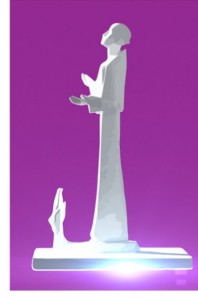


EXPLORING THE BIBLE

a St Francis College short course



Theme 4: Reading the New Testament

4f: Where did the Gospel writers get their material?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Greg paints a picture of early Christian communities who are passionate about the stories of Jesus and the disciples. What would you ask those people if you had the chance?
2. Collect a few questions of your own and keep them beside you as you read the Gospels.
3. See what comes up, which character addresses your questions and which situations, or stories come alive in new ways.
4. What impresses you about the storytelling prowess of the Gospel authors? Does anything frustrate you?

TRANSCRIPT

The Very Rev'd Dr Greg Jenks

Dean, Grafton Cathedral

First of all, from memory. There were people who remembered what Jesus is supposed to have said and done and what happened to him. There was a corporate memory amongst the early Christians. Also, some of the general laws of oral tradition are at play. If you go through some of the sayings of Jesus they are collected together because of common words – for example there are a whole lot of sayings about salt.

Another useful trick is to develop things into sets – remember the five rules about this, the 10 sayings or whatever it happens to be.

However at some point these traditions begin to coalesce. Around the early part of the 2nd century people like Ignatius of Antioch (Southern Turkey) is highly suspicious of documents like Gospels because he says documents can be falsified. The only thing he's interested in is the oral tradition and the sayings of the Lord. So even as late as 100 (years CE) the idea that going to a gospel to hear about Jesus, was not thoroughly kosher. There's still the oral tradition but it's beginning to turn into text. As far as we can tell the earliest expression of that is Mark. (In terms of a document that exists in its own right)

But it's also quite likely that parallel to Mark, and even a little bit earlier, there's a collection of Jesus' sayings which are not found in Mark – Mark is more the "action man" – Jesus doing. And we know from Matthew and Luke that there was a whole body of other material about Jesus which was mostly parables and teaching moments, pronouncements, stories and all the rest. That gathering of teaching material is sometimes identified with what we call "Q", from the German word "Quelle" meaning "source".

One of the interesting questions is, "What happens to "Q"? Is Q in effect, the first iteration of what became the Gospel of Luke? While the Gospel of Luke might not have been finished until much later,

maybe it actually had layers, some of which have their roots way, way back maybe even in the 40's and 50's (CE). This tradition that we call Q spiralled its way through history for a hundred years or so – along the way it gets used by Matthew when he's doing a revised enlarged edition of Mark. Effectively Matthew says, "Mark is good, but Mark plus this stuff is even better". So Matthew is really integrating the collected wisdom of Jesus into the story and so Mark then becomes Matthew.

Meanwhile that material continues to circulate and is probably what Marcion circulates as "the Gospel". It's simply the Q gospel material beginning to develop and not yet turning into the Gospel of Luke. Then, in response to Marcion, the Gospel of Luke comes out in a way which will emphasise the theological themes that are now important for orthodoxy. So Luke is dripping with echoes of the Old Testament. He wants to make the point that we're not going to throw the Old Testament out. Luke Chapter one and two could easily come out of First Samuel or Second Samuel, or the book of Judges; they are very much breathing the kind of culture and spirituality of those books and so on.

So Q is perhaps a collection of oral traditions. John doesn't seem to have made much use of it - the Gospel of John had other ways of developing its material but Mark has been pulling together stories about what Jesus did. Some other communities have been remembering what Jesus said. Matthew has pulled that plus Mark together. Luke represents perhaps the final development of the Q tradition into a stand-alone gospel. And then Luke the Gospel goes on to the Book of Acts, which makes it a very different Gospel: part one of a two part story!

