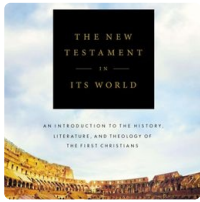


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Where did the Gospels come from?

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Delving Into The New Testament In Its World - Eternity News

Welcome to the fourth in a six-part series delving into the benchmark book The New Testament In Its World.

Co-author Michael Bird takes us through the text he wrote with N.T. Wright, this episode focusing on how the Gospels came together. The piecing together of the four biographies of Jesus' life has been a puzzle that has tested historians for centuries. Mike teases apart the layers of contribution to show us not only the sources we didn't suspect but the reliability of the works as a whole.

On the chopping block are important questions like,

- * Mark's Gospel is the earliest in the Bible - but is it the earliest Gospel?
- * What part did the 'Jesus tradition' play in the Gospels coming together?
- * Why does John's Gospel stand apart as an account of Jesus' life?

You can buy a copy of The New Testament In Its World [here](#).

If you're following along with The New Testament In Its World, this episode covers key issues in Part VI: The Gospels and the Story of God:

1. The Gospel according to Mark
2. The Gospel according to Matthew
3. The Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles
4. The Gospel according to John
5. The Making of the Gospels

Transcript

The New Testament in its world with Mike Bird. But we know there were sources. We know there were sources because in Luke's prologue, he tells us about all the people he's consulted and interviewed.

He says, "You know, others have laid out an account for me." Welcome to The New Testament in its world, a super series based on the brilliant book by the same name. My name's Mark Hadley and I'll be leading us through the brain of one of the authors, Dr. Michael Bird, Lecture in Theology at Australia's Ridley College. Along with Tom Wright, Mike has written The New Testament in its world.

He's also authored about 30 books in the fields of the Septuagint, historical Jesus, the Gospels and many, many other areas of Bible knowledge. But first, before we start talking about where did the Gospels come from, where did your favorite afternoon tea come from, Mike? Well, I do like a bit of Irish breakfast. So it's pretty good.

It's got a nice bit of a zest and maybe even a slight suggestion of whisky. I don't know what they put into the Irish tea. But yeah, I do like my Irish tea in a bit of an afternoon.

I kind of go English in the morning, maybe a bit of Irish in the afternoon. If I could find a Welsh and a Scottish one, I'd probably do them an early evening. Let me drag you kicking and screaming into the great afternoon tea debate that is Earl Grey.

Do you actually think it qualifies as a tea or is it some form of liquid perfume? No, this is my theory on Earl Grey. I think Earl Grey is made up of mashed up old ladies. So whenever some poor old lady goes missing from one of the nursing homes, I swear the Earl Grey people have got her.

And they've kind of been draining fluids from her body. And that's how they make Earl Grey tea. That's the only way I can explain that horrible, metallic-yucky taste.

That's my theory. I can't prove it. But that's why I don't drink Earl Grey.

It's an ethical thing because I'm worried about all those old ladies who have been tortured so they can make it. It would certainly explain that hint of lavender. Okay, so let's move on to our topic for today.

Where did the Gospels come from? And let's begin by asking. Maybe we should explain what is a gospel. Did you read any good gospels lately? I've read some good gospels.

I'm a big fan of the Gospel of Marcus, my favourite gospel. It's short, it's dramatic. It's got this amazing middle episode where Peter confesses Jesus as the Messiah and the Pashanary of it's great.

A gospel, we should talk about genre first. I think genre is very important. A gospel is what I would call an ancient biography.

So it's kind of like a Greco-Roman biography. But with some pike half twists, it's first of all connected to the story of Israel. So it's almost like an extension of the scriptural story.

And it also seems to be based on the early churches traditions, the stories from Jesus and the stories about Jesus and the proclamation of Jesus, which is why it gets the word gospel. So it's kind of like this three or four way interface between a Greco-Roman literary form called like a Bios or a Vita, a book of biography. A link also to Israel's scriptures is the kind of background.

That's why it's peppered with quotations and allusions to the Old Testament. But it's also based on traditions of Jesus. That's kind of stories about Jesus that was circulating the early church.

