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The Fourth Gospel

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The Nature and Purpose of the Gospels

Before studying the Gospels, it is helpful to think about their nature and purpose. The nature of the Gospels are that they are works of literature, but there are many kinds of literary works, so we want to examine how the Gospels compare with other kinds of literature. The Gospels were also written for a purpose, and unless that purpose is understood, they cannot be interpreted properly.

What kind of literature are the Gospels? At first glance, they seem to be of a biographical or historical nature. They tell the story of Jesus' life, and give insight into who he was, what he did, and what he said. In that sense one can say that the Gospels are biographical. The Gospels are like a history in that they are rooted in historical events.¹ Whatever is said later about the process of composition of the Gospels, we must remember that the Church affirms "without hesitation" their historicity, that they pass on what Jesus "actually did and taught" for our salvation.²

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xv.

² *Dei Verbum, The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (The Second Vatican Council, November 1965), ch. 19.

However, there are important differences between the Gospels and other works of history and biography. First of all, some of the differences can be seen in the long and complicated process of the composition of the Gospels, which may be broken down into the following three stages. In stage one, the actual events of Jesus' life are witnessed by his followers, and it is from these witnesses that the oral tradition that led to the Gospels began. Even at this first stage, there is some filtering going on that is different from the sources of a typical biography. These witnesses are focused on "Jesus' proclamation of God, not the many trivia of ordinary existence."³

The second stage of composition occurs after the resurrection and ascension of Christ when the Apostles and other disciples go out and preach about Jesus. Their preaching results in the conversion of some of the hearers, and the formation of more disciples, some of whom continue to preach about Jesus. Development of the Gospel message continues through reflection of the events of Jesus' life in light of the resurrection. The message is also shaped through adaptation to the background of those being evangelized and to the specific needs of the Christian communities that are formed.⁴

In the final stage, when the actual Gospel document is written, the material received in stage two is selected and arranged by the writer to meet the needs of the community that is being addressed by the the Gospel. By this time, some of the specifics

³ Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 65.

⁴ Brown, *Gospel of John*, 66.

of chronology and certain details may no longer be known with precision. In addition, writers of antiquity did not have the priorities when reporting historical events that we have today, preferring to communicate particular truths rather than details of chronology. Therefore, events that relate to each other may be placed in proximity in the chronology of the Gospel, even if that is not how they occurred historically. "Thus the Gospels have been arranged in logical order, not necessarily chronological order,"⁵ which explains why the four Gospels do not always agree chronologically.

Another way that the Gospels differ from other works of history and biography is that like the rest of Sacred Scripture, they have a dual authorship. Although they were written by human authors through a long and complex process, "a voice greater than man's echoes in Scripture's human words."⁶ The Church sees that the hand of God is at work in the composition of the Gospel texts in that he caused to be written what he intended "firmly, faithfully, and without error."⁷ The Gospels are ultimately a message from God, but since God's nature is infinitely higher than our own, it is impossible for us to comprehend truth at God's level. Therefore God comes down to our level, speaking to us through human agents in a manner that we can understand.

⁵ Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 110.

⁶ Benedict, xviii.

⁷ *Dei Verbum*, ch. 11.

Finally, the Gospels are different from other forms of literature in that they do not stand alone, but are part of the larger Christian canon of Scripture. Not only do the four Gospels complement each other to portray a fuller picture of Jesus Christ than any single Gospel alone, but they were written in the context of the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament, and are part of the wider witness of Jesus Christ found in the rest of the New Testament. Jesus Christ is the key to understanding all of Sacred Scripture, and the Gospels can only be correctly understood in the context of the whole of Scripture.⁸

All of these factors show that the Gospels are a unique form of literature because they focus on the most unique individual in the history of the world, Jesus Christ.

Although we have already alluded to the purpose of the Gospels, there is more to be said. The Gospel writers are not interested in history for its own sake, but their purpose is “to record the events and the teachings of Jesus insofar as they have meaning for the Church to which the evangelist addresses his Gospel.”⁹ Each of the Gospels place a major emphasis on the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, and it is this event that gives ultimate meaning to the rest of Jesus’ life.¹⁰ In the crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus Christ accomplishes redemption for the human race. This is the purpose of Jesus’ life, and it is the purpose of the Gospels. They are “the principle witness to the life and

⁸ Benedict, xix.

⁹ Roch Kereszty, *Jesus Christ, Fundamentals of Christology* (New York: St. Paul’s, 2002), 21.

¹⁰ Joseph Fitzmeyer, “Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels” in *A Christological Catechism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 134.

teaching of the incarnate Word, our Savior,"¹¹ and they are written in order to lead their readers to faith in Jesus Christ so that they may obtain the salvation he provides.

Specifically, they are designed to lead unbelievers to initial conversion and faith in Jesus, but they are also intended to deepen the conversion and faith of those who have already begun to believe in Christ. Each Gospel has a different emphasis on these two audiences. The Gospel of John, for example, emphasizes the strengthening of the faith of those who already believe in Jesus.¹²

The goal of leading people to faith in Christ is primary in the Gospels, and is applicable to every generation of reader. Each Gospel also has a secondary purpose to address specific needs of the community to whom it was written. Although these particular needs may not exist for today's reader of the Gospels, analysis of this secondary purpose can help in understanding the Gospels.¹³

In summary, although the Gospels have a surface resemblance to works of history and biography, they are actually a unique form of literature. They were created through a complex human process of development under God's guidance so that they bear all of the marks of human composition, but they are also the infallible Word of God. Finally, modern historical precision and chronology was not the goal of the Evangelists; their primary purpose was to lead people to faith in Christ.

¹¹ *Dei Verbum*, ch. 18.

¹² Brown, *Gospel of John*, 183.

¹³ *Dei Verbum*, ch. 19.

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