

CHAPTER 2

The Gospels: Central Sources for Understanding Jesus

Major Concepts

- A. How Do We Read the Gospels?** The Gospels were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and from a certain perspective, shaped in part by the early Christian culture. Although the Gospels offer basic information about Jesus and his message, they are not strictly biographies of Jesus but testimonies of faith. The Gospels' concern is religious truth, the deeper meaning God intends to reveal to people through historical events. The discernment of religious truth is the task of the entire Christian community, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Roman Catholic church believes that the same Holy Spirit that guided the Scriptures' authors continues to guide the church and help it clarify, develop, and preserve particular teachings and practices known as Tradition. See the *Catechism*, nos. 76, 125–127 (Gospels); 77–79 (Tradition); 80–87, 91–95, 109–119, 573 (discernment of religious truth); 105–108, 514–515 (inspiration and truth of Scriptures).
- B. The Development of the Gospels.** The development of the Gospels took place in three major stages, beginning with the disciples' experience of Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection. During the second stage, the disciples and early church proclaimed the Good News throughout the Roman Empire. The final stage saw the Gospels written down by the Evangelists, who had collected and edited material from all the previous years. See the *Catechism*, nos. 75–76, 126 (three stages); 122, 128–130, 702, 1093 (unity of Old and New Testaments); 209, 446–450 (“Lord”); 430–435 (“Jesus”); 436–440 (“Christ”); 531–535, 541, 547–551, 595–596 (Jesus' life and death); 638–655 (Jesus' Resurrection); 711–716 (Jesus as Messiah); 857 (apostolic church).
- C. The Gospels.** The Gospels differ from one another in terms of author, time of writing, audience, and purpose. Although each Gospel is a separate and unique “portrait” of Jesus, no one Gospel tells us everything we need to know about him. To gain a fuller understanding of Jesus, we must consider all four Gospels together. See the *Catechism*, nos. 125–127 (Gospels).

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Concept A: How Do We Read the Gospels?



Review Questions: How Do We Read the Gospels?

Question. Is the record of past events that we call history a totally accurate description of the events as they actually happened? Explain your response.

Answer. “History” is not a totally accurate description of past events, because it usually involves an interpretation of those events. The information comes to us through the eyes and perspective of the person doing the recording. And no one's perspective is totally objective, because this would require one to be without a point of view, which is impossible.

Question. What do the origins of the word *gospel* suggest about the purpose of the Gospels?

Answer. The word *gospel* is derived from the Middle English word *godspell*, which means “good news” or “glad tidings.” That word, in turn, is a translation of the Greek word *evangelion*, meaning “the proclamation or announcement of good news.” So from the origins of the word *gospel*, we learn that the purpose of the Gospels is to proclaim a message of faith in Jesus. It is not to provide accurate historical accounts of Jesus' day-to-day life.

Question. Briefly explain what is meant by the term *religious truth* and discuss its relationship to the Scriptures.

Answer. *Religious truth* refers to the deeper meaning that God intends to reveal to people through historical events. It is religious truth that the Scriptures are primarily filled with. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the biblical writers interpreted events in light of their own faith convictions and were far less concerned with the historical facts, or what an event might have appeared to be on the surface.

Question. What can we gain from the Gospels besides some basic information about Jesus and his message?

Answer. The Gospels, together with the rest of the New Testament, also reveal the meaning and significance of Jesus for the people of his time.



Text Activities: How Do We Read the Gospels?

Activity 1

Choose any public figure—for example, an athlete, a musician, or a politician—and list at least ten items of information you would expect to find in a thorough biography of that person.

Activity 2

Imagine you are a person from first-century Palestine watching a television show from our time. What expressions, references to contemporary culture, and styles of speaking and behaving might be confusing for you?

Activity 3

In a short essay, briefly summarize a favorite story that has been told over and over by one of your relatives. Then respond to the following questions: *To what degree do you think the story has been changed or exaggerated over the years? If the story has been changed, does that lessen or cancel out the value or meaning of the story itself? Why or why not?*



Additional Activities: How Do We Read the Gospels?

Getting a Sense of History

To help the students better understand the discussion of history on pages 25–26 of the student text, have the class analyze a current event. Choose a happening of significance to them and instruct them to collect as many reports of the event as possible. For example, in the case of a national political event, the students should be able to review newspaper, magazine, radio, TV, and World Wide Web reports. Assign a paper in which the students discuss the different approaches found in the reports and the perspectives of various parties involved in or affected by the event.

