

Stages in the Formation of the Gospels

1. Oral Traditions about Jesus

The four Gospels contain a collection of Jesus traditions that were originally preserved and transmitted by early Christians in their different communities (around 30-65 CE). These conclusions were drawn by scholars whose method came to be known as 'form criticism' (*Formgeschichte*).

How were small units transmitted during the period of oral tradition? How were they adapted before they reached their final written form? What was the intended function of these individual units within the early Christian community?

Individual narratives and sayings usually circulated as short self-contained units, known as pericopes (something 'cut out'). These oral traditions have been classified by form critics according to categories depending on their form:

- **Pronouncement Stories** Stories from the life of Jesus which culminate in a single pronouncement by Jesus (e.g., Luke 11:27-28). Note the controversy narrative: Jesus' opponents normally raise the issue, while he makes a pronouncement that justifies beliefs or practices (cf. Mark 2:15-17; 3:31-35; 12:13-17).
- **Miracle stories** Healings and exorcisms usually follow a threefold pattern: setting (description of person and illness), account of cure (method and performance), outcome of cure, often in the form of an acclamation. See, for example, the Capernaum demoniac (Mark 1:21-28), the daughter of the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-30).
- **Short sayings without a framework** Sayings in the form of a proverb (e.g., Matt. 6:24; Luke 10:7); others are judgement sayings (Mark 8:38; Matt. 7:1-2).
- **Parables** A parable involves a comparison (Greek: *parabolê*) or short story drawn from daily life, particularly about the kingdom of God (e.g., Matt. 13:33; Mark 4:3-9). All of Jesus' parables exhibit certain characteristics: a) the repetition of key words in order to emphasize the message; b) the highlighting of contrasts or opposites (e.g. rich/poor; sheep/goats; hidden/disclosed); c) three characters (three servants in the parable of the talents [Matt. 25:14-30]); d) focus on the last character in the series.

The context in which a tradition came to be used is known as its *Sitz im Leben* ('setting in life'); this context shaped the content of an individual unit: to instruct the community (Matt. 18:15-17), offer moral exhortation by urging believers to live according to the community's standards (e.g. Matt. 7:1: 'do not judge, lest you be judged'), defend the life of the community or for use in Christian worship (e.g. the Lord's prayer in Matt. 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4).

2. Written Compilations of Oral Traditions

Written collections were gathered together as collections of miracle stories, controversy stories, Jesus' sayings (e.g., Gospel of Thomas) etc. These (and other traditions) were combined into larger compositions. There were probably earlier Gospels (proto-Gospels) used as sources by some, if not all, of the four evangelists.

3. Formation of the Canonical Gospels

Core traditions may have already been adapted by various communities. Note, for example, the teaching about prayer in Matt. 7:7-11 (God will give 'good things' to those who ask him) and Luke 11:9-13 ('the Holy Spirit'). Such changes could however be the result of redaction carried out by the evangelists themselves (Luke's interest in the Holy Spirit). The evangelists decided which material to include and in what order it would appear; they also revised (redacted) traditions in order to tie narratives together.

Bibliography

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