

Comparing the Gospels

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Date: 24 June 2018

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[0 : 00] With no further ado, I'm going to bring on the man of the hour, Dr. James Packer, our beloved chair, coordinator, founder of Learners' Exchange, speaking on comparing the Gospels. Thank you, Jim.

Well, thank you for your welcome. And I hope I can keep within about half an hour's period for the presentation.

I should tell you, I think right at the start, that in the program card for this session of Learners' Exchange, the title was misprinted, and as indeed it's just been misstated in announcement. It's not comparing the Gospels, it's composing the Gospels, and it doesn't make the slightest difference, I think, to the presentation or to your mindset as you listen.

I certainly hope not. But, as a matter of fact, I thought all this out is a little more close to what that title would lead you to expect than it would be if the misprint remained.

[1 : 58] Okay, enough of that. Now to business. What is all this about? Well, it's going to take us, I'll tell you straight away, into the realm of guesswork to some extent.

Though, I must say, when I finished thinking it through, I felt that the Gospels were even closer to each other, in terms of significant links, than I had believed when I started.

Well, we'll see what you think. Let me dive in and present to you what I wanted to say.

Now, you will see me squinting at these papers, and you'll wonder what it's all about.

The answer is that when you've got my form of eye trouble, you can hardly see anything correctly.

[3 : 21] So you have to be squinting all the time at what you want to see, and what you want to say right.

And that's what I should be doing. You will notice that I empty my hands of coffee. You wonder why. Well, the answer is because I have a magnifier with me, and something else that you will see before we're through is Packer playing games with his magnifier.

Why is that? The answer is essentially the same. With the eye trouble I have, you need a massive magnifier to see what's going on with the words, I mean.

And then you still have, what shall I say, have difficulty for which you need to sip coffee every now and then.

[4 : 35] So that's how it all comes out. Magnifier, coffee, sort of notes that I would, that under ordinary circumstances I would never be using, and the text of scripture which stands, and about which I want to say directly a number of things.

Thank you. Was there a book trade in the day when the Son of God came to earth and the century in which the Gospels were written first century A.D.?

The question doesn't usually get asked, and when people ask it, very few have any idea as to the answer.

I spent my life as a teacher of theology, and I have to tell you this was a question which the learned also overlooked.

it doesn't get asked in the textbooks on the New Testament, and of course not being asked it doesn't get answered either.

[6 : 15] I think there was a book trade. I'm going to sketch that out. You ask me how do I know?

Well, long ago, very long ago, when I was young, I had a classical education, and classical scholars are interested in this subject, and I think they've gone a lot further into it than New Testament scholars, scholars, and I think they were right to do so, and I think that it's a real oversight in the world of New Testament study, that this question hasn't been raised and explored with the same energy, interest, and actually knowledge.

knowledge, for there is a bit of knowledge here. In the first century, books were certainly put together, and that naturally implies that books were sold.

Who would have put them together except salesmen, booksellers, as we call them nowadays? We are used to booksellers being distinct people from publishers, publishers produce the books, booksellers sell them.

In the first century AD, we know that, at least I'm going to tell you in a moment how it is that we know that books were sold, and, well, to be sold, they must first, of course, be written and produced.

[8 : 42] Question, how were books produced in the days before the, what's been called, the Gutenberg Revolution, were the printing press was invented towards the end of the 15th century?

Well, yes, in the days before the printing press, all books were produced by copying, and in classical learning, there is quite enough reference to an activity which I describe thus, slaves in the back room copying, salesmen in the front room selling, but it's a single firm, and it's thought of as a single operation, and the slaves belong to the guys who are the publishers, actually, and who are going to sell the books once they're copied.

How can I be confident about that? Well, here's where the guesswork that I find irresistible comes in.

Turn to the New Testament, and you find that one gospel is shorter than the other three, and the three are of just about the same length as each other.

Same length also is Acts, and even Revelation, the book of Revelation, can be brought into the discussion at this point.

[10 : 52] It too is about the same length. In a situation where no restriction is placed on the length at which you write when you've got something to say, well, you wouldn't expect that state of affairs.

