

The specific features of the Evangels

PhD. Vârlan Florin

Faculty of Theology and Sciences of Education of the
Valahia University of Târgoviște,
ROMANIA,
E-mail: varlanflorin@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: *Since always, man has been aware that his destiny has to do with a superior reality, greater than what he can perceive and realize, a reality that he can hardly acquire, considering the limitations of his nature. This awareness has been maintained and reinforced by the conviction that his present state is not permanent and Someone will come to help him to accomplish his mission. This hope has been maintained not just in the mentality of the Jewish people, by means of the Messianic prophecies, but also with the other peoples, as we can note from various legends or myths. For the Christians, Jesus Christ is the awaited Savior and this is why He is called the world's Savior, and His coming in the world is the Good News that God has given to man, as a manifestation of His unconditional love and as an accomplishment of all the promises made to man. Some of the acts and teachings of our Savior Jesus Christ have been written down by His disciples and constitute what we now call: the Evangels.*

Key words: Evangel, evangelist, Christ, Church, Christian.

Preliminaries

The Holy Evangels constitute the group of the first four books of the New Testament. The word *evangel* derives from the Greek word εὐαγγέλιον, which, in the Greek antiquity, designated the reward for the one who was bringing the good news – we find it with this sense in the Old Testament as well (2 Kings 18, 20, 25, 27; 4 Kings 7, 9) – while, later on, the word came to designate the very content of this piece of news.

The **Evangel** - *the Good News* of salvation brought to the world by the embodied Son of God, is one, namely the one lived and preached by our Savior Jesus Christ, yet, if we consider the form under which it came to be known by men, after the Savior's Ascension, then we can talk about several evangels. The Church of the first centuries acknowledged just four canonical evangels, because only they were carrying the seal of divine inspiration.

To differentiate between them, the evangels have been given a title, showing the person who endeavored to put down moments of the Savior's life and activity. Consequently, they were called: the **Evangel according to Matthew, according to Mark, according to Luke and according to John**. The preposition κατά ("according to") shows that the unique Evangel of our Lord Jesus Christ has reached us "according to" the way it has been drafted by one evangelist or the other[1]. They put down in writing only a part of the spoken tradition they had received, either directly, or indirectly, from eye witnesses or by means of documents. Yet, each of the evangelists has put his own mark on what he has

written, depending on the aim pursued, on the author's characteristic style and on the peculiar features of the people the evangelists were addressing.

Although the Evangel is one, according to its Unique Author – God, it is known to us under four different forms, completing one another and not overlapping. The unique origin of the four evangels has often been highlighted in the Church painting and in the writings of the Holy Fathers. So, until the 4th century, they were represented under the form of four springs coming out of the same rock – the Holy Spirit[2].

Due to the great similarities existing between the first three evangels, they are also called “*synoptical evangels*”, and put in parallel, on three columns, they reveal the same general presentation, the same order of the events, the same vision on the teaching of Jesus Christ and even, in certain places, the same sentences. However, each one has its own peculiarities that individualize it, a fact that puts each of them under a special spotlight.

When we speak about the specific features of the evangels, we have in view precisely these differences, namely: the author; the language in which the evangels were written; the addressees; the aim pursued; the place where they were written and the time when they were written.

1. The Evangel according to Matthew

The author – Saint Matthew the Apostle, one of the twelve Apostles[3]. As he himself mentions, before having been called to apostleship he was a tax-collector (10:3) in Capharnaum. The evangelists Mark (2:13-17) and Luke (5:27-32) mention the name he had before being called: Levi. After the Savior's Ascension, he preached the Evangel in Palestine and after the persecution started against the Church by Herod Agrippa I, he went to Ehtiopia or Persia. The Church honors him on the day of November 16.

The language – the whole Church tradition, since the 2nd up to the 16th century, confesses that this Evangel was initially written in Aramaic, the Syro-Haldaic dialect, being translated later on into Greek, according to the opinion of some specialists, by the author himself.

The addressees – given the fact that this evangel was written in Aramaic, we can deduce that it was addressed to the Jews, who were speaking this language. We are thinking about the Christianized Jews of Palestine but also about the non-Christianized ones, who knew quite well the Scripture of the Old Testament, and the Jewish traditions. After its translation into Greek, it received a universal destination.

The aim pursued – to leave a written version of the Evangel preached, the moment when, forced by circumstances, the Holy Apostles were about to leave Palestine.

According to several church writers, the author also had a *missionary aim*, namely to prove the revealed truth that Jesus of Nazareth is precisely the Messiah prophesied by the Old Testament prophets and awaited for so many generations by the people of Israel[4].

There is also the opinion that the evangelist Matthew had in view an *apologetic-polemic aim*, as well, wanting to fight the false expectations of the Jews who, refusing to believe in the Savior, were waiting for the coming of a different Messiah.

The place – being initially written in Aramaic, the Evangel may have been written in a locality of the Holy Land, most probably in Jerusalem, where the apostle lived for a while. Another argument supporting this theory is also that, in its content, it reveals certain details that could only have been taken from the Temple of Jerusalem.

