

## An Introduction to the Gospels

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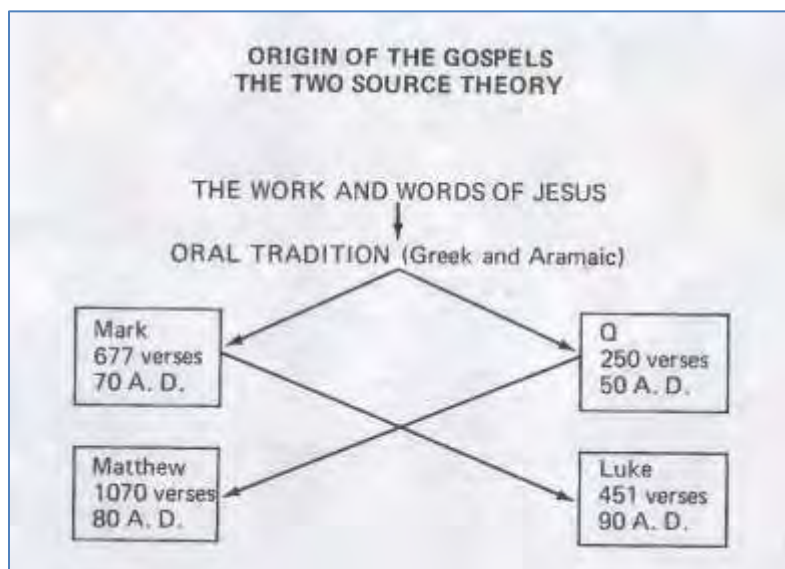
The word Gospel means "good tidings" referring to the character of the message which is related. For Christians, the Gospel means more specifically the "message of salvation" which is good news to mankind. There is really only one Gospel, although it is fourfold.

Justin Martyr was the first to use the term "the Gospel" as applied to the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that make up the Gospel record. The four books are not a complete history of the words and acts of Jesus. They are, rather, biographical memoirs which together constitute one Gospel. When speaking of a specific book of the Gospel, we should not say "Mark's Gospel" or "Matthew's Gospel," but "the Gospel according to Mark," etc.

The number of books contained in the Gospel has always been four. No books other than the ones now included have ever been recognized by the church as a whole. They were arranged as a group as early as 150 A.D. by Tatian the Syrian. The order has always been the same: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. That each book has its own peculiar characteristics was easily and early perceived. Irenaeus tells us that Matthew symbolizes the Man, Mark the Eagle, Luke the Ox, and John the Lion. In this way he is recognizing the differentiating features of the books. The authors were guided in their memoirs by the purposes they had in view. Each writes from his own perspective, so we have four different pictures of Jesus as his personality appeared to the minds of each.

The first three books (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are called the synoptic Gospels because they resemble one another in general features and the ground they cover. Synoptic here means giving a general view of the same series of events in the life of Jesus. The fourth book, John, is dealt with separately. Traditionally, it has been said that Matthew wrote for the Jews, Mark for the Romans, Luke for the Greeks, and John for Christians in general. It is generally true that each has a specific class in mind, but none of the books were written for non-Christians.

### Origin



The most difficult problem of a critical study of the Gospel books is that of their origin, because of their remarkable resemblances and striking differences. The synoptic Gospels are naturally dealt with by themselves, for the narrative of John coincides with the others in only a few passages. The most reasonable explanation of this is that John was written last of all and much later than the others, and the author's purpose for writing was different than that of the earlier authors.

Considering only the synoptic Gospels, there is a large amount of agreement and detail. If the histories are divided into 89 sections, we find that in 42 sections all three narratives coincide. In 12 sections Matthew and Mark only coincide, in five Mark and Luke only, and in 14 Matthew and Luke only agree. The cited figures apply only to the facts narrated. The verbal coincidence is much smaller. Most of the verbal coincidence occurs in the words of others, particularly in the words of Jesus.

There are also many points of difference in the Gospel. If the contents are represented by 100, the following table may be used to survey the peculiarities and concordances contained within the Gospel.

(Concordance-an alphabetical list of all the important words of a book or author, with references to the

passages in which they occur.)

