

**Some Thoughts in**  
**NEW TESTAMENT**  
**STUDIES**

**Edited by**  
**Benson O. Igboin**  
**Godwin Oyibo**  
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**En-Joy Press & Books, Ibadan.**

**2014.**

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ISBN 978-2051-50-0

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**EN-JOY PRESS & BOOKS**

49, Darlington Street, Mokola, Ibadan.

Tel: 08060797610

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## Chapter Six

# FACTORS THAT NECESSITATED THE COMPILATION OF THE GOSPELS

Akiti G. Alamu

### Introduction

We start by saying that the Gospel is all about good tidings and the announcement of salvation of humankind as culminated in the personality and work of Jesus Christ who was born in 4BC. Of a truth, the economy of salvation ushered in by Jesus' deeds was obviously transmitted orally at the inception, which sprang over thirty to thirty-five years before documentation. Nevertheless, some factors contributed immensely to the glaring delay of the documentation. In fact, these factors included lack of writing materials, the *parousia*, the church entering the courts and palaces of kings, apostasy among others. Therefore, it is the intention of this chapter to give the background of the gospel coupled with the factors that occasioned the emergence of the gospels.

### The Gospel: A Meaning

The term 'Gospel' is derived from the Greek word *evangelion* which means good news, good tidings and the announcement of the salvation of humankind, which was ushered in by Jesus' activities and *logia*. Thus, the *logia* and activities of Jesus Christ were pivotal to the Gospels and these were initially transmitted orally. It has been asserted that the people of the Orient were gifted with retentive memory; hence they were able to memorise and translate volumes of traditions.

## The Need for the Compilation of the Gospels

As earlier noted, there were factors that delayed the writings of the gospels. Some of which were lack of writing materials such as stylus and papyrus; these materials were scarce and beyond the reach of the people. Secondly, the disciples of Jesus Christ preoccupied themselves with the task of fulfilling the Great Commission in order to usher in *parousia* – the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thirdly, the gospels were delayed because a handful of the custodians were not lettered; therefore, they were not so much concerned about documenting the gospel.

After sometimes, the Church started to overflow its native boundary due mainly to persecution. As a result of this, there arose a need to tell the Christian world what sort of man Jesus was. For this reason there came an urge to commit the gospel into writing for easy transmission. Apart from this, the historical record became necessary for catechistical purposes. Unlike the Jews, the Gentiles did not trust oral instruction; such would not appeal to them. The need for an authoritative teaching and answers to questions that arose about their object of belief (i.e. Jesus Christ) therefore called for the writing down of the gospel (Falaiye, 2010:107).

Another reason for the documentation of the gospel could be fact that through the preaching of the 'Good News', the new converts were also expected to become evangelists. Such evangelists, who were not eye witnesses of what they were to witness to, needed some documents of reference to facilitate their evangelistic work.

Other reasons for the documentation include:

- (1) persecution and death of the apostles: As a result of this, there was the fear that the gospel would likely die with the Apostles if they failed to document it;
- (2) need to defend the gospel among the people of the Gentile world: the rationale behind a publicly executed

person becoming a worshipped object could be defended if only there is a document to back up whatever the story the evangelists had to tell; and

- (3) the delay in the parousia: The coming back of Jesus which had been thought to be very imminent was no longer thought to be so. At that time the parousia become a futuristic event. Thus, in order to preserve the gospel, it was needful to document it (Falaiye 2010:108).

### **Factors that Prompted the Compilations of the Gospels**

Some factors actually facilitated the compilation of the gospels. Some of these factors ranged from the worship of Sun god to Neronian persecution. As a result of the fact that the state and the church were having things in common, the worship of the Sun god was officially shifted to Sunday in order to align with the church worship day. This period, the church had entered the courts and the palaces of kings by condescending low to the level of collaboration. E. G. White (1950) described this period as the beginning of paganisation of Christianity. According to him,

Little by little, at first in stealth and silence, and then more openly as it increased in strength and gained control of the minds of men, the mystery of iniquity carried forward its deceptive and blasphemous work. Almost imperceptibly the customs of heathenism found their way into the Christian church... Christianity entered the courts and palaces of kings, she laid aside the humble simplicity of Christ and His apostles for the pomp and pride of pagan priests and rulers; and in place of the requirements of God, she substituted human theories and traditions (49).