When men with literary skill have something of enormous significance to contribute, and yet their books are just about the same length, you suspect something.

what do you suspect? Well, as I say, classical scholars have a general idea of what operated here. There was a manufacture which produced what were called codices, that's a Latin word, which means, or which stands for blocks of blank paper which were somehow strung together, same number of sheets though, in, well, wait a minute, there were two, there were two sorts of codices, same number of sheets in each of the two, but one is shorter than the other.

So, classical scholars know what's what when they hear people talking about a long codex, codex is a Latin singular word for this block of paper, or papyrus, or whatever it was, there's a short codex, and there's a long codex, and that's standard throughout the Roman Empire, where the book trade operated, and any, how can I say, all the books that were copied by slaves in the back room would be copied onto blank paper of either the one length or the other.

[13 : 27] Now, this is where the guesswork comes in, in a way that to me is irresistible. I write books, or at least I have written books in the past, and every now and then, the publisher who virtually promises to print your book once you've written it, says, this book is in a series, and the items in the series are all the same length, so you must write either to the length of the short or of the long codex.

In other words, the author is committed, you see, to a certain word length, and it's up to him in doing what authors do to produce their products, you have to boil your material down, usually, in order to get it to the desired word length.

How do I know this? Well, you can guess the answer, it has happened to me. And you can, as I say, you can see it happening, I think, in the Gospels, particularly, in the New Testament.

Well, now, to my mind, that is a fact which tells you straight away what's been going on, or something of what's been going on in the mind of the writer in each case.

And certainly, in the four accounts of the ministry of Jesus, which we have, if you think, the ministry itself lasted for three years, and there were no long periods of vacation.

[15 : 58] Jesus, as far as we can tell, we're encouraged to think, Jesus was teaching all the time.

But nonetheless, you've got this standard length in three of the four Gospels, and a shorter version of the same story, which was used very clearly as a source by two of the other three, that's Matthew and Luke.

They took Mark's material and added to it material of their own, and thus the text moved from being the right length for a short codex to being the right length for a long codex.

We don't know how these sheets were bound once they'd been copied, but we do know about the slaves in the back room copying them.

Yes, it was a rudimentary book trade, and to my mind, it gives a great deal of help interpreting the Gospels to know this.

[17 : 28] How so? Well, you look at what the Gospels contain, and you learn straight away what the Apostles writing the books regarded as the facts that must be stated, because they're of primary importance, and so you fiddle with them in order to secure the word length that the codex prescribes, long codex or short codex, whichever it is that the bookseller trades in.

Now, think back. the four evangelists are regularly spoken of as men of uncommon literary skill, although the literary skill varies from one to another.

general view, and this is really undeniable, the general view is that Mark came first, and he wrote his story the way he did.

Mark's Gospel has the minimum of teaching because it has the maximum of action. it picks up the beginning of Jesus' ministry and takes us through to the resurrection, and Mark, in his odd way, as perhaps you've been told by other sources because nobody doubts this, Mark ended his Gospel very abruptly, so abruptly, that somebody, somebody else wrote a, how can I say it, a postscript to round the Gospel off smoothly.

but what Mark wrote finishes with the statement that the women went away from the tomb frightened, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

[20 : 17] That's Mark chapter 16, verse 8. Well, what is going on here?

The answer, I think, is that Mark is concentrating on action, and a sub-theme, which he runs all the way through the Gospel, you'll find, is the theme of human perversity, sin as perversity.

And, so, he ends his Gospel with this abrupt presentation of the fact that at first, now we know from the other Gospels that this didn't last, but at first, the women who'd gone to the tomb and found it empty, they were so shaken, by what they'd discovered, that though the angel told them to go and tell, they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Before the day ended, they got over that, and they were talking to the apostles about what they'd found. That, I think, is the way to read the material that three of the four Gospels bring together here.

But anyway, this is Mark's style. Action, yes. And the teaching, the teaching of Jesus, which Mark puts into his Gospel, it's the teaching that has to do primarily with his action, actually, as the one who came to earth to be our Redeemer.

