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## **CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE FOUR GOSPELS**

### **UNIT 2: BACKGROUND**

As we begin this course it is important for the student to have a basic understanding of the geographical and cultural background to the New Testament and some knowledge of the origin of the four gospels. This information can be gained by reading selected chapters in the course textbook, *Inside the Four Gospels* (a free download from the *CornerstoneCourses.org* website), when prompted below – so be sure to take the time to complete the assigned textbook readings, especially if any of the terms used in this background unit are unfamiliar.

The more background we can bring to our study of the four gospels, the more we will be able to see their unique characteristics and the better we will be able to understand their message.

#### **THE GOSPEL “STAGE” AND “ACTORS”:**

When we read the Old Testament, we may find many strange-sounding and unfamiliar names, but generally speaking the narrative will be clear to us. When we begin to study the New Testament gospels, however, we find ourselves in a relatively detailed world of specific regions and groups of people whose identity we need to know if we are to understand the narrative fully. For example, when the Old Testament tells us that Abraham “pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east” (Genesis 12:8), the locations may be unfamiliar to us, but we can understand the story, nonetheless.

In the New Testament, however, when we are told that at one point Jesus went “down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis” (Mark 7:31), if we are not familiar with the nature of the region called the Decapolis, we will not understand the significance of Jesus going there or of the miracle he performed there. (This example will be discussed later in this course, in unit 10: “The Miracles.”)

So it is important in studying the gospels that we have a basic knowledge of their geographical setting – the “stage” on which the gospel stories are “acted out.” We will not attempt to cover that background information here, as it is contained in the course textbook, *Inside the Four Gospels*. If you are not familiar with the location and identity of the regions of Judea, Samaria, Galilee, and the Decapolis, be sure to read chapters 1-4 in the textbook before proceeding beyond this unit.

In the same way, if we are to gain a deeper knowledge of the gospels and fully understand their message, we need to be familiar with the various groups of people who are the “actors” on the stage of the New Testament. In the time of Jesus, the nation of Judea had a mixed social makeup. Although the Jewish people themselves constituted the majority of the population (see chapter 5 in *Inside the Four Gospels*), many other ethnic and cultural groups of people were represented there.

For example, because Judea had been taken over by Rome and was a part of the Roman Empire, there were numerous Romans in the area – not only military personnel, but also many others involved in the administration, taxation, and general running of the region (see chapter 6 in *Inside the Four Gospels*). There were also people of many other nationalities from surrounding and even distant lands who were present in Judea for the purposes of trade, travel, or to keep the Jewish holy days which drew people from around the Roman Empire. These peoples constituted only a minority of the population at a given time, but we find individuals from such groups continually mentioned in the gospels.

The broad ethnic and cultural diversity of first century Judea meant that a number of languages were spoken there. Hebrew was probably not very widely spoken in New Testament times, though it was the main language of the Bible and a kind of “official” language of the nation, as we see in its use in temple inscriptions, on coins, etc. More common in everyday speech was the related language Aramaic that had replaced Hebrew in many contexts since the Babylonian captivity, as it was the language commonly used in Babylon and surrounding areas. This would have been the language most often spoken by Jesus and the disciples. Despite the Roman presence in Judea, Latin was seldom used except by the Romans themselves; but Greek was spoken fairly widely in Judea and elsewhere in the Near East, as the whole region had been part of the empire of Alexander the Great. The evidence we have suggests that it is likely Jesus mainly used Aramaic, but that he also knew Hebrew and probably at least some Greek.

Finally, first century Judea was also strongly stratified in terms of religious and cultural groups, ranging from the minority ruling elite to large numbers of the poor and others who were often despised and rejected by much of society. It is vital that we are aware of the identity of these social groups if we are to understand the gospel stories fully (see chapters 7 and 8 in *Inside the Four Gospels*). With this background material in place, we can now turn to the origin of the four gospels.

