

CHAPTER 4

THE GOSPELS

The four Gospels are unique in ancient literature. They are not biographies as such. Rather each Gospel presents a different view of Jesus, especially his work and teachings, emphasizing his Passion, death, and resurrection. The word *gospel* means “good news” (Greek *euangelion*, from which we get our English *evangel* and its related words).

The Gospels were written by men who either knew Jesus closely and personally or who were close disciples of them. Matthew and John were original apostles; Mark was a disciple of the apostle Peter; Luke was a disciple of Paul and also extensively interviewed other witnesses. In addition to their extremely good historical connection to Jesus, the Gospel writers were inspired by the Holy Spirit, who guided them as to what to write, aided their memory, and kept them from error. Therefore, we consider the Gospels to be not only reliable witnesses to Jesus’ life and work, but authoritative witnesses.

Although the four Gospels were written separately and at first circulated separately, the early Christians very soon gathered them and considered them as a single collection. The titles of the earliest Gospel manuscripts are parallel, using the Greek *kata* (“according to”) with the name following: “According to Matthew,” “According to Mark,” etc. Longer and more elaborate titles are found in MSS from later centuries. These titles go back at least to A.D. 125.

Augustine and many others in the history of the church have associated each Gospel with one of the creatures marking the cherubs in Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Revelation. There have been various arrangements; here is a common one used by many today:

Gospel	Symbol	Emphasis
Matthew	Lion	Jesus is the King
Mark	Ox	Jesus is the Servant
Luke	Man	Jesus is the Man
John	Eagle	Jesus is the Son of God

Synoptic Gospels

The word *synoptic* comes from the Greek word *sunoptikos*, literally, “seen together.” Scholars have given this name to the first three Gospels because they are remarkably similar in

their content and wording. Yet they are not identical; each author maintains his own literary style. They are very different from John's Gospel.

Duplication of material

According to William Hendriksen, *Matthew* (pp. 6-76):

- Mark has 661 verses:
 - 606 are also in Matthew.
 - 350 are also in Luke.

- Matthew has 1,068 verses:
 - 500 are also in Mark.

- Luke has 1,149 verses:
 - 350 are also in Mark.

- Matthew and Luke have ca. 200 verses in common that are not in Mark (designated Q).

Q stands for *Quelle*, the German word for “source”; it was coined by those who believed that this “Q document,” along with Mark, provided the material used by Matthew and Luke. There has never been discovered an actual Q document.

Some theories

The detailed study of the relationship of the Synoptic Gospels to each other, with its implications for the authorship and dates of these works, is called literary criticism. Several prominent theories exist (an excellent recent collection of articles arguing for these views: *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem*, ed. by David Alan Black and David R. Beck).

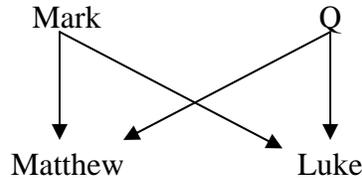
Traditional view

Each Gospel writer wrote his own gospel, based on his own experiences and knowledge. There might have been some reference to previous Gospels, but this was not extensive. Various church fathers and scholars through the centuries have had different theories about the order in which the Gospels were written.

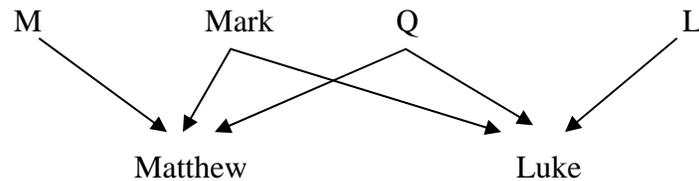
Two- or four-source hypothesis

During the nineteenth century careful literary criticism discovered many details of the text and order of the Synoptics that indicated to many that Mark was the first Gospel. In this

view Matthew and Luke used Mark to a large extent in their Gospels. There was another document (now called Q) that contained many of Jesus' sayings and messages. Mark did not use this Q document, but Matthew and Luke both did. Therefore, Mark and Q were the two main sources for Matthew and Luke (thus the "two-source" hypothesis).