To conclude the activity, stress that the coverage of any event, and therefore of all history, consists of more than objective facts and information; it also reflects biases, perspectives, strengths and weaknesses, the intended audience, and so on, of the reporter. Make the connection to the Gospels, saying that each Evangelist worked from a unique perspective and with specific intentions as he developed his own Gospel portrait of Jesus.

It's All a Matter of Perspective

As an alternative or in addition to the preceding activity, have the students analyze a recent school sports event, viewing the event from the perspectives of losers and winners, coaches and players, and so on. You may want the students to take the roles of reporters covering the event, or you may arrange for mock TV interviews in class. Conclude the activity along the same lines as the preceding one.

Faculty Guest Speakers

Consider inviting one or more teachers from outside your department to offer insights into the importance of considering levels of meaning and interpretation when looking at historical or literary sources. For example, a history teacher might speak about what constitutes “history” and illustrate that all history is subject to the interpretation and biases of the one recording it. An English teacher might explain that all great literature involves multiple layers of meaning and that the richness of such literature can be experienced only when those deeper layers of meaning are explored.

It would be particularly helpful if the teachers could connect their insights to material the students are actually studying in your school’s nonreli-

gion classes. That is, the history teacher could draw illustrations from the material the students are currently covering in their history course, and the English teacher could refer to a story the students have recently read in their English course.



Concept B: The Development of the Gospels



Review Questions: The Development of the Gospels

Question. Briefly describe the three major stages in the development of the Gospels.

Answer.

- *Stage 1.* Jesus lived and worked, having a profound effect on his disciples.
- *Stage 2.* After the death and Resurrection of Jesus, the disciples and the early church proclaimed the Good News throughout the Roman Empire.
- *Stage 3.* The Gospels were actually written by the Evangelists, who likely served as editors or collectors of material that had developed gradually through the years.

Question. *Christ* is not Jesus’ last name. Explain.

Answer. *Christ* means literally “anointed one.” It is based on the Greek word *Christos*, which is itself a translation of the Hebrew word *messiah*. To those Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah after his Resurrection, he became known as Jesus the Christ, which in turn rather quickly became shortened to what we now know as a single name: *Jesus Christ*. This clouds to some degree the recognition of the Christian conviction that the Jesus of History is truly the Christ of Faith.

Question. What two major factors explain the transition from an initial oral telling of the Good News to the written form of the Gospels?

Answer.

- *The passage of time.* Christians slowly realized that Jesus was not going to return in glory as quickly as they had hoped. With the realization that the church had a future, it became necessary to find a means for preserving the church’s teachings for future generations.
- *The need for continued instruction.* The church needed to continue instructing and inspiring the already existing communities of faith that had been formed throughout the Roman Empire during the previous decades of missionary activity.



Text Activity: The Development of the Gospels

Activity 4

Fold a piece of paper in half to create two vertical columns. Title the left column “Oral Storytelling” and the right column “Written Storytelling.” List at least five benefits and five shortcomings of each type of storytelling. For example, what can be done with an oral story that cannot be done with a written one, and vice versa?



Additional Activities: The Development of the Gospels

Summarizing the Development of the Gospels

Tell the students to close their textbook. On the chalkboard draw a timeline using the years from the timeline on page 39 of the student text. Then ask the students to help you summarize the development of the Gospels by placing the stages of that development on your timeline. The students may have difficulty doing this, but the effort will help clarify their understanding of the text discussion. If they are unable to complete the timeline, refer them to page 39 of the student text and discuss the timeline presented there. Go through the timeline with them stage by stage, commenting appropriately.

Becoming Evangelists

This activity is designed to give the students a more in-depth sense of how the Gospels developed. Allow two full sessions for it.

1. Begin this activity by giving an introduction along the following lines:
 - A number of years ago, there was a popular movie titled *Oh, God!* It depicted the problems encountered by a young supermarket manager who was visited by God and informed that he had the job of telling the world about God and God’s plan for humankind. Though the movie was a clever and entertaining comedy, its success was probably due just as much to its simply stated but profound insights. The supermarket manager’s ultimate realization—that all he could really do was say what he believed and hope people would listen—is certainly one of the key lessons each Christian must learn.

Today’s Christians, like all followers of Jesus throughout history, have a profound message to share, one that seems almost too good to be true. Despite the fact that many people will doubt the message and laugh at its apparent absurdity and at those who believe in it—just as people laughed at that supermarket manager in the movie—the message must be passed on. The question is, If you were to pass on the Christian message, which images and stories would you use?