	Peculiarities	Concordances
Mark	7	93
Matthew	42	58
Luke	59	41

From the above table, we can see that, of the synoptic Gospels, Mark has the least amount of peculiarities. Mark contains only about 24 verses which are not paralleled in Matthew or Luke. Matthew has more concordances than peculiarities. Luke has more peculiarities than concordances. How do we account for the peculiarities as well as the concordances?

Three general theories have been put forward. One is that the synoptists depend on one another as source material. Many different orders of dependency are possible here. Another is that the synoptists are independent of one another but depend on older, common sources. Finally there is the theory that the synoptists are dependent both on one another and on older sources.

Although there still exist many points of difference among critics of the New Testament, modern thought seems to have found agreement on several basic points. The earliest Gospel is Mark, which was composed on the basis of a number of oral and written sources. Mark served as the primary source for Matthew and Luke.

The books of Matthew and Luke contain common material which is not drawn from Mark. This double tradition of Luke and Matthew indicates a second written source which both shared, probably written in Greek. This source is designated "Q," from the German "quelle" for source.

Matthew enriched his work with legends and testimonies. Luke adds more from both written and oral sources. Nearly all the material used reached the evangelists in Greek; a large majority were written.

### **Matthew**

Although tradition assigns the authorship of this book to the disciple Matthew, a tax collector, there is nothing in the text to confirm this. The author of Matthew was a Jew converted to Christianity, demonstrated by his use of the Old Testament (in genealogy and law), his view of Jesus as the new Moses, and his interest in Christianity as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy. Yet he was a Jew familiar with the Greek world, and wrote his message in Greek.

The author does not record events chronologically, but rather, groups sayings and events. He is not writing a history, but a historical argument. He is striving to confirm that Jesus was the Messiah to the Old Testament prophecy. He begins by giving the legal ancestry of Jesus. Many of the prophecies which were fulfilled in the case of Jesus are noted.

Jesus was born of a virgin (Isaiah), he was born in Bethlehem (Micah), his parents were driven into Egypt so that he might be a "son called out to Egypt," he healed the sick and did deeds of mercy, he had a forerunner (Isaiah), and was finally betrayed. The message is that the Jewish mission is now over, as the Jews had refused Jesus. He despairs of converting the Jews, and gives the inheritance of the Kingdom of Heaven to the Greeks, who have responded to Christianity.

Although it is impossible to determine the exact date of composition, it is evident that considerable time elapsed between the actual events and their recording. From internal evidence, the date of composition can be placed after the destruction of Jerusalem, at approximately 80 A.D.

The author quotes the Old Testament more frequently than any other book. Sixty-five passages refer to it. Jesus is called the "son of David" eight times. "The Kingdom of Heaven" is referred to 33 times. The other books used "Kingdom of God." Matthew is called the "Kingly Gospel" because it presents the Messianic King. Its teaching revolves around the kingship of Jesus, and emphasized Jesus' message.

### **Mark**

The book itself makes no claim to its authorship, but tradition assigns the book to Mark. It is reasonable to suppose the Mark is the "John whose other name was Mark" referred to several times in the New Testament. Mark was a Jew whose mother owned a house in Jerusalem, an indication of wealth. The apostle Peter, calls Mark his son, but he is probably using this term in a spiritual sense, as he was responsible for Mark's conversion. He may have been an eyewitness to some part of Jesus' life, if he was the young man who followed Jesus, "with nothing but a linen cloth about his body; and they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked" (Mark 14:51-52). Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey, probably arranging temporal matters, such as travel, lodging, etc. Later, he is identified as a companion of the apostle Peter in Rome.

The purpose for writing the Gospel was to preserve Peter's memoirs of Jesus for the Roman public. Jewish rites and ceremonies are always explained, and place descriptions are clearly intended for those not familiar with Judea. To the material from Peter, Mark brought additional material and his own theological views. The emphasis is on the facts of Jesus' life, dealing with Jesus as a person, rather than his teaching.

Mark is the earliest of the Gospel records, written soon after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

The last 12 verses of Mark are almost universally regarded as being written by an unknown author. The internal inconsistencies of these verses with the rest of the book indicate that in some way the end of the Gospel was tampered with. Mark is a Gospel of fact and action. It deals with the actions of Jesus and doesn't contain any long discourses. Fittingly, the style is abrupt. The author used the Greek words for "forthwith," "immediately" and "straightway" over 40 times. He dwells upon little particulars, using word pictures to describe the work of Jesus and his effect on the multitude.