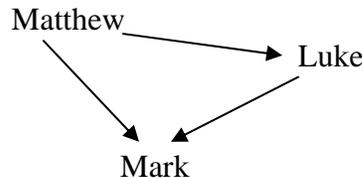
Bernard Hillman Streeter developed this two-source hypothesis into his four-source hypothesis by assuming that Matthew and Luke each had another written source, called M and L respectively. Thus, he would chart their relationship as follows:



At this point the two-source or the four-source hypothesis is accepted by most NT scholars, liberal and conservative.

Griesbach Hypothesis

Johann Jakob Griesbach proposed this theory that eliminates the need for Q and that retains Matthew as the first Gospel, a view favored by church fathers. He did this by proposing that Luke used Matthew and that Mark used both Matthew and Luke. Since he believed Mark used the other two Synoptics when he wrote his book, many call this the two-gospel hypothesis.



Oral tradition and memory

Many NT scholars have noted that Jewish tradition was passed down orally by the rabbis, extensively using memory. Rabbis taught their disciples to memorize large portions of their teachings. Assuming that Jesus was a Jewish rabbi in his position relative to his disciples, he

would have taught them to memorize much of his teaching. He referred to this in John 14:26. This would result in similarity among the gospel writers.

In addition, the apostles authoritatively taught their disciples in the next generation. Using the same methods, they soon would have developed a common tradition about the important events of Jesus' life; this fact would explain the similarities in the Passion accounts and other events in the life of Jesus.

Literary criticism and inspiration

Any of these theories could account for the data found in the Synoptic Gospels. It could be that a combination of them would be involved.

The doctrine of biblical inspiration does not demand that a particular method of writing must be followed or forbidden. Any of these theories is possible and compatible with inspiration. God used the gospel writers to produce the desired result, employing the writer's own talents and methodologies, guiding him and keeping him from error in what he wrote.

Other critical theories

During the last century NT scholars have developed other theories to account for the material in the Synoptic Gospels. Some of these contain elements that might be helpful in understanding the Gospels, but often they also contain destructive elements that deny the historicity of the events or words recorded in the Synoptics. Therefore, these techniques should be used with great caution.

Form criticism

While some conservative scholars have used this method in moderation, its most extreme proponents, such as Rudolph Bultmann, take it to the extent that virtually nothing in the Synoptic Gospels is historical.

This method says that the Synoptic Gospels are collections of small paragraphs and sayings called pericopes (per-IC-op-ee; from Greek, "a cutting out"). These are short passages suitable for public reading. According to this theory the Gospels were not original compositions, but were collections of these short sayings, stories, and narratives that originally were passed on orally in the church. The Gospel writers were basically editors, pasting these pericopes together.

Many form critics are skeptical about these stories or sayings being actually from Jesus. They say that they were from other sources, including traditional Jewish material, early stories, legends, and myths about Jesus. Some pericopes contain older and more historical material, and others are purely legendary. The reason for these pericopes being preserved and recorded is that the early church went through different stages, and the Christian leaders adapted the story of

Jesus to fit the prevailing situation in the churches. They would make up stories, if necessary, to cover these situations. Some “evangelical” practitioners of form criticism say that the “spirit of Christ” in the church was directing these ideas, and that the result is a true, theological picture of Christ, even though the actual historical life of Jesus was different. Karl Barth distinguished *Geschichte* (mundane history) from *Historie* (theological history).

Redaction criticism

A redactor is a kind of editor, only he contributes more of his own work as well. After form criticism became generally accepted, many scholars noted that the different Gospel writers each had a different emphasis or perspective, actually, a different theology. While there was a theological center they all held to, each writer left his theological imprint on his Gospel.

This view requires that Mark was the first Gospel, and that Matthew and Luke used Mark and Q to write their Gospels. The earliest redaction critics worked on the theologies of Matthew and Luke, noting their variations from Mark and Q. Later critics tried the more difficult project of figuring out the theology of Mark himself, and of Q. These studies required many assumptions, including the confidence that the critic knew what original materials or traditions each writer worked with, even though none of these documents are extant.