To give you a sense of how difficult this question really is, we are going to do a project now. Most of you have probably been hearing about Jesus since you were young children. You might have listened to your parents talk about him. If you are Catholic, you have probably

heard all the Gospels at least several times by going to Mass throughout your lifetime. You may have attended religion classes for years. If so, you probably know quite a bit about Jesus. We’re going to find out what things about Jesus stand out the strongest in your memory, mean the most to you, touch you deeply. In effect, you are going to write your own gospels.

Using the movie *Oh, God!* as an example will, of course, be most effective if you have seen the movie and can describe it vividly. If you have not seen the movie, consider not using it as an example.

2. Divide the class into four groups. Give each group some large sheets of newsprint, some colored markers, and the following assignment:

- First list the miracles of Jesus that you, as a group, would want to share. Your list should include only the miracles that have special significance for you, the ones you remember most vividly.
- Then list the parables, or stories, told by Jesus that you want to include in your gospel—the ones that are particularly meaningful or important to you.
- Next, list brief summaries of the teachings of Jesus that you strongly think others should hear. All that is needed are the general topics.
- Finally, list all the events in the life of Jesus—other than his teaching, miracles, and telling of parables—that you feel are essential for people to know about. For example, you might want to include the stories of his birth, his being lost in the Temple, his confrontations with the Pharisees, and his Crucifixion. You do not need to explain your choices. Just list them.



Handout 2-A

Instruct the groups to record their answers on the newsprint, clearly labeling each list.

Handout 2-A, “A Reference Guide to the Gospel Story,” is for the students to use during this part of the activity. It lists most of Jesus’ miracles and parables as well as Jesus’ most significant teachings and many important Gospel events. Distribute the handout when you give the assignment. Make sure that the students also have their Bibles handy.

Variation. You may want the students to first try the assignment relying only on their memory. What stories and information about Jesus are important enough for the students to have remembered them? The handout and the Bibles can then be used as backups.

Tell the groups that they have about 5 minutes to spend on each part of the assignment, or about 20 minutes total. The idea is for them to identify quickly the elements of the Gospel story that they feel are most important. After the 20 minutes has passed, check on the groups and, if necessary, give them another 5 minutes to wrap things up.

3. After the groups have completed the assignment, give them the remainder of the class session to decide how they would like to introduce their gospel. To help them get started, say something like this:

- Luke and Matthew began their Gospels with stories about Jesus’ birth and childhood. Mark began his Gospel with the baptism of Jesus, the event that signaled the start of Jesus’ public life. And John opened his Gospel with a poetic description of how “the Word became flesh.” Decide how you would like to open your gospel. What will you do—tell a story, share a favorite poem, plunge into your own convictions about Jesus, or approach the opening some other way?

4. At the second class session, invite each group to give the class an overview of its gospel outline and to talk about any difficulties it had with the assignment, any strong reactions or discussions that came up. After each group has made its presentation, ask a group member to post the sheets of newsprint in a place that can be seen by all the students.

5. Wrap up the activity by giving your reactions to the students' gospel outlines, along with a summary of the purpose of the activity. Your summary could be something like this:

- What you have done is a very abbreviated version of what the first Christians had to do after the death and Resurrection of Jesus nearly two thousand years ago. Those people loved Jesus, had hope in him, in many cases staked their lives on the belief that he was the Messiah they had long awaited. And then they watched him die. Imagine their grief, their fear, the turmoil their lives were in. But then imagine as well the incredible joy of the Resurrection, the experience that Jesus was no longer dead but alive in their midst! The implications of that reality have been experienced by Christians ever since that day.

But how have Christians heard the Good News? It has been handed down largely through the efforts of the original followers, who knew Jesus, and those to whom they passed their message. Eventually their recollections of the man Jesus and all he meant were written down. And the writers recorded not just what Jesus meant to them while he walked the earth but, even more so, what he meant to them after his death and Resurrection.

In your group discussions, you just recalled the elements of Jesus' life that mean the most to you, bringing several ideas together into a whole, into something that would make sense at least to people who would believe those images and stories and view them with faith. What you have done is what the Evangelists had to do, and the results of their efforts are the four Gospels.



Concept C: The Gospels



Review Question: The Gospels

Question. For each of the four Gospels, summarize the following information: *author, approximate date when written, primary audience, central themes.*

Answer.

- The Gospel of Mark was written by an unknown author (possibly a certain John Mark who is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles) around 70 C.E. It was written for the church in Rome and for Gentile readers, and it stresses Jesus' humanity and suffering.
- The Gospel of Luke was written by an unknown author (possibly a Gentile doctor) around 85 C.E. It was written for Gentile Christians and perhaps for well-to-do Christians. Luke's Gospel stresses the mercy and compassion of Jesus and the central role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life.

