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## CHAPTER 2

# Words of People

## Sacred Scripture

**S**acred Scripture, the word of God written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, has the preeminent position in the life of the Catholic Church and especially in the ministry of evangelization and catechesis. . . . Through all the ages of the Church, the study of Sacred Scripture has been the cornerstone of catechesis. . . . Sacred Scripture . . . strengthens faith, nourishes the soul, and nurtures the spiritual life.

—*National Directory for Catechesis*, p. 70

## Bearers of the Torah

During World War II, the Germans established a work camp in the town of Yanov in Poland. Yanov later became a concentration camp; but during the period that it was a work camp, prisoners were occasionally allowed to leave the camp, provided a family member was left behind to insure the prisoners' return.

While on pass, a group of devout Jews decided to smuggle a Torah into camp. They dismantled the Torah piece by piece, hiding parts of it in their bodies and clothing and returned to camp. The exact whereabouts of the various hiding places were handed down by word of mouth. God's Word lived among the persecuted but persevering community, its beloved Torah whole in spirit if physically divided into pieces.

When the camp was finally liberated, the precious fragments of the Torah were pieced back together. Over the years the holy scroll remained with the oldest living survivor of Yanov. The last survivor arranged for it to be taken to America, where it travels from congregation to congregation as an important symbol of hope and courage.

*From Stacey Roberts, Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans (quoted in Connections, 2/4/01, 5c).*

## From Word to Words

"Hearing the word of God with reverence and proclaiming it confidently, this most sacred Synod takes its direction from the words of Saint John, who says: 'We proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.' (1 John 1:2–3)."

That sentence begins Vatican II's *Constitution on Divine Revelation*. "Word of God" (*Dei Verbum* in Latin) is the opening phrase. Hearing that word and proclaiming that word, the Council then quoted the words of a man, Saint John, as its

source of "direction." The words of Saint John are from the Bible, the word of God—a word spoken and heard before it was recorded in words written and read.

### The Vatican Council's Document on the Bible

This document, *Dei Verbum*, is "in fact, if not in name, the Second Vatican Council's pronouncement on the Bible. Four of its six chapters (3 to 6) expressly deal with sacred Scripture. Chapters 1 and 2 set the Bible in the context of the whole Christian doctrine of salvation, and in this light explain its origin and its function."

### The Origin of Scripture in Revelation

"The document's main subject is revelation. This is a manifestation

by God—primarily, of Himself; secondarily, of His will and intentions—granted to particular men at particular times . . . Revelation by its nature is public. . . . Therefore it has to be made known to others by the testimony of its recipient. Passed on orally, it becomes tradition; recorded in writing, it becomes Scripture.”

### The Writing in the Human Heart

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* uses the image and language of writing to describe the core condition of the human person: “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for . . .” (CCC, 27).

### The Experience of God

This is all context for understanding Scripture as “the words of humans.” Through the design and initiative of God (revelation), a religious awareness emerged in people of the presence and loving kindness and justice of God. A community gradually recognized the revelation of God and began an accurate religious interpretation of life experience as salvation history.

### The Conception and Birth of Scripture

The Bible did not appear all at once, in full maturity, as we know

it today. It began with an experience of God who intervened in the world and became involved in its history.

The Jewish people experienced “saving events and significant realities” (CCC, 1093). They came to understand, under the influence of grace, that this was an experience of God.

This is the Church’s experience too, since she was “prepared in marvelous fashion in the history of the people of Israel and in the Old covenant”<sup>1</sup> (CCC, 1093).

## An Oral Tradition

“God graciously arranged that what he had once revealed for the salvation of all peoples should last for ever in its entirety and be transmitted to all generations.” So begins Chapter 2 of the *Constitution on Divine Revelation*, “The Transmission of Divine Revelation.”

### Remembering the Experience

Moses often exhorted Israel to remember and to hand on their experience: “Take care and be earnestly on your guard not to forget the things which your own eyes have seen, nor let them slip from our memory as long as you live, but teach them to your children and to your children’s children”

(Deuteronomy 4:9; see also Deuteronomy 6:20–25, 11:18–21). In a reminiscence, Moses then reviews the revelation at Horeb that the Israelites should recall and relate to their children (Deuteronomy 4:10–14).