With this antecedent, the focus of the church was compromised for the first time in church history. The sudden realisation came when the empress mandated everybody to worship the nature god. Suddenly, Christians realised their

foolery for the first time and vehemently refused to continue the worship. In consequence of this, the Christians were labelled haters of mankind and subsequently declared Christianity *religio illicita* – unlawful religion (Boer, 1976:108). As the Jews were warming up to persecute the church, the Augustus Palace was razed down with fire and two reports went to town on this incidence. First, it was reported that Emperor Nero burnt the Augustus palace in order to rebuild it for self-glorification, while the second information had it that Christians were responsible for the burning of the palace. Consequently, the latter information was strongly embraced by the Jews and others.

In addition, Adamolekun (2006:16) points out some of the causes for the persecution of the church by the emperor. Among these, however, one cause was more fundamental than the others. The basic reason for the persecution of the Christians in the Roman Empire was the refusal of the church to permit emperor-worship by its members. Because of this, Christians were hated, imprisoned, banished, condemned to work as slaves in the mines, cast to the lions as a public spectacle, and executed by the sword. These dreadful punishments did not come to all Christians everywhere and all the time. On the contrary, open persecutions were occasional, in this locality or in that region in the empire; nevertheless, Christians were always in danger. At any incidence of a mob action, governor at will or persecuting emperor could afflict Christians with a terrible suffering (Adamolekun, 2006:16).

It was not possible for the church to compromise with the government during this period of persecution, particularly as it related to idolatry. To worship the emperor meant to accept polytheism and idolatry. The status of the emperor at the place of sacrifice was for Christians not a status but an idol. It pointed to living or a dead emperor with prosperity in time of peace, with victory in time of war, with the justice of law, the progress of the arts, with fruitfulness of the field, and fertility of the herd.

Emperor-Worship in its deepest meaning was not simply emperor worship; it was worship of the state. The emperor, who represented the dignity, majesty, authority of the state, became the state itself (Adamolekun 2006:17).

Adamolekun (2006:17) again argues that the Christians' refusal to worship the emperor was tantamount to rejecting the state as a god to be worshipped. To Christians, emperor could not allow God to share with a man or with a human institution. It could not do so even if that institution was the powerful imperial Roman State. On the other hand, Roman government believed with equal conviction that prosperity in the economy, peace at home, and victory on the frontiers all flowed from the state and its gods. To refuse worship was to invite their displeasure and vengeance. As a natural result of this conviction, Adamolekun (2006: 17) further asserts that the Romans accused the Christians of being *atheoi*, that is, atheists. The Christians scorned the gods that had made Rome great; they refused to worship the emperor, in whom the state found its human-divine expression. This atheism became the chief accusation against the Christians, and the main cause of their persecution by the Roman State. Emperor Nero, Marcus Aurelius, and Decius were great persecutors who afflicted the Christians greatly with severe torture, murder, burning at stake and the like.

Apostasy could be considered as one of the reasons for the compilations of the gospels. Preceding the period of peace in the early church, many dangerous and heretical teachings had saturated the church and these heresies emanated from some of the leaders of the early Christian church. Thus, these heretical doctrines such as Arianism, Donatism, Meletanism, Marcionism, Montanism among others challenged the faith of the early church. Boer (1976:123) observes that the church recognised the scriptures but did not determine the canonisation of the gospels. Because of the fact that they recognised the

scriptures on the basis of lectionary act of worship, errors could not creep into the early church.

In AD 64 under Emperor Nero, persecution started in earnest, and this persecution graduated in varying degree and it lasted for 250 years from Emperors Nero, Marcus, Galerius, Decius, Valerius to Diocletian. During the persecution, those who possessed the scriptures by heart met their gruesome death during the period. For instance, Paul the apostle, St Peter, Bishop Silvanus, Bishop Romanus, Felicita, Valens an aged Deacon who knew the scriptures by heart were among the victims (Whitham, 1975:170). Among the names of other distinguished martyrs were Anthimus, Bishop of Nicomedia and Phileas, Bishop of Thmuis distinguished for his learning and piety, beheaded; Tyrannion of Tyre, and Zenobion, a presbyter of Sidon, thrown into the sea; Silvanus, Bishop of Emesa, devoured by wild beast; another Silvanus, of Gaza, beheaded with thirty-nine others; two Egyptian bishops, Peleus and Nilus, burnt to death; Romanus, a deacon of Antioch, burnt to death for his attempt to restrain apostate Christians from offering sacrifice; Pamphilus, an eminent presbyter of Caesarea, the teacher and friend of Eusebius himself (from whom he took his own surname, 'Pamphili'), who after two years in prison was put to death by torture. With him also suffered in hideous ways, Valens, an aged deacon, who knew the scripture by heart; Paul of Jamnia, who in the midst of his sufferings spoke of the heavenly Jerusalem as his true city, and Porphyey, a servant of Pamphilus, who suffered death by fire in silence, save for calling once upon the name of Jesus (Whitham, 1975:171).