- The Gospel of Matthew was written by an unknown author around 90 C.E. It was written for Jews who were converting to Christianity, and it stresses Jesus as the Messiah whom the Jews had been waiting for.
- The Gospel of John was probably written by followers of the Beloved Disciple around 95 C.E. It was written for the church of that time, which had had many years to reflect on Jesus' true identity. John's Gospel stresses Jesus as the divine Son of God.



Text Activity: The Gospels

Activity 5

Write a paragraph describing the differences between a *painting* and a *photo* of someone. How do these differences relate to the notion of the Gospels as four "portraits" of Jesus?



Additional Activities: The Gospels

Getting to Know the Gospels Better

Use this exercise to review and expand on what the student text says about each of the Gospels.

1. On the chalkboard, draw four broad columns and label each with the name of a Gospel. Divide the class into four groups, one for each Gospel. Ask the groups to tell you as much as they can about their assigned Gospel: its author, when it was written, its primary audience, its major themes, and so on. List this information on the board in the appropriate column.

2. Fill out each column with any of the following information. Note that the information provided in boldface type here is not included in the student text discussion and should not be expected to come from the students. These items provide you with the opportunity to expand the students' knowledge of the Gospels. You may want the students to take notes on the additional material.

Mark's Gospel

- possibly written by John Mark, a companion of the Apostle Peter
- written around 70 C.E. (the earliest Gospel)
- written for the church in Rome and for Gentiles
- **often recognized as "the Gospel of action," in which Jesus is always "on the move"**
- stresses the humanity and suffering of Jesus
- **portrays Jesus as the unrecognized Messiah (Jesus' followers seem to take forever to catch on to who Jesus is, and when they finally do, Jesus tells them to keep it a secret.)**

Luke's Gospel

- possibly written by a Gentile doctor
- written around 85 C.E.
- written for Gentile Christians and perhaps for well-to-do Christians
- stresses the universality of the Christian message, particularly by showing women and poor people in important roles
- stresses Jesus' compassion, mercy, and concern for sinners
- **in the miracle stories, emphasizes Jesus' compassion for those who are suffering**
- stresses the central role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life
- is the first part of a two-part work, part two being the Acts of the Apostles

Matthew's Gospel

- written around 90 C.E.
- written for Jews who were converting to Christianity
- stresses Jesus as the fulfillment of promises made by God in the Hebrew Bible (Jesus as "the new Moses")
- demonstrates Jesus' role as a teacher and preacher (e.g., **the Sermon on the Mount, in Matt., chapters 5–7**)
- discusses the responsibilities of Jesus' followers (e.g., **Matt., chapter 18**)

John's Gospel

- probably written by followers of the Beloved Disciple
- written around 95 C.E.
- written for the church of that time
- reflects theological sophistication and concentration on spiritual realities
- presents Jesus as "the Word of God" and stresses his Incarnation
- **emphasizes faith as coming from God and as truly present when the believer is "without sight," that is, without visible evidence of God**
- builds poetic and memorable images of Jesus as "the vine," "the good shepherd," and so on

3. Close this exercise by restating the student text's explanation that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as the synoptics because of their great similarities, while John offers a unique portrait of Jesus.

A Special Reading Assignment

At this point in the course, you are strongly urged to break from the student text for a few class sessions and have the students actually read at least one of the Gospels from beginning to end. This initial familiarity with the content of a Gospel will be valuable—and perhaps critical—to effective study for the remainder of the course. **All lesson material from this point on will presume that the students have read one complete Gospel.**

1. Divide the class into four groups, assigning one of the Gospels to each group. (The Gospels are not of equal length, with Mark and John being considerably shorter than Matthew and Luke. The students may not notice this, but if they do, just acknowledge the discrepancy and draw lots to determine which group has which Gospel.)

The reading of one Gospel may take two or three hours. Assign the reading as homework to be done individually and according to a schedule (e.g., over a five-night period, with each Gospel divided into five reading assign-

ments). You may also choose to allow time for quiet reading during class sessions.

2. Take some time during class to have the students gather in their Gospel groups. They should discuss their reading, with one student in each group recording on paper any terms, events, persons, groups, or incidents that were completely foreign or confusing. For example, a group might note that they did not know who the Sadducees were and that the genealogy of Jesus was confusing. These items should be reported to the class as a whole and listed on the chalkboard under a heading for the appropriate Gospel.