1. In remembering, people who were not present participate.
2. In remembering, the unfaithful are recalled to fidelity.
3. In remembering, the full understanding of the experience is realized.

### Endowing the Next Generation

“But it is not with you alone that I am making this covenant, under this sanction of a curse; it is just as much with those who are not here among us today as it is with those of us who are now there present before the Lord, our God” (Deuteronomy 29:13–14).

1. Among the people of the exodus and later the nation of Israel and still later the disciples of Christ, experiences of God’s intervention were shared and remembered and passed on to the next generation by those who were there.
2. The religious interpretation of life by the people of Moses’ day became a living tradition. Stories were repeated, sayings became familiar, commemorations became rituals, insights of one were claimed by others, proverbs and poetry were inspired, narratives were formed and reformed by the telling.

Descendants, endowed with their forebearers’ recollections, came to share the historical experience.

### Salvation History

Within human history, Abraham and his descendants, under the influence of the grace of God, discerned salvation history (which can be described as the story of God’s personal and saving engagement with humanity and the rest of God’s creation, bringing it finally to wholeness and restored relationship to God).

#### Themes of salvation history

Under the influence of divine inspiration, Jews, and later Christians, came to interpret their experience of “saving events and significant realities” in terms of certain themes and patterns in their life:

- promise and covenant
- Exodus and Passover
- Kingdom and Temple
- exile and return

#### Stages of salvation history

- The lives of the patriarchs
- The saving events of the Exodus
- The history of Israel, the people of God
- The life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God

## The Texture of Scripture

The texture of fabric is something a person can feel through its threads and the weave. So, too, is the texture of a book felt, especially a book of Scripture. The word "texture" comes from the Latin past participle *textus*, "something woven or constructed," from the verb *texere*, to weave or construct.

The word "text" came to be used, naturally, for passages of Scripture as well as other religious works in which spoken words were used to weave the stories that were, in turn, woven into the large fabric of Scripture. The reader can still feel the unique thread and weave of its various parts.

## The Old Testament Oral Tradition

Psalms 78 illustrates the place of the oral tradition in the Jewish generations of faith: "Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; / incline your ears to the words of my mouth. / I will open my mouth in a parable; / I will utter dark sayings from of old, / things that we have heard and known, / that our ancestors have told us. / We will not hide them from their children; / we will tell to the coming generation / the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, / and the wonders that he has done." (*Psalms 78:1-4*). The psalm continues through its 72 verses to recount God's gracious acts and people's infidelity.

## The New Testament Oral Tradition

In a similar way, centuries later, disciples of Christ remembered and

handed on their experience of "the praiseworthy and mighty deeds of the Lord," now including the experience of Christ. Their remembering had the same result it always had in the Jewish tradition.

"Remembering" is the way the New Testament speaks of understanding, after the Resurrection, the true significance of words and events in the life of Christ. The Holy Spirit does not bring new teaching but a true interpretation of what Jesus had taught. Following are three examples.

### After the cleansing of the temple

Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (*John 2:19*). John concludes the episode by saying, "After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken" (*John 2:22*).

### During Jesus' entry into Jerusalem

"Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: 'Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. / Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!'" (*John 12:14-15*). John also says, "His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him." (*John 12:16*).

### During Jesus' last discourse

Jesus said, "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit,

whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." (*John 14:25-26*).

### The Place of Preaching in the Formation of Scripture

"The teachings and the life of Jesus were not simply recounted for the mere purpose of being kept in remembrance, but were 'preached' in such a way as to furnish the Church with the foundation on which to build up faith and morals" (Pontifical Biblical Commission, "Historical Truth of the Gospels" #2, 1964).

#### Preaching

In the beginning, preaching had a central place in Christianity. In continuity with Jesus' proclamation, the preaching of Peter and Paul and the others who had been sent was foundational and formative and authoritative for the first Christians. The Christian Church was a Church of the Word for many years before there was a "word of God" (Bible) as we know it.

