

THE FOUR GOSPELS

Jesus is the most important person in the New Testament. It is not surprising, then, that it commences with his biography. In fact, we have four separate accounts of his life. Two of them are from men who were Jesus' disciples from the beginning (Matthew and John). They belonged to a group of 12 specially chosen disciples called the Apostles, who were to lead the infant Church. One is from a gentile (non-Jew) who travelled with the Apostle Paul (Luke), and who also wrote a sequel to his gospel called the Acts of the Apostles. Mark, who wrote the shortest account, was the son of a believer called Mary who hosted gatherings of the early Church in her house. He was therefore in a strong position to find out the facts about Jesus from his friends. Incidentally, even Bible sceptics accept that all four gospels were written in the First Century. They were not dredged up from people's memories years afterwards. There is a fragment of John's gospel in the Ryland's Institute in Manchester, England that has been dated to the beginning of the second century, and this was a copy, not an original. So we can be sure the gospels were circulating for people to read about the life of Jesus within a few years of the actual events.

You might ask why we need so many biographies of the Lord Jesus. The answer is, when you need to reconstruct a full picture of what happened in the past (for example in a court case), you always call on a number of witnesses, so that by comparing their testimonies you can establish the whole truth. In a car

accident, one of the spectators may have noticed that the vehicle came round the corner on the wrong side of the road. Another may have arrived on the scene later, but remembers that the driver had a tattoo on his neck as he slumped over the wheel. A third may have noticed that one of the offside front wheels had a completely flat tyre. So you build up the sequence of events on that fateful morning. It is like this with the story of Jesus. Some writers remember things that others did not notice or thought unimportant. Matthew, for example, concentrates on situations where the actions of Jesus had been predicted in Old Testament prophecy. John, on the other hand, selects miracles that Jesus performed which particularly convinced him that he was the Messiah (anointed one) and the Son of God. Put them together, and you have a vivid impression of what Jesus of Nazareth was really like.

Finally, why are they called 'gospels'? The answer is that this word literally means 'good news'. The gospels tell us the good news that Jesus has come to deliver people from the power of the grave, and to bring about the Kingdom of God, when God's will will be done on the earth, just as it is obeyed now in heaven. And through the writings of the Apostles he calls us to be there.

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