The persecution was of course a time of testing. If some who suffered were over-zealous and provocative, and rushed fanatically to death; there were many others, who as in the Decian terror, either apostatised or gave up the sacred books, or in some underhand way endeavoured to obtain the *libelli*, or certificates of sacrifice; some too who feigned madness in order

to escape. And such conduct brought sad results of controversy and schism, notably the Meletian and Donatist schisms.

Nevertheless, as a whole, the persecution provided Christian evidence of high order. It won a new respect and admiration for Christians. Courage unknown to the world before was revealed in the endurance of torture even by women and children; in the patience and fortitude with which death itself was faced and overcome, and above all in the absence of resistance. It may have been that here and there hot indignation flared out, and a cruel magistrate was reproved or a heathen altar kicked over, as was done by woman at Gaza; but there were no reprisals, no insurrections, and no outcry for vengeance. The conduct of the martyrs and confessors is for all time a witness to a new power at work in human nature which nature never gave. Bettenson (1963:156) supported the fact that heaven wept over those who met their gruesome death in this process and he quoted Revelation 12:11 to buttress this: 'They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony, and they loved not their lives unto the death.'

### **The Gospels**

In consequence of this persecution, some eye-witnesses who remembered what Jesus said and did at a time were called upon to urgently put down what they heard Jesus say, so that this information would not fizzle out. The custodians of the traditions availed themselves of the opportunity to make the information available. With this at hand, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wrote on what they knew of Jesus, remembered of him and heard from eye-witness account. The four evangelists wrote on the activities and logia of Jesus. However, New Testament scholars have opined that out of the four gospels, three looked like and similar.

Matthew was considered to be an eye-witness to the words of Jesus Christ, Mark was said to be an interpreter to

Peter whose home was a rendezvous for early Christians and his Gospel was almost Petrian Gospel, while Luke acknowledged previous endeavour like Mark and Matthew, and received historical information from Paul to whom he was a companion.

The first three books of the New Testament are called the synoptic gospel, this is a term initiated by J. J. Griesbach in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The term is applied to the three gospels in the sense that they see and view in common the life of Jesus Christ in their selection of materials. The term synopsis is a combination of two Greek words *syn* meaning together, and *opsis* meaning view or see. In a complete word, synopsis means 'seeing together' or 'viewing together'. This term has been applied to the three gospels in the following sense (Babs Mala 1983:234):

- (1) The three gospels view together or present to us a similar account of the events in the life of Jesus. In other words the three gospels contain accounts which when put together are virtually identical.
- (2) The term is used to differentiate these three books from the fourth gospel which has its own distinctive features. For instance, the gospel of John differs in the following ways:
  - a. In chronology (timing), in the prosecution of the events: the time of the cleansing of the temple is early in John but late in the Synoptics (Babs Mala, 1983:233).
  - b. In style, and in matters of Jesus' teaching;
  - c. In the placing of most of the public works of Jesus. In John's gospel, Jesus' ministry centres round several visits to Jerusalem while in the synoptics it is largely devoted to Galilee. John records three Passover events in his gospel while the synoptics records only one.

In the fourth gospel, stories like the birth and baptism of Jesus; the transfiguration, exorcism of demons and the agony of in the garden are absent. Also, the use of parables in the synoptics is replaced by long discourse in John. All these differences make the fourth gospel different from the first three which stand together because they present similar

outlines of the work and ministry of Jesus, thus, making their presentations from the same perspective to a large extent.(Falaiye 2010:109).

- (3) The term synopsis, relates to the fact that many passages in the three gospels can be put together in parallel columns which can be seen together and studied together. In the second century a man called Tatian attempted to harmonise the four gospels and make them into a *diatessaron*, which, is four in one, since they all contain accounts of the same person. But the early Church was opposed to such a view (Falaiye, 2010:109).

### Concluding Remarks

This chapter has x-rayed that factors that prompted the documentation of the gospels. Despite the urgency, retentive memory must be appreciated in this regard because through this, the Gospels have been serving their purposes and have subsequently met the needs of the church on a daily basis. In biblical history, despite the historical urgency in the collections of the Gospels, “nothing conserved was lost and nothing lost was conserved” (Osasona 1997).

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