#### Faith sharing

In the first years of the Church (AD 30-50), there is no clear evidence of important Christian writing. The Christian faith was communicated, received, and nurtured by word of mouth (see *Romans 10:14-15*). "Faith comes from what is heard," Saint Paul said in *Romans 10:17*.

#### Writings

For approximately the first 100 years, the Sacred Scripture of the

early Christians as a whole was that of their Jewish heritage. The term "Old Testament" was not used then, since there was not a clearly established "New Testament" from which to distinguish it. (Jews today, not recognizing Christian Scripture as their inspired text, do not speak of it as a New Testament or of their own Scripture as old.)

### Historical Truth in the Oral Tradition

The Pontifical Biblical Commission, in a 1964 document "Historical Truth of the Gospels," directs the interpreter of Scripture to the three stages of tradition by which the Good News has come down to us (the life and teaching of Jesus, the oral tradition, and the written Gospels) and makes two fundamental points.

1. The Apostles handed on things that were actually said and done by Jesus Christ.
2. The Apostles understood things in a fuller light than when they had first received them.

### Causes of the Apostles' Fuller Understanding

1. They were "schooled by the glorious things accomplished in Christ."
2. They were illumined by the Spirit of Truth.

### Interpretation in the Oral Tradition

1. After his Resurrection, Jesus had "interpreted to them" (*Luke*

24:27) not only words of Scripture (the Old Testament), but also words that he himself had spoken.

2. Likewise, the Apostles, after Pentecost, interpreted the words and deeds of Christ according to their own purposes and the needs of those who heard them.

### Resources of the Oral Tradition

1. There was a variety of material available in various literary forms in the Apostolic Church. As the Apostles carried on their ministry of the word (see *Acts* 6:4), they needed to make full use of this common fund of formulations that included liturgical and catechetical traditions, "obligated" as they were, as Saint Paul said, "to Greeks and barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish" (*Romans* 1:14).
2. The Catholic Church recognizes the importance of understanding and "criticizing" these resources in the oral tradition that ended up in Scripture: "These varied ways of speaking which the heralds of Christ made use of in proclaiming Him must be distinguished one from the other and carefully appraised: catecheses, narratives, testimonies, hymns, doxologies, prayers and any other such literary forms as were customarily employed in Sacred Scripture and by people of that time" (Pontifical Biblical Commission, "Historical Truth of the Gospels," #2, 1964). The nature and methods of "biblical

criticism" are covered in Chapter 4 of this book.

## The Writing of Tradition

In the course of time, some members of the community began to give written form to some of the wide variety of material that had become an oral tradition, so the religious interpretation of one generation could be surely and accurately transmitted for the generations to come. This "Sacred Scripture" became a foundational and formative record of God the Father's self-revelation in the history of Israel and in the life, death, and Resurrection of his Son.

As explained in the pages ahead, writing and editing are not always distinguishable and often merge.

### Scripture's Infancy

The descendants of Abraham were nomads. Their library was within them. There are only fragments of a written literature that can be traced to the period of the Exodus, notably:

- The Song of Miriam in Exodus 15 may date from the Exodus from Egypt around 1300 BC.
- The Song of Deborah in Judges 5 may have been composed shortly before 1100 BC. (Both of these are hymns praising God for victory in battle.)

This process and purpose of writing is sometimes mentioned in the

Scriptures themselves. Before the great Song of Moses, for example, God commanded him, "Now therefore write this song, and teach it to the Israelites; put it in their mouths, in order that this song may be a witness for me against the Israelites. For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I promised on oath to their ancestors, and they have eaten their fill and grown fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them, despising me and breaking my covenant. And when many terrible troubles come upon them, this song will confront them as a witness, because it will not be lost from the mouths of their descendants. For I know what they are inclined to do even now, before I have brought them into the land that I promised them on oath" (*Deuteronomy* 31:19–22). The poetic sermon of The Song of Moses follows (see *Deuteronomy* 32:1–43). Following the song is his blessing on the tribes and death.

## Authorship

The ancients did not understand authorship the way modern people do. We cannot speak of the authors of scriptural books in the same way we speak of authors of books today.

