non-negotiable, foundational proclamation of Jesus.”²⁴ The Catholic

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ “Scriptural Foundations,” presented by C.T. Brown, S.C.J, Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology, Hales Corners, WI, March 25, 2013.

²⁴ Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, XXVIII.

Fundamentals at this stage then, take shape around “*the normative proclaimed Jesus enshrined in the New Testament text.*”²⁵ *Incarnation* as such, the truth that God is constantly being revealed in creation, is perpetually understood around the ascended cosmic Christ who first “lived among us” as “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). Through the canonized, proclaimed Word and theologically developed sacraments we remember our sacred history and hand on our experience of God, that through preserving the experience of *discipleship/ministry* through liturgy and numerous works, persons may continue experiencing transformative grace in this present life.

This is all expressed through the maxim *Fides Quarens Intellectum*, the *faith seeking understanding* that undergirds the sacramental nature of Catholicism as a whole. Utilizing the human artifacts of Scripture that are also revelatory, as well as the best methods of investigation that human minds can devise, we begin with faith, and we use the world around us to guide us to sure knowledge of God.

²⁵ Ibid.

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