3. When the groups have completed their reading, discussion, and identification of difficult points, collate the items listed on the board, looking for points of interest and recurring questions. Then refer the students to the table of contents in the student text, remarking on how the chapters will clarify many, if not all, of the items listed on the board. Because the students have become familiar with at least one Gospel, they will see how the course is designed to lead them logically through the maze of information toward a clear portrait of Jesus.

Jesus in Art

Showing a variety of pictures of Jesus will underscore for the students that any portrayal of Jesus is from a particular perspective and sheds only partial light on the truth. If you need help finding varied portrayals of Jesus, the following two books are excellent sources: *The Illustrated Jesus Through the Centuries*, by Jaroslav Pelikan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997); and *The Faces of Jesus*, by Frederick Buechner (New York: Stearn Publishers, 1989). The latter book highlights different ethnic portrayals of Jesus; the former traces images of Jesus in the history of Christian art. After you have shown the pictures to the class and highlighted their features, assign one of the following activities:

- Ask the students to analyze a single portrayal of Jesus in several paragraphs.
- Divide the class into small groups. Assign each group to discuss what three very different portrayals of Jesus bring to their understanding of Jesus. Then invite volunteers to share their insights with the whole class.

Note: Both of these activities will work better if you are able to display the portrayals in front of the class while they are working.

A Reference Guide to the Gospel Story

A Partial Listing of Jesus' Miracles

Cleansing a leper (Matthew 8:1–4)	Healing the blind man of Bethsaida (Mark 8:22–26)
Calming a storm (Matthew 8:23–27)	Healing a centurion's servant (Luke 7:1–10)
Healing two blind men (Matthew 9:27–31)	Restoring life to Jairus's daughter (Luke 8:40–56)
Cursing a barren fig tree (Matthew 21:18–22)	Healing a boy with a demon (Luke 9:37–42)
Healing a paralytic (Mark 2:1–12)	Cleansing ten lepers (Luke 17:11–19)
Multiplying loaves (Mark 6:30–44)	Changing water to wine at Cana (John 2:1–12)
Walking on water (Mark 6:45–52)	Raising Lazarus (John 11:1–44)
Healing a deaf man (Mark 7:31–37)	

A Partial Listing of Jesus' Parables

The house built on rock (Matthew 7:24–27)	The talents, or sums of money (Matthew 25:14–30)
The sower (Matthew 13:1–23)	The mustard seed (Mark 4:30–32)
The weeds among the wheat (Matthew 13:24–30)	The wicked tenants (Mark 12:1–12)
The lost sheep (Matthew 18:12–14)	The good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)
The laborers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16)	The rich fool (Luke 12:16–21)
The wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1–14)	The great feast (Luke 14:15–24)
The faithful servant (Matthew 24:45–51)	The prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32)
The ten bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1–13)	The unjust servant (Luke 16:1–13)
	The rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31)
	The Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14)

Some of Jesus' Most Significant Teachings

The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–12)	The Last Judgment (Matthew 25:31–46)
Salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13)	God revealed in the simplicity of children (Mark 10:13–16)
How to pray (Matthew 6:5–13)	Not judging others (Luke 7:36–50)
God and money (Matthew 6:19–34)	Trust in God (Luke 12:22–31)
Finding life by losing it (Matthew 16:24–26)	Attitude toward sinners (Luke 15:1–32)
Forgiveness of injuries (Matthew 18:21–22)	The vine and the branches (John 15:1–8)
The true disciple (Matthew 19:16–22)	The gift of the Spirit (John 16:5–14)
The greatest commandment (Matthew 22:34–40)	

Some Important Gospel Events

Jesus' birth in Bethlehem (Luke 2:1–20)	The cleansing of the Temple (John 2:13–17)
The boy Jesus lost in the Temple (Luke 2:41–50)	Peter's confession of faith (Matthew 16:13–20)
Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:13–17)	The Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–9)
The temptation in the desert (Luke 4:1–13)	The entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11:1–10)
The calling of the Apostles (Matthew 4:18–22)	The Last Supper (Luke 22:7–38)
Picking corn on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1–8)	The agony in the garden (Mark 14:32–42)
Dinner at Simon's house (Luke 7:36–50)	The arrest and trial of Jesus (Mark 14:43–65; 15:1–15)
Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:4–30)	The Crucifixion (Matthew 27:32–56)
Jesus' conflicts with the Pharisees (Matthew 23:1–39)	The Resurrection (Matthew 28:1–10)
The rejection of Jesus at Nazareth (Matthew 13:54–58)	The post-Resurrection appearances (Luke 24:13–49)
	The Ascension (Luke 24:50–53)