## **THE GOSPEL AND THE GOSPELS:**

It is often said that the English word “gospel” means “good news,” and it does – but it can be helpful to understand the word a little more deeply. The word “gospel” in the New Testament is translated over seventy times from the Greek noun *euangelion* which is composed of the prefix *eu-* meaning “good” (as in the English word “eulogy”) and the noun *angelion* meaning “message.” *Euvangelion* is related to the nouns *angelos*, “messenger,” (from which we get our word “angel”), and *euangelos*, one who brought a message of victory or other news that caused joy (from which we get our word “evangelist”).

It is also worth remembering that the word *euangelion* was most frequently used to refer to important events regarding rulers and their kingdoms, and the four gospels do indeed tell the good news of the most important royal events in all of history: the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the promised King who was the Son of God.

If we go back to the beginnings of Christianity, the word gospel originally was used to refer to this message about Jesus, but in the second century it also came to be used for books in which the message was told. There were actually many gospels in the early centuries of the Christian era. When Luke wrote that “Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us” (Luke 1:1), it is unlikely that he was referring only to the other two Synoptic Gospels, but also to others as well.

Some of these early gospels, such as the Gospel of Thomas (approximately AD 100-250), were written in the centuries after Jesus lived and clearly contain ideas that developed after his teachings had been widely accepted. But the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as found in modern Bibles, were among

the earliest accounts of Jesus, were all written within the first century – within decades of Jesus’ life – are apparently based on eyewitness testimony, and clearly contain the most faithful accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus. As a result, only these four gospels were accepted by most of the early church as being “canonical” or accepted parts of the Christian Scriptures (see Note 1).

This does not mean that the four gospels were written down in the form that we have them now within a few years of the events they describe. It is likely that many of the things that Jesus said and did were written down by his followers or passed along verbally for some time before they were brought together into organized compositions. Luke himself speaks of such primary accounts that “were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses” (Luke 1:2) and indicates that in writing his own gospel he utilized some of this material: “since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account” (Luke 1:3). We will look at this situation in more depth below, but for now we can summarize this section by saying that whatever the precursors of our gospels may have been, it did not take the Christian Church long to decide that the four compositions with which we are familiar were the most trustworthy and reliable accounts of Jesus’ life and the only ones that were universally agreed to have a place in the inspired Scriptures.

### **THE SO-CALLED SYNOPTIC “PROBLEM”:**

If we compare the four gospels, we find that the first three have many similarities in both content and expression – both what they say and how they say it. As a result, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are referred to as the “Synoptic Gospels” (from the Greek word *synoptikós* meaning “seeing together” or “having the same view”). In fact, the Synoptic Gospels are so similar in many of their details that it seems likely that their writers were aware of each other’s works or a common source that they all shared. On the other hand, there are some very important differences among the Synoptics and in those cases where they seem to disagree, we naturally might want to know why. The question of how to explain the similarities and differences among the Synoptic Gospels is sometimes called the “Synoptic Problem” because determining how these gospels were put together is not simple.

For example, it is not entirely certain which of the four gospels was composed first. While it is clear that the Gospel of John was the last of the four accounts to be written, Matthew, Mark, and Luke may not have been composed in that order. The early church fathers regarded Matthew as the first gospel written – and so it appears first in the New Testament – but beginning in the late eighteenth century scholars began to find indications that the Gospel of Mark might actually have been written first.

The main indication for the “priority” of Mark’s account is that Matthew frequently agrees with Mark but not Luke in the order of recorded passages, and Luke frequently agrees with Mark but not Matthew. Further, where Matthew and Luke do agree they both usually agree with Mark. This all suggests that the Gospel of Mark was known to Matthew and Luke and that they both followed it to some extent – which, of course, would make Mark the earliest gospel.

But even if we accept Markan priority, as most modern scholars do, there are other questions we might have regarding the Synoptic Gospels. For example, how do we explain the approximately two hundred verses that are shared between Matthew and Luke but not found at all in Mark? The most widely accepted answer to that question is called the two-source hypothesis: that Matthew and Luke each drew not only from Mark, but also from another document, which scholars have termed the “Q source,” though we should remember that this is entirely hypothetical – no portion of such a Q document has ever been discovered and none of the early church fathers ever mentioned such a source in their writings.