And also the church is a very proclamation of Jesus because when they proclaimed the gospel, they didn't just start with God as holy and man is sinful. They would actually include the story of Jesus, telling the story of Jesus was indeed part of the gospel in the early church. So the shorthand that most people offer though is that it's, if they're trying to relate it to today, is it's a biography, but you're saying it falls out of that category in a number of different directions.

Well, I would say it's within it. The ancient biography is a diverse and somewhat flexible genre. So I definitely think the gospels are types of biographies, but with certain, if you like, augmentations or distinctives or particular characteristics such as being connected to the scriptural story, traditions of Jesus and part of the church's proclamation.

Okay, so let's start talking about your favorite gospel, the gospel of Mark. Now, many people seem to be aware that Mark's gospel is the earliest of the Bible's four gospels, but is it the earliest Christian gospel? Well, I think it is. I think Mark's gospel was the first gospel to be written.

Scholars suspect, I mean, they can't really approve this, but they suspect that Mark's gospel was probably written either just before or just after 70 AD when the Romans were laying seats, the Jerusalem and the Jerusalem temple had been destroyed. So this is a kind of cataclysmic event, and it's called forth for various thoughts of responses. And Mark's also writing in a time when I think the first generation of Christians passing away, and he almost creates this new literary form, okay, as a way of taking the memory and the teaching or the memory of Jesus and the teaching of the apostles and putting it in this literary form that we call a gospel as a way of preserving in literature the teaching of the apostles or their earliest generation about Jesus, his life, teaching his death and resurrection.

Well, that's a kind of a potted biography of Mark's gospel. How did John Luke, Matthew, how did they come about as opposed to how Mark came about? Well, I think they have generally seen what Mark has done, and they've used Mark as a bit of a template. I

mean, scholars think that these four gospels were not written independently.

There may have been some borrowing from one another. Mark is generally first, and we're fairly sure that Luke and Matthew have both used Mark as a kind of template. After that, it gets a little bit more controversial.

Did Luke and Matthew also have another source? Because there's a lot of agreements between Matthew and Luke or some similar material. That's called the double tradition. Now, did they get that from another source that we call Q for, you know, quel-a-f-a source, or did Luke also use Matthew in addition to Mark? I mean, this is some of the riddles that people wrestle with, and John's sort of again.

He's got a- he's got like a similar genre and a similar outline to Mark, but he has on the whole fairly independent tradition. So does John know Mark or has he heard of Mark, or is it completely separate? I mean, these are things we debate about. But after Mark has been written, Matthew and Luke have certainly composed their own gospel, I think, in the 70s and 80s.

I don't think it's not designed as a refutation of Mark, but maybe a type of imitation. Or maybe they're trying to do what Mark did, but maybe do it better. Or, you know, there's other things they want to stress as well.

There's different aspects of Jesus' career, life, and ministry that they want to accent and bring out. In the case of Matthew's gospel, I think he's writing in a period where the church is struggling with its Jewish heritage, but it's becoming very quickly in some sense as a Gentile religion. And he kind of wants to hold together both the old and the new.

So Matthew lays out that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah and the brother is Jewish. There's no doubt about it. He is of from and for Israel.

He is the Jewish Messiah, the son of David. But there's also this big place, this big expectation that a number of Gentiles are coming to faith. And you see that at various moments, you know, when the censure in who comes to faith is perhaps a pre-figuration of the later Gentile mission.

And certainly then the great commission at the end, you know, going to all nations and proclaiming Jesus and baptizing people, that type of thing. Luke's sim, I think, he's also used Mark's outline. And he's emphasizing the prophetic aspect of Jesus' career, particularly with his concern for the outcasts, the poor women.

And that type of thing. And that's even then utilized as part of his two-volume project to also include the Acts of the Apostles. And in John's case, I think he's telling the story of Jesus, but he wants to add a particular spiritual depth.

And John is offering very much what I would call kind of like a documentary drama. He's interested not just what who Jesus was, but who Jesus is and continues to be for us now. Actually, I've been reading through the New Testament in its world, and I've been studying some of the charts that you provide that actually help kind of understand how some of these books came together.