Redaction criticism has helped in certain areas, however. By emphasizing the theologies of the Gospel writers and relating them to their own settings and circumstances in the church, we can see how the history of the church helped them in the selection and exposition of their material. Of course, we, as orthodox Bible students, assume that all the statements in the Gospels are true and historical.

Matthew

Author

Matthew (or Levi) was a tax collector, and was called by Jesus to be an apostle while he was sitting at the tax table. He left his position to follow Jesus. He also held a great feast in his house when he became an apostle, inviting his friends and companions—tax collectors, prostitutes, and other people considered undesirable by the Jewish leaders.

Primary thrust of Matthew

- Jesus is the King of the Jews (genealogy through Judah’s kings).
- Jesus’ ministry was directed primarily to Jews (10:5-6; 15:24).

- The Jewish nation, represented by its leaders, rejected Jesus (8:10; 15:21-28; 23:13-39; 28:11-15).
- Therefore, the kingdom is given to others (3:7-12; 21:43).

Fulfilled prophecy in the life of Jesus

Matthew, more than any other Gospel, compares the life of Jesus to that of Israel in the OT, and many of his actions to direct fulfillment of prophecies in the OT (see L. M. Petersen, “Matthew,” *ZPEB* 3:132-133, for 50 OT proof texts in Matthew).

A very interesting parallel is the comparison of Israel in Egypt, going through the Sea of Reeds, wandering and being tested in the wilderness, and receiving the law, with the corresponding events in the life of Jesus (time in Egypt, baptism, temptation in wilderness, giving the law in the Sermon on the Mount). Matthew sees Jesus as the perfect antitype of Israel, obeying God completely where Israel always sinned.

Five major discourses in Matthew

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| • Sermon on the Mount | Matt 5-7 |
| • Instructions to the Twelve on their first mission | Matt 10 |
| • Parables of the kingdom | Matt 13 |
| • Obligations of discipleship | Matt 18 |
| • Olivet Discourse | Matt 23 |

Mark

Author

John Mark was a young disciple from Jerusalem. He might have been the young man who fled naked from the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:50-52). The early church there met in his mother’s home. He accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey but deserted that work. Then he was reclaimed, accompanying Barnabas on a mission to Cyprus. Later he was a useful helper for both Paul and Peter. Peter took Mark in as his spiritual son.

Mark wrote down the preaching of Peter in his Gospel. This is the universal testimony of the earth church fathers, and is evidenced by the similarity of the outline of Mark to that of Peter's sermons in Acts (cf. Acts 10).

Audience

Mark apparently wrote his Gospel in Rome, and his audience seems to be his own contemporaries—Romans and others who had little background knowledge of Jewish culture or religion. In the Gospel Mark explains his terms for non-Jewish readers (Mark 15:22, 34), and he employs Latinisms (Mark 6:27; 12:14, 42).

Characteristics of Mark

Mark is a book of action. Compared to the other Gospels there are few speeches (e.g., Mark has only 18 of the 70 parables of Jesus). The book shows Jesus as a man of action as well, often using the term *euthus* ("immediately, at once"). This activity of Jesus is a part of his mission as the Servant of the Lord (Mark 10:45). This emphasis on activity is consistent with the 151 uses of the historical present tense, a number higher than that found in the other Gospels. Mark pictures Jesus as Peter did: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and . . . he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him" (Acts 10:38).

As a close eyewitness of Jesus' life, Peter was intimately acquainted with Jesus' circumstances, life, and emotions. Even though Mark is the shortest Gospel, many of these details are found only in the Gospel of Mark. Mark alone mentions the "green grass" that the people sat on when Jesus fed the 5,000 (6:39). We read of Jesus' human emotions in this Gospel: compassion (1:41), indignation (3:5), sighing (7:34), and distress (14:33). Mark also mentions the astonishment of the observers (1:22).

Luke

Author

Luke, the faithful companion of Paul, is the only Gentile NT writer (Col 4:14). He was a physician, and his writings show him to be an educated person. He uses various medical terms in his Gospel and Acts that are not used by other Gospel writers, yet these terms are not technical; they were available to educated writers in general.