The time – the year must have been 43 or 44 A.D., seeing the numerous patristic testimonies mentioning that the Evangel according to Matthew is the first to have been

written and that it was put down in writing before the apostle left the Holy Land. Eusebius of Caesarea says that: “Matthew wrote his Evangel when he had in mind leaving Palestine and, by doing so, preaching to others as well” (The Church History 3:24). St. Theophylact of Bulgaria situates it 8 years after the Lord’s Ascension (around 41-42 A.D.). The translation into Greek was achieved around the year 70 (68) A.D.

Themes approached:

- the Savior’s descent from Abraham and the lineage of David;
- in the Person of Jesus Christ have been accomplished the prophecies of the Old Testament;
- by His teaching, Jesus Christ is the One announcing the divine will to men;
- Jesus Christ is the world’s Savior and Judge.

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2. The Evangel according to Mark

Author – John Mark, a Jew of the Hellenists’ community of Jerusalem. He was neither apostle, nor disciple of the Savior; in exchange, he was a disciple of Barnabas, his cousin (cf. *Col.* 4:10), of Paul, until the end of his second journey, and of Peter (cf. *Acts* 12:25; 13:5; 15:36-39; *IPt.* 5:13). It is in his mother’s house that the Christians were coming together sometimes (cf. *Acts* 12:12-17), this being also the place where the Last Supper is supposed to have taken place (cf. *Mk.* 14:14-15; *Acts* 1:13-14).

The tradition affirms that Mark accompanied Saint Peter in his missionary voyages through Minor Asia and Italy (Rome), being “interpreter” (Papias of Hierapolis) – translator, secretary. He died as a martyr, probably in Alexandria, and his holy relics have been preserved in St. Mark’s Basilica in Venice. The Church celebrates him on April 25.

The language – this evangel was written in a Greek of Alexandrian origin, sprinkled with Latinisms and Aramaisms. The vocabulary is reduced, yet precisely used, in a direct, vivid and spontaneous manner.

The addressees – are the Christians of Italy, more precisely of the capital of the Roman Empire, Jews but also pagans, of Greek-Roman culture, who are not so familiar with the interpretation of the Law and of the prophets’ writings. This fact gives this evangel a universal character, since it addresses all those who want to know “the Evangel of Jesus Christ, God’s Son” (1:1), who want to repent and to believe in the Good News (1:15).

The aim pursued – was to show its readers that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, God’s Son, Who defeated the evil power by His miracles, and, especially by letting the readers know about His Passion, death and resurrection, to accomplish God’s will: man’s salvation. Jesus came into the world to reveal the Eternal Kingdom to men and to make known to them God’s reign and sovereign will.

Emphasizing that the Kingdom of God has come near (1:15), the evangelist warns his readers about the moral conduct they need to have and about the fact that only by the Cross, by sacrifice, can they be called Christ’s followers (8:34-38).

The place – The Evangel according to Saint Mark was drafted in Italy, probably in Rome. Saint John Chrysostom is the only one who states that the writing of the Evangel took place in Alexandria, Egypt. Other locations suggested are: Decapolis, Tyre, Sidon, Syria and even Galilee. The presence of numerous Latinisms is a strong argument in favor of Italy as place of its writing.

The time – for the time of writing there are two variants: 64-65 A.D., after the death of St. Peter or the year 63, when the apostle was still living. St. Theophylact of Bulgaria

situates it 10 years after the Lord's Ascension (about 43-44 A.D.), "being taught by Peter"[5]. There are also some biblical researchers who situate the writing of the Evangel before or immediately after the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D.[6].

Themes approached:

- Jesus Christ, as God's Son, reveals the Kingdom to men as already-existing reality and which will fully show itself in a near time;
- Jesus identifies Himself with the Son of Man (of the Book of Daniel, the Prophet), Who has come "to give His life as a ransom for many" (10:45).
- The universal character of the evangelical message: Mark commonly uses expressions such as: "all the people" (2:13; 4:1), "every nation" (13:10), "throughout all the country round about Galilee" (1:28, 33, 39).

3. The Evangel according to Luke

The author – of the third evangel is Luke "the beloved physician" according to Saint Paul the Apostle (cf. Col. 4:14). As origin, he was from the Antioch of Syria, having a select education and a rich general culture, doubled by the fine quality of writing beautifully. The Holy Fathers count him among the 70 disciples of our Savior[7], being one of the two disciples who accompanied our Lord Christ on the road to Emaus (cf. Lk. 24:13-35).

Out of the Book of Acts, whose author he is, we find out that he was a close collaborator of Saint Paul the Apostle, accompanying him in his activity, starting with his second missionary voyage. The sure information on the life of Saint Luke stops at the death of the Apostle Paul. After that, the tradition affirms that he preached in Achaia, southern Greece, where he wrote his evangel and the Acts of the Apostles, and where he also died as a martyr, at the age of 84. At the same time, according to an old tradition (4th century), Luke was also a skilled painter, the author of a beautiful icon of the Theotokos. The Church celebrates him on October 18.

The language – the evangel was written in a beautiful and elegant Greek language, which betrays the author's qualities of endowed writer, but also of fine knower of the human psychology and mentality and good analyst of the social reality.