## In Judeo-Christian History

1. Few of the books in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, have come to us from the hand of an individual author. Today,

most books do. Today, a book "belongs" to its author, but scriptural books are the product and property of the community. We still use terms like "Moses' Pentateuch," "David's Psalms," "Solomon's Song of Songs," and "Isaiah's prophecies," but not in the same literal way we speak of literature today.

2. The identity of a book's author and "copyright protections" were not the concerns then that they are today. Scripture arose from the midst of the community of faith to serve the community of faith. Before an individual became responsible for authoring or editing some part of the word of God, the Word was in the life of God's people.
3. Normally, scriptural books came together and were edited and re-edited over the course of generations (in the case of the Old Testament). It was a long and uneven development that brought various written material together to form what is known today as the Old Testament.

## In Biblical Scholarship

God is the author and the authority behind the Scriptures. The community authorized the Scriptures. Individuals put oral traditions into written form. Other individuals edited written traditions.

## The Authority of Moses

The first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, are often called "the books of Moses." In the Bible itself, there are numerous references to "the law of Moses." Jesus used this term.

It appears that, through the course of the history of biblical interpretation, this phrase was sometimes understood in a literal way: that Moses himself wrote those books. However, among the ancients, this phrase was used more broadly than it was used later in history. For them, the Pentateuch was deeply associated with Moses. It has the authority of Moses behind it. Today there is a more careful distinction between someone actually authoring a book and the traditions standing behind a book. The interest for the ancients was the authority of Moses, not authorship in today's terms. The interpretation of authorship in a literal way, anachronistically, by generations far removed, would be foreign to them.

It should pose no problem to the reader of Scripture to learn that many scholars today believe the Pentateuch did not exist in its present condition until approximately 450 B.C.—nearly 800 years after Moses' death. It should not be confusing to learn that Moses' own death is recorded in "the books of Moses" (*Deuteronomy* 34:5-12) or that the "Law of Moses" includes laws regarding conditions that did not exist at the time Moses led the people through the desert.

So we still call the Pentateuch "the books of Moses." Some have little interest in the scholarly work of dating the process through which the Pentateuch came into the form as we know it today. Some are very interested and are greatly served by scholars as their appreciation for the Bible grows and their understanding of God's ways deepens. How could this not serve faith?

### Autograph

An autograph is not just a signature; it also refers to something written by one's own hand. It is an anachronism to apply the term to the Scriptures as if its meaning and significance were the same then as it is now.

### Anonymous

"Unknown name" (*an-* not, without; *-onym*, name). The word is also used to describe something that lacks individuality.

### Pseudonymous (sue-don-eh-mehss)

Literally, a pseudonym is a false or fictitious name. In biblical studies it is used of a work that was written in the name of a famous person like

Moses to honor his memory and continue his teaching for a new generation. In the New Testament, for example, 1 Timothy (the First Letter of Paul to Timothy) was written under the pseudonym of Paul. The actual author is unknown, but we can say that he was writing to honor Paul's memory and to relate Paul's teaching to a later generation of Christians.

### Eponymous (eh-pon-eh-mehss)

An eponymous work is named after someone or something. Its root is "name" (as in anonymous and pseudonymous) plus a prefix meaning "upon," "above," or "in addition." An eponym is a person,

writing. When the Israelites rose

who could be real or imaginary, from whom something takes its name. Among Scripture scholars, the word pseudonym is commonly used instead, with similar connotations.

## Stages in the Written History of the Old Testament

Over time, the need arose for writing and documentation. Written records were generated by the development of various cultures at the time of the establishment of David's capital in Jerusalem (1000 BC). On the secular side, there was the need to document the economic, legal, and military affairs of the nation. At the same time, and drawing on a growing archive of resources, inspired writing blossomed that ultimately became Sacred Scripture.

1. There was a great emergence of religious poetry and song, if not by the hand of David, certainly with his inspiration.
2. A court history also came from this period, composed by an unknown, gifted composer using the available documents of the kingdom along with his own eyewitness accounts. There are vestiges preserved in 2 Samuel 9—20 and 1 Kings 1—2, telling the story of the passing of the crown from David to Solomon.
3. In this same period, possibly during the reign of Solomon (970–931), an account in writing of Israel's origin and growth as

a people emerged. "The Yahwist" is the name given to this tradition. It's not an author's name, it's God's name, "Yahweh," because the account refers to God by this holy name that was revealed to Moses at the burning bush (see *Exodus* 3:14–15). The Yahwist calls God Yahweh even in its version of the creation story. There isn't a particular book authored by the Yahwist.