Luke's literary style is admirable. Luke 1:1-4 are purely classical in style, and the rest of his writings are a good quality literary Koiné; French critic Ernest Renan called Luke "the most beautiful book ever written."

Luke was a careful historian. His gospel is the only one to tie Jesus' life directly into secular chronology (Luke 2:1-2; 3:1). Although he himself did not witness the life of Jesus, he carefully studied the available writings and interviewed the eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1-4); these eyewitnesses might have included, in addition to the apostles, Mary the mother of Jesus (cf. Luke 2:19, 51) and the early disciple Mnason (Acts 21:16). Luke's account of Jesus' birth and childhood is unique (Luke 1-2), and he includes a major section of Jesus' ministry not recorded in Matthew or Mark, his extensive ministry in Perea and elsewhere during his final journeys to Jerusalem (Luke 9-18).

Purposes of Luke-Acts

Luke's style shows that he is writing to educated Greeks (or non-Greeks that have adopted the Greek culture). Luke and Acts form a two-volume work dedicated to Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). Theophilus probably was a Christian man in Rome who sponsored this work, making it possible for Luke to investigate and write this work (the preface of Luke is similar to the preface of Josephus' work *Against Apion*, dedicated to his sponsor, Epaphroditus).

The overall purpose of Luke-Acts seems to be to show how the gospel started with Jesus in Judea, was given to the apostles, and from them spread out to the Jews, the Samaritans, and the Gentiles. It made its way from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to Antioch to Rome. Luke assures us that the message Theophilus heard in Rome is the same that Jesus preached in the beginning.

There are important secondary purposes in Luke-Acts as well. The relation of Paul to the Jewish church and his new Gentile mission get center stage. This book is a defense and promotion of Paul's ministry and of the Gentile church. In addition, Luke shows how the Roman officials approved of Christ and of the early Christians, and that the opposition to them arose from unbelieving Jews; this should make the Roman authorities recognize the legitimacy of Christianity and not persecute it.

Emphases in Luke

As a Gentile, Luke had a different perspective on Jesus' life than did the other Gospel writers. There are several ways this produced various unique emphases.

Humanity of Christ

Luke does not emphasize Jesus' Jewishness, as Matthew does, but rather his humanity.

- Extended birth narrative
- Genealogy traces not from Abraham (as in Matthew), but from Adam

- Early life shows him growing in stature and wisdom
- Shows him tempted like a man (cf. 22:28)
- Constant need for prayer (3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 29; 11:1; 23:44, 46; the Gospels record 15 prayers of Jesus, 11 of them in Luke)
- Weeping over Jerusalem (19:41)
- Sweat like drops of blood (22:44)

Under-classes

Luke shows Samaritans, social outcasts, women, and children in a favorable light, and as recipients of Jesus' special attention and favor.

- Samaritans
 - The Good Samaritan (10:30-37)
 - Samaritan leper (17:11-19)
- Social outcasts
 - Sinner woman (7:36-50)
 - Prodigal son (15:11-32)
 - Tax collector (18:9-14)
 - Zacchaeus (19:1-10)
 - Thief on cross (23:43)
- Women
 - Mary, mother of Jesus
 - Elizabeth
 - Prophetess Anna (2:36-38)
 - Widow of Nain (7:11-17)
 - Sinner woman (7:36-50)
 - Mary and Martha (10:13)
 - Defrauded widow (18:1-8)
- Children
 - Daughter of Jairus (8:41-56)
 - Child with evil spirit (9:37)
 - Becoming as a child to enter heaven (9:47-48)
 - Blessing the children (18:15-17)

Holy Spirit

Luke mentions the Holy Spirit more than Matthew and Mark combined, especially as the Holy Spirit enables people to speak God's word.

- John the Baptist (1:15)
- Mary, mother of Jesus (1:35)
- Elizabeth (1:41)
- Zacharias (1:67)
- Simeon (2:25-26)
- Jesus (1:25; 3:22; 4:1, 14-18; 10:21; 24:49)

The Holy Spirit also figures prominently in the book of Acts, leading the church from the Jews to the Samaritans and then to the Gentiles. At each point of progress, a special manifestation of the Holy Spirit is seen.