## **Luke**

According to tradition, the author of the third book is "Luke, the beloved physician." The author does not mention his name, but does refer to himself in the prefatory words of the Gospel. It is not possible to identify Luke as the author from the language or style of the Gospel, although attempts have been made to confirm the author as physician by the frequency of medical terms. However, such medical knowledge as found would have been common to any cultured writer of that time.

We do know that the author was a Greek, a Gentile Christian. He was well-educated, as displayed by his methodical approach to his history and his use of terms from classical Greek. He was a companion of Paul on his journeys and was influenced by the writings of Paul.

So, while there is no absolute attribution of this work to a particular person, we have no valid reason for doubting that the author is Luke, Paul's companion.

In the prologue, the author indicated his use of sources. He used several narratives compiled before his (including Mark). He also included information from eye witnesses (indicating that he was not one himself. He desired to set forth an orderly account of the historical foundations of the faith in which cultivated Christians believed.

The author says he is writing his account for the "most excellent Theophilus," a Christian of some and. Theophilus means "lover of God," leading some to claim the name refers to Christians in general. Others say he is an honored Greek with whom Luke was intimately acquainted. Most agree that Theophilus was representative of a large class to whom the Gospel had been preached and with whom Luke wanted to leave it as a permanent treasure. Luke wrote for the Greeks and addressed it to an individual, Theophilus, for personal reasons.

The author of Luke and Acts is the same. Considering both books together, it is possible to place the writing of Luke in Ephesus at approximately 90 A. D.

This history starts earlier than Matthew or Mark, beginning with the birth of John the Baptist. Luke traces the natural parentage of Jesus through Mary to Adam and to God. He presents Jesus as the son of man-a redeemer of the human family with a national distinction. The emphasis is on Jesus as the Savior of the world.

Luke has the most peculiarities of the synoptic Gospels and contains more history of the life of Jesus.

Thirteen parables and seven miracles are recorded in only this Gospel. The best use of Greek in the New Testament is found here, notably in the purity of language and extent of vocabulary. From this book come the names for the most famous hymns of the church- including "Ave Maria," "Benedictus," "Magnificat," and "Gloria in Excelsis."

By making numerous references to contemporary history, the author has aided in fixing dates of some important events in Gospel history. Many of the Jewish traditions concerning Jesus and his teachings, which are found in other books, are omitted here. The insistence is on the universalism of the Gospel.

## **John**

The Gospel according to John is considered apart from the synoptic Gospels because it differs not only in the chronological and geographical setting for Jesus' life, but also because it has different theological viewpoints. By the beginning of the second century, it had become apparent that the Greek world was to provide the response Christianity needed in order to thrive. Yet the message of salvation was still being

related in Jewish terms. To those who had not been schooled in Jewish messianic thought, the message was difficult.

The old books of Christianity could not fulfill the literary expectations of a culture which had produced such masterpieces as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Reason, rather than revelation, was the Greek method of arriving at truths. For these reasons, there was a need to relate the message of salvation to the Greek public in their own terms. The Fourth Gospel was an attempt to meet this need.

The author of John was not so much interested in writing a historical account as in placing the life of Jesus in philosophical, eternal, and cosmic relationships. His emphasis on Jesus as the Logos both the Word of revelation, and the Reason or way to truth-makes possible the blend of philosophy and religion.

The chronology of main events differs from that found in the synoptic Gospels, and the scene of action switches from Galilee to Judea. The author also differed from the synoptists in his view of Jesus' role. So we find that Jesus' death was no longer a sacrifice; it was the culmination of his life. He will not come again; his return was the resurrection. Judgment is not a messianic function; it is performed by the individual man as he makes choices which convict or acquit him.

The chief sin is unbelief. Thus, the promise and need for the return of the Messiah is lost. This book is a spiritual Gospel, providing the Greeks rich devotional material in which they found foundations for their new faith.

The Greek character of the Gospel of John establishes that the author was a Greek, not John the Apostle, a Galilean fisherman. The abstract thought and use of dialogue are characteristically Greek. Very little Jewish scripture is used. And the book itself contains strong anti-Jewish feelings. The date of composition was probably between 100-110 A.D. at Ephesus in the province of Asia. The author may have been John the Elder, credited with the Johannine letters.