It is a whole tradition, making up much of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), that took centuries to develop. The final form of the Pentateuch emerged only after the exile (587–537) in the fifth century before Christ.

## Four Threads, One Fabric

Most scholars agree that there are probably four traditions of written material that became strands woven into the narrative we have today:

- Yahwist, already mentioned
- Elohist (from Elohim, the Hebrew name for God before the revelation to Moses)
- Deuteronomist (from the word "deuteronomy," which also became the name of the last book of the Pentateuch with its emphasis on the reform of the nation's religious law and justice)
- Priestly (from a priestly emphasis on religious ritual, covenants, and genealogy)

4. Somewhat later than the Yahwist, the Elohist was also generating a written tradition, but in very different circumstances. It's the ninth century and the Kingdom is now divided. The Elohist tradition comes from the Northern Kingdom and has as a starting point God's covenant with Abraham. In the stories of the patriarchs and Moses, some of the Elohist writing parallels the Yahwist writings. The two were combined by a later editor at about the same time that two other traditions were forming: Deuteronomist and Priestly.

5. At this same time (about the ninth century BC), there were prophets emerging, like musicians who would one day find themselves in one orchestra playing one symphony.

- Elijah and his successor Elisha were rising up, also in the Northern Kingdom ("Israel"), and a prophetic tradition was born.

- In the eighth century, the first so-called "writing prophets" appeared: Amos and Hosea. More properly, they were the first prophets whose oracles were put into written form—finally the books we know today, not necessarily by the prophets themselves.

- More prophets followed, in both Israel and Judah (the Southern Kingdom).

6. Assyria's overthrow of Israel's royal city of Samaria in 721 BC

became the context (but not the locale) of the work of priestly descendants of Levi. Escaping to Judah, they supported the movement to purify the Southern Kingdom by reforming its worship and centralizing it in the temple of Jerusalem. The teachings of these priest-refugees to Judah, supporting the reforms of King Hezekiah (716–687 BC), came to have an extensive influence in the formation of Scripture. They became the core of the Deuteronomic tradition from which came the Book of Deuteronomy and the "Deuteronomic historians" who edited Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings.

7. A new era of religious fervor—and literary activity—came with another king: Josiah (640–609 BC). After Hezekiah's corrupt successors, the stage was set for renewal. It was triggered by the discovery of "the Book of the Law" in the Temple, led by Josiah, and fueled by more prophets (like Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and the great Jeremiah). That Book of the Law was probably what is known as "the Deuteronomic Code" (see *Deuteronomy* 12–26) written during the time of King Hezekiah and "lost" by his successors.

8. Another tragedy, the defeat of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon (and King Nebuchadnezzar), brought darkness in the national experience but light in terms of sacred writing. When the Israelites rose

from the ashes of exile (587–537 BC), they brought with them the core of the Old Testament:

- There were psalms written in exile.
- There were lamentations in the ruins of Jerusalem.
- There were old traditions from the desert wandering collected in exile and accounts recorded of the order of worship when the Jerusalem temple was the center of worship.

It was in the early 500s BC that a school of writers compiled the narratives of “Deuteronomic history.”

- This collection includes the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings.
- Christians refer to this collection as “history books.” They are mainly about the history of the Chosen People from the settlement of the Promised Land and include the period of the judges, the establishment of the monarchy, the divided kingdom after the reign of King Solomon, the story of the divided kingdom, the exile into Babylon, and finally the return to Judah and Jerusalem (including the temple rebuilding and the covenant renewal).
- Jews refer to this collection under the broad heading “prophets” (“former prophets,” distinguishing it from the “latter prophets” which

include most of the figures associated with prophecy—the “literary” prophets whose names are on books of Scripture). “Oral” prophets like Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha play major roles in these books.