Songs of Praise

Luke 1-2 record four songs of praise given to God:

- Mary's *Magnificat* (1:46-55)
- Zacharias' *Benedictus* (1:68-79)
- Angels' *Excelsius* (2:10-14)
- Simeon's *Nunc Demitis* (2:29-32)

John

Author and date

The author is the apostle John. Although not stated in the book itself, both the external and internal evidence favors him as the author.

John's Gospel was written much later than the Synoptics. It assumes the readers were familiar with the Synoptics already. Cf. the following examples:

- "John [the Baptist] was not yet cast into prison" (3:24; yet his imprisonment recorded only in Synoptics)
- Mention of "the Twelve" (6:67-71; 20:24; yet the 12 apostles selection only in Synoptics)

- Necessary to eat Jesus’ “flesh” and drink his “blood” (6:52-59; spiritual significance of Lord’s Supper, yet Lord’s Supper only in Synoptics)

Actually, about 92% of John is different material than the Synoptics have. Traditionally John is dated in the 90s, when he was living in Ephesus.

Purpose of John

John’s purpose is stated in John 20:30-31, “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

John clearly had an evangelistic purpose, apparently directed to non-Christian Jews and proselytes especially; the idea being that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God expected by the Jews (see D. A. Carson, *The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel: John 20:31 Reconsidered*, *JBL* 106:4 [Dec. 1987], 639-51).

Emphases of John

Deity of Christ

John does teach the humanity of Christ; he was thirsty, he was weary. He is called the “son of man” in 5:27.

But his deity is proclaimed more emphatically in John, and announced earlier in his ministry than in the Synoptics (1:1-14; 8:58; 17:5). It is emphasized in the seven “I am” sayings in John.

1. The Bread of Life (ch. 6)
2. The Light of the World (ch. 8-9)
3. The Door (ch. 10)
4. The Good Shepherd (ch. 10)
5. The Resurrection and the Life (ch. 11)
6. The Way, the Truth, and the Life (ch. 14)
7. The True Vine (ch. 15)

Signs of Christ

While John mentions that Jesus performed many miracles, and many other miracles are recorded in the Synoptics, John selects seven miracles in particular, which he calls “signs.” The

Gospel is structured around these seven signs, with Jesus' sermons or disputes in the immediate context providing the theological meaning of the signs.

1. Turning water to wine (ch. 2)
2. Healing nobleman's son (ch. 4)
3. Healing the invalid (ch. 5)
4. Feeding the 5,000 (ch. 6)
5. Walking on water (ch. 6)
6. Healing the man born blind (ch. 9)
7. Raising Lazarus from the dead (ch. 11)

Dealing with individuals

John pictures Jesus as interested in various individuals and speaking extensively with them: Nathaniel, Nicodemus, Samaritan woman, Thomas, Peter.

Short time periods

John has selected several short time periods—a day, a week, a month—to concentrate much of his material; for example, John 1-12 covers only 20 days, and John 13-19 all takes place on one day.

Judea and the festivals of the Jews

John is the only Gospel to emphasize the Judean ministry of Christ, as the Synoptics concentrate on his Galilean ministry. The Synoptics hint at a Judean ministry prior to his last Passover there (Mark 11:1-6; Luke 10:38-42), but John devotes many chapters to Jesus' words and activities in Jerusalem and Judea. He structures Jesus' life around events in Jerusalem, the Jewish festivals (see notes above, Ch. 3, "Life of Jesus," under "Length of Ministry").

- 3 Passovers (3:23; 6:4; 12:1 = 13:1)
- 1 Other feast, possible a Passover (5:1)
- Feast of Tabernacles (7:2)
- Feast of Dedication (10:22)

Necessity of believing

In addition to the stated purpose of the book ("that you might believe," 20:31), John emphasizes the need to believe by using the verb *pisteuo*, "to believe," 100 times in the book.

Brief outline of John

1. Prologue (1:1-18)
2. Public ministry (ch. 1-12)
3. Private ministry and Passion (ch. 13-20)
4. Epilogue (ch. 21)