[22 : 13] are. Well, then you look at Mark and Luke, and you realize they have filled out Mark's narrative, this is why they wrote theirs, they filled out Mark's narrative to add teaching about the Christian life into which Jesus was leading his followers.

years. And so, in Matthew, you have five heavy blocks of teaching, as if to suggest that Jesus is the new Moses.

It starts with the first block is the Sermon on the Mount, and there are four more blocks, and interspersed with the blocks, are narratives of things that Jesus did.

But it's clear that both Matthew, who sets up these five blocks, and Luke, who brings in yet more teaching that hasn't been narrated in either of the first two Gospels, yes, Luke is concerned that the teaching that Jesus gave for disciples should be properly represented in the Gospels, so anyone who reads Luke, I think, will feel well, Jesus is being presented as the great teacher who also redeemed, as if the teaching came first.

That isn't the impression that a careful student of Luke gets, but it is the impression that a casual reader of Luke gets.

[24 : 27] And I think Luke meant it to be that way. The teaching, he's saying, is terribly important. And what about John?

Well, John's Gospel, we are told, there's no reason to doubt this, was written when he was an old man.

He had developed his own literary style over the years. He was, of course, a Jew who started his literary career in Hebrew, but he had become master of a very striking, simple, thrustful style in Greek.

It's there in the epistles, and it's there in the gospel also. And he doesn't appear to be dependent on those who had written before him.

No, he's an old man adding something which none of the first three gospels highlighted, namely the truth of the trinity which gives shape to the work of redemption.

[25 : 51] The father loves sinners and sends his son into the world to save them. The son comes, he is the mediator, the savior, and the climax is, as all the three gospels before John had also said, the climax is that he was crucified, and that he rose from the dead, and that he lives now.

And, well, how does John know this answer? Because he is John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, the disciple to whom then it seems Jesus gave most instruction in terms of personal instruction during his ministry, and certainly he is the evangelist who puts most theology into his gospel so that readers will properly understand it.

well, what I've said to you in this rather bumbling way is the natural way, it seems to me, and it has seemed to scholars generally since these things began to be thought and talked about, it's the way, the natural way to suppose that our gospels came to exist.

There are details, too, in the New Testament which confirm this guesswork, yes, let's call it guesswork, who was Mark?

Well, Mark was Barnabas' nephew, and his mother lived in a big house in Jerusalem, which became the headquarters, it seems, for the early church in its early days, so that when, in chapter 12 of Acts, we read of Peter being miraculously let out of prison, angel, angel coming and opening the door and so on, where did he go?

[28 : 39] Well, the place he went was precisely Mark's mother's home. So, we have here a family which, right from the start, it seems, that is, before the crucifixion, has become a disciple family to the Lord Jesus.

And Mark, we think, who is we? Well, most scholars, because you can't think of a reason for the phenomenon that I'm going to mention, accept the reason I'm going to give.

The reason we all think so is that Mark, for some reason, shall I say, some funny reason, puts in to his account of Jesus' arrest death.

The detail that there was a young man there, and they tried to arrest him, and he wriggled out of his cloak, and fled naked.

I mean, that's what the text says, and I guess we all knew that. Well, what is that detail doing? In books written by people who the classical scholars work with, the authors, I mean, of books in Greek and Latin, that sort of detail is every now and then put in as an identification of the writer.

[30 : 40] who doesn't give his name at the beginning of the book, but does give this detail as part of his narrative.

It's just a funny convention that, nonetheless, is a very memorable convention, I think.

You give a personal detail, and in effect, you are encouraging the readers, your readers, to say in their hearts, oh, that's him, the writer.

And he is encouraging himself to say, yes, I put in this detail because that's me. See? Mark is the only one who does this.

Matthew and Luke don't actually give us their names. But, as I say, Mark gives us this detail, and the others, well, the bookseller gives the name of the writer.

[31 : 53] of the bookseller. What we're seeing as we look at these details is that the four gospels form a group, yes they do, and there are links between them which, if picked up, will give us a better understanding of them than we would have otherwise.

Again, just think, Luke tells you of action. He sees Christ's achievement as saviour, and he sets his book up as a story.

There is a little teaching in it, but it's the minimum. Alright, well, there's that. And then, there's Matthew.