And there are so many mystery documents involved. Maybe you could explain to me just for a second, you've mentioned Q. What are some of these other mystery documents that I get referred to? Yes, yes, there's a number of hypothetical documents that get postulated to explain the sources underneath the Gospels. Now, let me say, scholars are fairly confident that Mark was first, and that Luke and Matthew have used Mark.

After that, I would say it's a bit more tentative. I don't take what I'm saying next as Gospel per se. That's a little bit more tentative at that point.

But we think that Matthew has used some special material that's unique to him, and we call that the M source, because it's unique to Matthew. Luke has got some unique material, and because it's from Luke, we call that the L source, if you like. And when it comes to material that's shared between Luke and Matthew, that's where the real conundrum is.

And that could be another source. Like I said, we call it Q, and people speculate about a Q document or even a Q community and all sorts of things. I'm a little bit skeptical on that myself.

Or it could be that Matthew has a very big M source, and then Luke has used Mark and Matthew. That's one way of explaining it and holding it all together. But it is a little bit speculative, and some scholars do have a propensity to make very much out of very little, and they can sometimes build these amazing castles in the air, particularly when it comes to scholarship of Q, this hypothetical document, and people have produced a critical edition.

And it can be a little bit extravagant. I mean, what's the line between inference and mere fantasy in some scholarly estimations? That's one of the debates. But we know there were sources.

We know there were sources because in Luke's prologue, he tells us about all the people he's consulted and interviewed, and he says, "You know, others have laid out an account before me." But he wanted to give his own rendition or his own version of the story. So we know there are definitely worse sources, which are probably people and maybe some earlier attempts to write the story. Luke tells us that.

So there's nothing wrong with postulating these sources. But scholars who love, the type of people who love jigsaw puzzles, love treating the gospels as jigsaw puzzles. And when

it comes to a jigsaw puzzle, like normally you do the corners first.

Like if you had a jigsaw puzzle and you're trying to figure out how it got made, I mean, you could have a guess that they probably made the corners first. They did that. And then maybe they found them more colorful bits.

But after that, you don't really know. You don't really know. And it's a bit that way with the gospels.

We've got some really good suggestions, a few tips and hints from Luke himself. But at the end of the day, we don't know with 100% certainty. In what order the gospels were written and precisely who borrowed from whom.

It's probably a very complex picture that is not truly available to us now. At the end of the day, we simply do not know for certain how the synoptic gospels were put together. A literary relationship between the synoptic seems clear.

Mark and priority is still probably the best bet. Luke tells us he has used sources. If we suppose that Mark was one of those sources, all sorts of things make sense.

But after that, it gets murky. Things might be far more complicated than we can ever know. Oral tradition was a lively but untrackable factor.

People did not stop telling stories about Jesus. And there were plenty of people around with their own memories, their own favorite versions of this or that incident or saying. As for written documents themselves, it is quite possible that one or more of the evangelists produce two or more editions of their books.

We can see from later manuscripts that scribes, copying one gospel, would sometimes allow well-known phrases from a different one to creep in. What is more, it is highly likely that there were other Jesus traditions and texts that some early Christians knew. Mike, you teach theology for a living.

Would you be happier if you had a full text of Q rather than one of the gospels? Now, would you be happier if you had M written out for you neatly or do you feel like you have enough? Well, on the one hand, I am content with the sources that we have at hand. There is an awful lot of them to study about early Christianity. We have the various manuscripts of the New Testament such as this is a papari on this thing like P52, P46, P47.

You have all these sort of wonderful things around you can discover and talk about. There are some lost documents I would love to find. Writings that we hear about, but we don't have access to.

Now, Q is a hypothetical document, so if someone is digging through a church in Colossi

one day or an Ephesus or in Rome, and they found this document in Greek, which is a list of sayings in Jesus that corresponds roughly to Luke and Matthew, that would be groundbreaking. That would be incredible. There are some plans to dig up on Colossi in a few years.

If they find the letter to the Laodiceans that Paul speaks of, that will be terrific as well. One of the early church fathers in the generation after the apostles, they were called Epapius. He wrote a little book called The Oracles of the Lord.

It's like, oh my gosh, if we could find that somewhere, that would be awesome as well. Some New Testament scholars, they got a little bit of an Indiana Jones archaeologist. Let's go hunt for the hidden artifacts.

