

From Jesus to the Writing of the New Testament

We know Jesus' disciples were not following Him around with notepads, tape recorders or mini-cams, recording everything He said and did as it happened. We are sometimes vague, however, about how all these stories and teachings were collected into what we call the gospels.

On a timeline, Jesus died and was resurrected somewhere around 32 or 33 C.E. In the ensuing ten or fifteen years the church grew, spreading throughout the Mediterranean region. During this time, there was no "New Testament" and almost nothing written down that was circulating among the churches that had started up. Imagine that: going to a Christian church without (what we call) a "New Testament" having been written. This Fall, we'll see more of the problems that arose in the early church when we spend several weeks with Paul's first letter to the Corinthian house church.

During this time after Jesus' departure and before the writing of the New Testament documents, each church had their own leaders called Elders and Deacons. The average worship service for a house church, such as the one in Ephesus, would begin with an Elder standing up and reading out of the Old Testament. Next, another leader would comment on the passage, giving an interpretation of how that passage might relate to their lives at that time in the first century.

Following that might be singing (without the benefit of musical instruments). This would be followed by a time of sharing about the needs of the community. Based on those needs, a leader would pray.

An Elder or perhaps a visiting Apostle, or someone who had heard the preaching of an apostle, would stand up and tell stories about the life of Jesus. They would observe

communion in the context of a meal, closing with a song.

By this point, no one had taken the time to write a biography of Jesus because most everyone was well-familiar with the orally-circulated stories of His life. Most every church leader fully expected Jesus to return soon. After all, Jesus had said that this is the end times and He would return unexpectedly – as surprisingly as "a thief in the night."

Well, Jesus didn't return as expected. The first New Testament writings were not the gospels but actually letters of Paul to struggling start-up churches.

Emperor Nero began a persecution of Christians in Rome around 65 C.E. There was also a civil war going on in Palestine between the Jews and the governing Romans. It wasn't until the sixties when Mark decided to write a long sermon that summed up the entire life of Jesus. Mark, the first gospel written in the 60's, was probably written in the city of Rome when the persecution was underway. This accounts for Mark's hurried writing style, characterized by frequent uses of "and immediately" and other similar transitions to other stories and events in the life of Jesus.

Matthew and Luke, independently, had copies of Mark's gospel on their desks. Both of those writers also had another written gospel about Jesus (of which we do not have a copy today). This gospel is nicknamed "Q" by Biblical Scholars.

With Mark's long sermon and the "Q" gospel in hand, Matthew (in the 70s) then Luke (in the 80s) wrote their accounts. Matthew was writing to Jewish Christians while Luke wrote to Gentile Converts to the faith. At or beyond the 90's of the first century, John wrote a very different and theological version of the life of Jesus.

Whenever we read a passage from Thessalonians, Corinthians or other early writings by Paul, we have to take ourselves back to the time, early in the life of the church, just before the oral traditions about Jesus were written down by Mark. This was the time between 33 and 49 C.E. when there was nothing in print (until the year 50 and after) when Paul's early letters to start-up congregations began to be circulated among the churches.

Another thing to remember is that the New Testament books were not published in order of the time of their writing. They came to be placed in the order they were believed to be most credible and authentic (in their acceptance in the canon of sacred scriptures) by the early church leaders during the span of the first 4 centuries. Too bad the modern publishers don't let us know that.

The oldest NT writings were written in the 50's of the first century and they include Paul's letters to Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians and Romans. In the sixties, Colossians (if by Paul), Philippians, and then Philemon. Mark, the oldest gospel, was written between 66-70. Matthew: 80-85; Luke & Acts 85-95, then Hebrews, 1st Peter, Ephesians, James, the Gospel of John, Revelation, Letters of John, 1st and after the turn of the century: 2nd Timothy, Titus, Jude then 2nd Peter. (See James Harris, p.11 ISBN 0-7674-0014-3.)