Matthew, no, was a businessman. He collected taxes, and submitted them to the Roman authorities.

He reads Mark, and he says, this is a fine story. It's a true story. I was one of Jesus' disciples, I know.

[33 : 26] But then, Jesus came to set up a kingdom. He came to be a king. He came to make disciples as servants of the king.

And he gave a great deal of teaching for the disciples who would be servants of the king. Well, yes. So, Matthew spends about half his gospel working in five blocks of teaching to make the most of the extra space that he was using by writing to the length of a long codex.

Luke, by contrast, was a doctor, physician, who became a companion of Paul when Paul was in Troas.

Luke never knew Jesus. But Luke could write. Luke had the instincts of a historian.

[34 : 49] Luke accompanied Paul, I suppose, with a guesswork. I'm sorry, but all of this talk involves guesswork. You can't deal with these themes without making guesses somewhere.

The guesswork here is that Luke accompanied Paul because Paul's health, as we know from chapter four of Galatians and one or two other places, Paul's health was a doubtful quantity. He needed a physician again and again. Luke traveled with him. There came a time when he says, you remember, only Luke is with me.

That's towards the end of his life. And there was a time in Paul's life when he was in prison, kept there to gratify the Jews.

This is in Palestine. a period of two years before Festus came along as Roman governor.

[36 : 09] And the guesswork again, but those two years would make a fine time for research.

church. And the guess is that Luke used them in that way. And that's how it is that all the material from Mary and Jesus' family got into Luke's gospel.

All the material, too, about the birth of John the Baptist. This was the result, I'm suggesting, natural guess, of Luke's research during those two years.

And then, as I said, Luke was a writer. He could write in the manner of ancient historians and did.

And he, too, decided, well, I mean, he was doing the research because he'd already decided, probably, I would think, encouraged by Paul himself, encouraged to gather up further material about Jesus, and retell Mark's narrative with the emphasis on the teaching all the way through, which is what you've actually got in Luke's gospel.

[38 : 01] I've said these things and they do alert us to something we knew already, namely, that the four gospels, they're wonderfully similar and wonderfully different.

Yes, well, each of them is doing a different job. And we are enriched, therefore, by having them, having them alongside each other.

And Luke has a second volume. Luke got into the writing, a long codex on the life of Jesus.

And then he wants, well, he sees the need. If Jesus is the king and the church is the kingdom, he sees the force that will attach to a narrative of how the gospel got from Jerusalem to Rome.

And he researches that and writes that and closes his second book, telling how the gospel got to Rome, by saying that Paul, when he got to Rome, wasn't immediately put on trial.

[39 : 26] He lived in his own house for two years, speaking of the kingdom of God, to everyone who came and would listen to him.

And there's a phrase at the end of the Greek text, which is deliberately awkward.

I mean, it's awkward as Greek. And that, again, clearly, I think, is so in order to call attention to it.

And the phrase is that Luke was, I'm sorry, that Paul was teaching about the kingdom for these two years, no one forbidding him.

An adverbial phrase which hangs on to the end of the sentence in a way that from a literary standpoint is ugly, but from a human standpoint is very telling, just because it's a hammer blow right at the end of the story.

[40 : 42] That's the thing which most of all Luke wants you to remember. The gospel got to Rome and Paul preached it there, although he'd been sent to Rome in order to undergo a judicial process.

nonetheless he was left free for two years to preach the word, no one forbidding him.

Well, that's a literary effect which Luke was, as I said, a bit of a writer. Luke understood the book.

And we readers should understand it also. This is Luke proclaiming the triumph of the gospel in the ministry of Paul.

Bible. Okay, now the time has gone and more than gone and I must stop. But when one stands back and puts all these facts together, the New Testament appears as a wonderfully coherent whole, even more wonderfully coherent than one thought the first time one's read it.

[42 : 03] And that's the news, shall I say, that I wanted to share with you in this talk. The more you work with the New Testament, the more it appears as a wonderfully coherent literary whole.

And I'm afraid there's no time for questions. I now have to leave you with that. Well, I think it's a very good thought to be left with.

So, God bless and never forget it. Thank you.