The addressees – as we find out from the beginning, both the evangel and the writing of the *Acts* were addressed to a certain *Theophilus*, a patrician who recently converted or on his way to conversion to Christianity, to whom Luke offers a "life" of Jesus according to the requirements of an authentic intellectual.

The aim pursued – is to reinforce the faith of the new convert, assuring him that the One he is preaching is the Word (1:2), Who came to bring salvation to all the people, including to those of other nations. For this reason, after much research, he composes his writing with a lot of vigilance, knowing that it is a holy narrative, rendering as exactly as possible the activity and the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, God's Son. The Savior's activity will be continued and accomplished by the Church, under the protection of the Holy Spirit.

The place – of writing is most often taken to be Rome, yet, opinions differ. A quite old tradition encountered at St. Irenaeus and accepted by St. Jerome or St. Gregory of Nazianzus indicates southern Greece as place of composition [8].

The time – Most of the biblical researchers consider that the year when it was issued is 63, namely before the end of Saint Paul the Apostle's imprisonment. Seeing that *The Acts*

were written before the Apostle's deliverance from prison, it results that the Evangel had appeared before that. The St. Theophylact of Bulgaria's proposition to situate it 15 years after the Lord's Ascension (around 48-50 A.D.), has no real grounds.

If we consider the fact that Luke used the Evangel written by St. Mark, then the most probable date would be the middle of the 70s.

4. The Evangel according to John

The author – of the fourth Evangel is John, son of Zebedee, who was one of the first disciples of our Savior, together with his brother, James (after having been Saint John the Baptist's disciples, first). The Evangel presents him as "the one Jesus loved", who, during the Last Supper, leaned his head against his Master's shoulder (13:23). At the same time, he was part of the restrained group of three disciples (together with Peter and James), who witnessed really special events: the resurrection of Jairus's daughter (Mk. 5:37), the Lord's transfiguration (Mt. 17:1-13) and the tense moment that preceded Jesus's arrest in the garden of Gethsemane (Mt. 26:37).

John is the disciple to whom the Lord entrusts His Mother (Jn. 19:26-27); he is the one who runs to the empty tomb, arriving there before Peter (Jn. 20:2-8), and the first to recognize the Resurrected Jesus.

In *The Acts of the Apostles*, we find him present at the Descent of the Holy Spirit and then preaching, healing and being imprisoned together with Peter. He is preaching the Evangel in Ephesus (around the year 69), then in Rome, where he was persecuted and immersed in hot oil, but came out safe; then, he was exiled on Patmos Island. Under the reign of the Emperor Nerva (96-98), the apostle withdrew to [9]. His celebration day is May 8.

The Church considers him the author of three epistles and of the last book of the New Testament's canon: The Apocalypse.

The language – the Evangel was written in a Greek perfectly reproducing the everyday language of the time. The quite refined style characterizing it, compared to the different, less refined style, of the Apocalypse, determined some researchers to affirm that the Apostle John used, when drafting the Evangel and the epistles, a secretary-disciple whose Greek was superior to his own.

The addressees – the addressees of this Evangel are the Christians of Asia coming from among the pagans, a fact highlighted by the description of the Jewish customs it explains briefly (to be understood by those who do not know them), by the translation of the Aramaic words and by the universalist tendency characterizing its approach.

The aim pursued – is first of all a *theological one*: confessing Jesus Christ as true God and true Man, a thing also mentioned in the Evangel: "these are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name" (20:31). This citation also highlights another goal: a *missionary aim*, of conversion to Christianity of the Jewish diaspora, but also of helping the others to grow in faith. A third aim would be an *apologetic one*, meant to refute certain heresies emerging in those times.

The place – just as in the case of the other evangels, the place and the time of writing are hard to mention. Seeing the fact that during the final part of his life the Apostle lived in Ephesus, it is considered that it is here that he wrote his Evangel. Some more cities with a significant Jewish population were also mentioned in this sense – namely Alexandria and Antioch, in Syria [10], yet without many supporters.

The time – a date accepted by most of the researchers situates this Evangel towards the end of the last decade of the first century.

A special aspect brought by John is the one concerning the Savior's activity period of three years, the evangelist mentioning the Easter date three times.

Conclusions

In the first four writings of the New Testament, we find out the *Good News of salvation* brought by the Messiah, a salvation that God promised to the first men and awaited for generations. This Good News includes all about the embodied Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, namely: His embodiment, His life, His teaching and especially His crucifixion, death, resurrection and ascension – namely especially His three years of activity.

As there is just One Savior and one teaching, there is also just one Good News, one Evangel, announced by Christ our Lord and preached since the beginning by the Holy Apostles, then by their disciples, and which, at a certain moment, was put down in writing. From the multitude of writings, the Church chose just four, which it considered authentic, namely faithfully relating aspects of our Savior's activity and teaching – only a part of all that He did – only as much as man needs to know for his salvation.

The titles of Evangel *according to Matthew*, *according to Mark*, *according to Luke*, *according to John* show that each of these authors have left their mark on the composition and drafting of one and the same content. The Evangelists constitute four ways, four possibilities for man to draw near God and know the mysteries of God's kingdom.

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