- Scholars refer to this collection as “Deuteronomic history” because its compilers worked from the basis and principles of the Book of Deuteronomy.
9. After the return from exile the rebuilding of the temple and national life is recorded in the writings of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah and in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.
  10. An anonymous author, called “the Chronicler” in two books named after him, describes Israel’s history in terms of the unfolding of God’s will.
  11. In the fifth century, authors known collectively as “the priestly tradition” edited the Pentateuch into the form of it that we have today, including as a conclusion the book of Deuteronomy, which had become an introduction to the history of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. The writing of prophetic literature declined gradually through the fifth and fourth centuries before Christ.
  12. The largest collection of inspired writing after the exile belongs to a broad category called “Wisdom Literature.” It is associated with Solomon, the “wisest of men.”

- The books of Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth), Song of Songs, and Wisdom, although written after the exile (four centuries after Solomon) were attributed to him (in much the same way that the Pentateuch was credited to Moses and the psalms to David).

- Other books of Wisdom Literature, also associated with Solomon, include Proverbs, Sirach, Song of Songs, Job, and Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth).

13. When Alexander the Great and the Greeks conquered Syria and Palestine in 333 BC, as both Assyria and Babylon had centuries before, a whole new era began with its own influences and threats. There was new writing inspired to counter the Greek ("Hellenizing") influence. In particular, it was the severe persecution of the Syrian ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes, committed to crushing the worship of Yahweh, that inspired the Maccabean revolt of 167–164 BC.

- The Book of Daniel, inspiring hope and faithfulness and using apocalyptic language (see below), came out of this period.
- The Maccabean revolt was described by historians inspired fifty to seventy-five years later in the two books of Maccabees.
- The books of Esther, Tobit, and Judith, in the style of

historical novels, also appeared at this late point.

## Stages in the Written History of the New Testament

The Old Testament evolved over centuries; the New Testament, over decades.

## Writing Destined for a "New Testament"

In the first decades of the life of the Christian community, we have to assume that there were things being written. The process of passing on a New Testament in an oral tradition was not only like that of the Old Testament—it was part of it.

1. Just as in Israel, so in the Christian community, liturgy was a mix of songs, creeds, psalms, and other prayers.

- "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God" (*Colossians* 3:16).
- "Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs . . ." (*Ephesians* 5:18–19).

2. Some of these liturgical ingredients appeared full blown in the letters of Saint Paul.

- "Though he was in the form of God, / [he] did not regard equality . . ." (the hymn in *Philippians* 2:6–11).

- “He is the image of the invisible God,/ the firstborn of all creation” (the hymn in *Colossians* 1:15–20).
- 3. There were also sayings of Jesus written down in the first decade after his death and Resurrection that were put down in some order that circulated probably first in Aramaic then in Greek. There are strands of this source (*quelle*, in German; “Q” in academic circles) woven into the Gospel versions of Matthew and Luke.
- 4. There were probably other collections and fragments—proof texts from the Old Testament, records of parables, notes on deeds of Jesus—that were used by first-generation evangelists and catechists.
- 5. There was a primitive account of the suffering and death of Christ in writing.
- 6. The letters of Paul became the first body of Christian writing. He wrote for the same reason people write today: to bridge the distance between one person and another—between an evangelist and a community of faith in Paul’s case.
  - Authorship by Saint Paul himself is not always certain: Ephesians is unique enough in style and vocabulary to cast doubt on his personal authorship. It is still certainly “Pauline” but possibly written by a disciple of Paul. Likewise, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, and 1 Timothy are thought by most scholars to be “deuteropauline” books (*deutero-* meaning secondary, literally). The letter long-called “Paul’s Letter to the Hebrews” is now called simply “the Letter to the Hebrews” and thought by most scholars to have had little or no connection to Paul himself.
  - In approximately AD 50, Saint Paul wrote the earliest of these letters, 1 Thessalonians, in a style that would become familiar in the later ones: encouraging, admonishing, instructing.
  - The actual letters of Paul himself are earlier in date than any of the New Testament’s written Gospels. The dates of the other New Testament letters are more difficult to determine, but there is general agreement that they do not belong to the first generation of the Christian Church but to the second or third.
  - In the middle 50s of the first century, he wrote his main doctrinal letters, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans.
  - At various times, Philipians and Philemon, written by Paul, and Colossians and Ephesians, attributed to Paul, were written and have been called “captivity letters” because of Paul’s imprisonment variously in Caesarea, Ephesus, and Rome.