Whatever the answer may be to these and other questions, the majority of New Testament scholars regard Mark as the earliest of the gospels, but Markan priority is not universally acknowledged, and some scholars still uphold the possibility that Matthew was written first. We can summarize the situation by saying that while most early Christian scholars believed Matthew was the first of the four gospels to be written, most modern scholars believe Mark was in fact first, though the argument is not settled. Fortunately, for most purposes it does not matter which gospel was composed first, though as we will occasionally see in this course, the matter can sometimes affect our understanding of certain issues, so we need to be aware of the possibilities.

## **PERSPECTIVES AND THEMES OF THE GOSPELS:**

Although the four gospels all tell the same story – that of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ – they each tell the story differently. This is partly because they were written to different audiences with different concerns, but also because the four accounts, similar as they may be, all have different things they aim to teach and stress.

First, each gospel has its own unique viewpoint or *perspective* on the life of Jesus. The background and outlook of the writer and his original audience necessarily affected the way the material was presented in each account. As a result, each gospel gives us a unique “portrait” of Jesus. Just as different artists might paint portraits of the same individual from different angles, so the writers of the four gospels each chose a different viewpoint or “angle” to depict – a different aspect of the identity of Jesus. Matthew depicts Jesus from a distinctly Jewish perspective, as the Messianic King prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures. Mark looks at him from more of a Roman perspective, often showing him as a Servant of the common good. Luke takes a Greek perspective, depicting Jesus in his humanness as the Son of Man. Finally, John portrays Jesus differently again, with a universal perspective and primarily portraying Jesus as the Son of God. This does not mean that there is no overlapping of some of these perspectives in the different gospels, but that some are noticeably stressed by specific writers. We can learn a great deal about the nature of Jesus and the work he accomplished when we keep these different viewpoints in mind, so if you are not familiar with the specific perspective taken by each gospel, be sure to read chapters 10, 13, 16, and 19 in the textbook *Inside the Four Gospels*, where they are explained in detail.

Finally, it is important to realize that all of the gospels have distinct *themes* that tie into the lessons they teach. Some of these themes may be relatively minor ones only stressed a few times in each account. But each gospel has at least two major – often related – themes that express the most important aspects of that gospel’s message. Matthew might be called the “Gospel of Justice and Mercy” as these themes are emphasized throughout his account. Similarly, Mark has been called the “Gospel of Service and Humility;” Luke, the “Gospel of Prayer and Forgiveness;” and John, the “Gospel of Belief and Love.”

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*Each Gospel has its own perspective, and each contains specific themes that are vital to keep in mind if we are to understand its unique message.*

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If we do not recognize these themes, we can miss much of the unique message of each gospel – while keeping them in mind as we read can give us a far greater appreciation for what the four authors intended to highlight in their accounts. If you are not familiar with each of these themes and how the gospel writers incorporate them into their portraits of Jesus, be sure to read chapters 11, 14, 17, and 20 in the textbook *Inside the Four Gospels*, as these chapters explain the major themes in more detail.

When you feel comfortable with your knowledge of the background of the gospels as summarized in this unit, be sure to complete the review and reflection exercises given below, and you will be ready to begin your study of the fascinating message of the gospels themselves.

\* Note 1: This is not to say that some of the later gospels do not contain any accurate traditions, only that it is often difficult to tell what is true and what later legends and ideas have also been incorporated into them. As a result, these books are recognized as being “apocryphal” and are not viewed with the same esteem as the four canonical gospels. Neither Roman Catholics nor Eastern Orthodox Christians nor Protestants accept any of the apocryphal gospels as being authoritative or inspired.

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## **REVIEW AND REFLECTION:** (complete in your notebook)

### **Basics:**

Write a short paragraph summarizing the so-called “Synoptic problem” and why it may not really be a problem.

### **Beneath the Surface:**

Think about how the individual perspectives and viewpoints of the four gospels – for example, the primarily Jewish perspective seen in the Gospel of Matthew – explain the major spiritual themes found in each gospel writer’s account.

### **Everyday Applications:**

Make it a goal to more clearly see the major spiritual themes of each gospel account by noting or highlighting examples of those themes as you read the gospels in your personal study.

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