There would be some really good cool things that I wish we could dig up and find. But I don't know whether they're going to find them any time soon. Speaking of really cool things that sort of sit alone in their own category, I'm thinking of the Gospel of John.

Anyone who reads through the four gospels knows when you leave Luke and start off reading something really quite different. Why is that? What makes John stand apart? Well, John has a different texture. Now, you can argue that all the evangelists, at one level, try to do the same thing.

They're trying to tell the story of Jesus in a way that is, I think, true and accurate, but is also persuasive and resonates with the people of their day. Okay, so they're doing that. John is doing the same thing, but John is a little bit of a maverick.

He's not just doing a rehash of Mark with a few augmentations. He does take a slightly different way of doing that. And that's why he starts with this amazing prologue, which seems to be a bit of almost like theological poetry.

And he kicks off straight away with an allusion to Genesis, like, you know, the book of Genesis in the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. Well, John kicks off with some similar verses in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God, and he was with God in the beginning, and all things were made through him. So John basically starts off saying, look, this is basically a new Genesis.

This is a new creation story, but this time I'm going to show you that Jesus, the Word, is at the center of it. So that's how he kicks off his story. And he also has some other unique aspects.

He has these amazing series of encounters between Jesus and other people. We see that in the encounter with Nicodemus, Nicodemus, who's kind of the professor of Hebrew at Jerusalem University, and Jesus has to kind of learn him up on the Kingdom of God and New birth. He meets the Samaritan woman, okay, who's a figure on the margins of society, and yet she seems to get more about him than a whole cohort of religious

leaders can.

You've got these healing miracles that happen on the Sabbath, which raised the question of Jesus' authority. Does he have the authority to do things on the Sabbath? Is God still active then, and his authority to do that? And Jesus' connection to the festivals, and that type of thing. And the whole time you find John saying the mystery of Jesus is both being disclosed to the disciples and unveiled for the readers, where we see that this Jesus, he is certainly the Messiah.

He's certainly the prophet, but he is also the word of God made flesh. And John does that because he wants to not just tell the story of Jesus like Mark, but he wants us to think this is a new Genesis. This is a new Exodus.

This is Pentecost that we're talking about here. Wow. Okay, mate, well, if there was one thing you wanted people to take away about the Gospels, that's particularly leading from your book, *The New Testament in its world*, what would it be? I think the Gospels are the most important books, not of Christian literature.

Now, I know I'm not supposed to have favorites within the biblical canon, you know, because you know, Genesis is just as good as Romans and Hebrews, and that's how I find Lehman and I really think that the Gospels are important because they bring us closer to Jesus. Okay. And they tell us the story of Jesus, the teaching of Jesus, the events of Easter and his resurrection.

And, you know, in the early church, the Gospels were the most popular books. I mean, there's more copies or more manuscripts of Matthew than there are of any other Christian text. And more quotes from Jesus, more quotes from the Gospels than from any other figure in the New Testament.

So the early church were very Jesus-focused and they were very gospel-focused. So I think, you know, we really need to have a big view and a big emphasis on the Gospels. In fact, one of the earlier Reformers, Zwingli, he preached from the Gospels every Sunday, and he'd teach from the Epistles and the Old Testament during the week at Bible studies, but every Sunday was a gospel sermon.

Now, I'm not saying we need to go back to that. That's a little bit of extreme. I mean, you want a good diet of biblical preaching through the entire canon, but there's something very prominent and very important about the Gospels.

And that's why I think it's paramount that Christians really do read them, meditate on them, reflect on them and studying because this is where you're reading not just stories about a figure of antiquity, you are reading the Gospel of the Lord. Well, thanks very much for what you've told us today about the Gospels and particularly where they sit inside of the rest of the Scriptures. That's actually been the fourth episode of our Super

Series, the New Testament in its world, the fifth episode next week.

What are the Catholic letters about it? That'll be interesting to follow around, particularly if you're as surprised as I am, that there were, in fact, Catholic letters in the Bible. So we'll find that out next time with Mike Bird. Mike, thanks for your time.

And if you'd like some extra information about the Gospels based on the New Testament in its world, you'll find that in the show notes for this week. See you next episode.

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