- 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, called “pastoral” epistles because they are addressed to pastors not communities, are concerned about more settled and formally organized Christian communities.
- Since the New Testament letters can be attributed to a single author writing over a relatively short period of time, they did not undergo the creative and extensive editing process that is part of the very nature of the Gospels. Strictly speaking, the author of a New Testament letter is a writer; the author of a Gospel is an editor.

## Gospels

Unlike a letter of Paul or his disciple, the Gospels by their very nature emerged only in the editing stage. They are the work of an editor (Evangelist) who creatively, artistically, and faithfully brought together existing materials according to his own purposes and the needs of his audience (which was usually broader than the community or pastor that received a letter of Paul). Chronologically, they are later than the New Testament letters, even though they come first in the New Testament canon. (Paul was probably dead before the Gospel of Mark—the first—was in circulation.)

## Gospel and Gospels

When the word “gospel” appears in the New Testament, it is referring to the proclamation of faith: the “good news” of Jesus Christ. Nowhere does the New Testament use the word Gospel to designate a writing. Mark begins, for example, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ [the Son of God].” The Gospel writers did not call their books Gospels.

Nevertheless, very early in the Christian tradition, Church writers began calling Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John “Gospels” (as a genre). They were, after all, not biographies of Jesus of Nazareth but collections of material presented as “proclamations of faith” in Jesus as the Christ (the Messiah).

In the table of contents of the revised New American Bible, this dual use of the word “Gospel” is illustrated: There is a heading “The Gospels” followed by the titles of four books beginning with “The Gospel according to Matthew” (not “the Gospel of Matthew”).

Likewise, in the Catholic liturgy, the proclamation of the Gospel is announced by the phrase, for example, “A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew” (not of Matthew). And after the proclamation is the statement, “The Gospel of the Lord” (not “The Gospel of Matthew”).

There may be four “Gospels” that are written works of a particular literary style, but there is only one Gospel that is a proclamation of faith. As some teachers say, there is only one Gospel; there are four “according to’s.”

## The Formation of the Gospels

(See CCC, 126.)

The editing of the Gospels was the third of three stages in their formation. Just as Christ did not begin his life on Earth as a full-grown man, so the Gospels did not begin their life in the form we know them today. Jesus, like every human being, began life in the womb, was born, grew as an infant and then as a child, and finally grew to adulthood. Stages can be discerned in the incarnation of the Gospel too. In the traditional language of "form criticism" of Scripture scholarship (see Chapter 4), these stages have each been called a "situation in life" (*Sitz im Leben* in its German original).

### The life and teaching of Jesus

The "situation in the life of Jesus" is about the context and meaning of individual stories and sayings in the earthly ministry of Jesus.

### The oral tradition

The "situation in the life of the Church" is about the context and meaning of these component stories and sayings in the life of the early Church. Why were these particular reminiscences preserved and what was their significance in the first community?

### The written Gospels

The "situation in the Gospel" is about the context and meaning of these stories and sayings of Christ in the text of the Gospel as we know it. What was the purpose of the Evangelist in recording

particular stories and sayings in particular settings?

## Motivation for Written Accounts

In the various communities of Christians, there were pastors and preachers who kept alive the memory of Jesus' words and deeds. Each community was unique and the accounts of Jesus varied. The emphasis in a particular story was not the same in Ephesus as it was in Jerusalem or Rome. Corinth might have had an incident in its memory that had never been heard in Alexandria.

### Saint Luke's Motivation

Saint Luke, not one of the Twelve but a second- or third-generation Christian, recognized his debt to "eyewitnesses" and "servants of the word" (Luke 1:2). He also declares in the following verses that his part in this developing tradition is "accurate" so that his readers will have certainty and clarity about the earlier teachings they have received. ("Accurate" in the Catholic tradition means "trustworthy" for the sake of salvation.)

"Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed." (Luke 1:1-4, addressing himself to Theophilus—"friend of God").

1. There were concerns that important material or its interpretation would be lost.
2. There were requests for a systematic presentation of the Jesus story by new converts.

In response to these concerns and requests, the Gospel as a literary form emerged, a form or genre that was not a documentary, a history of the life of Christ, or a biography, but a proclamation by the Church of its faith in Jesus and what it means to call him the Christ.

## A Chronology of the Writing of the Gospels

The letters that Saint Paul himself wrote pre-date the written Gospels. They are an example of first-generation Christian writing. There is much uncertainty and debate about the dates of composition of Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, and the "Catholic" letters. Mainly, they are second- and third-generation Christian writings.

1. Around AD 70, the Gospel according to Mark appeared, probably in Rome, soon after the martyrdom of the pillars Peter, Paul, and James of Jerusalem. His Gospel, like those that followed, was not a "life of Christ." It was not a biography. It dealt only with Jesus' public life and ministry. It begins with the words, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. . . ." And what follows immediately is not an account of Jesus' birth but a quotation from Isaiah

("I am sending my messenger ahead of you") and the preaching of John the Baptist. As explained earlier, the Gospels are not biographical or historical works in the modern sense.

2. Around AD 85, the Gospel according to Matthew was written. Its original audience was Jewish Christians of Palestine and Syria. It contains material in common with that of Mark, but is nearly twice as long because of material designed to illustrate for Jewish converts that Jesus' mission and their Christian faith are the fulfillment of Judaism and the Old Testament (which is quoted more than 60 times in Matthew). Like the other Gospels, it was written in Greek, although there is speculation that there was an Aramaic version behind it.
3. Also around AD 85, the Gospel according to Luke and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, were written by a Greek Christian convert of Asia Minor. Unlike Matthew's Gospel, Luke's was intended for the Roman Empire's Greek-speaking communities whose interests and needs were different from Matthew's Jewish Christian audience. For them, the Gospel provided the basis of Jesus' words and deeds for their Christian faith, which had come to them from missionary preaching.
4. The Gospel according to John was probably composed in the

90s in Asia Minor, near Ephesus. Aside from the passion account, John repeats almost nothing from the synoptics. It came from a community that claimed the Beloved Disciple, "the one whom Jesus loved" (*John* 13:23), as its founder. The Book of Revelation and the three letters of John followed the Gospel by a few years.

### The Lips of Jesus and the Hand of the Evangelist

"Redaction criticism" (see Chapter 4) is the name of professional Scripture scholarship that studies what the Evangelist did with

sources in editing and combining them. The cleansing of the temple episode (see *John* 2:13–22) is an example: After Jesus' declaration, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace," it says, "His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'" That Scripture is Psalm 69:10—almost. The Evangelist changes the wording to the future tense. In this way, what the psalmist said of himself is made to refer to Jesus, ultimately his death as the price of his zeal for doing the work of the Father. Immediately following this, the Gospel according to John referred to "the Jews"

### The Evangelists and the Jews

The document of the Second Vatican Council on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions (*Nostra Aetate*) includes fundamental Catholic teaching:

- Jews are and always will be God's Chosen People.
- Any teaching or preaching of Scripture that justifies persecution of the Jewish people is condemned.

In an application of *Nostra Aetate*, the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews published a statement in 1985, "Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church." It is based on the Church's understanding that the Gospels went through three stages before emerging as we have them today. It says, for example, "... it cannot be ruled out that some references hostile or less than favourable to the Jews have their historical context in conflicts between the nascent Church and the Jewish community. Certain controversies reflect Christian-Jewish relations long after the time of Jesus. To establish this is of capital importance if we wish to bring out the meaning of certain Gospel texts for the Christians of today" (IV.1.A).

For example, in the story of the healing of the man blind from birth, the evangelist says "the Jews" confronted the parents of the man newly healed of his blindness. Their response was, "We do not know ... who opened his eyes. Ask him, he is of age; he can speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone acknowledged him as the Messiah, he would be expelled from the synagogue." (A revised NAB footnote on *John* 9:21 points out, "Rejection/excommunication from the synagogue of Jews who confessed Jesus as Messiah seems to have begun around AD 85 ...")