

# A Basic Introduction to the Four Gospels

Prepared  
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## I. THE FOUR GOSPELS.

### A. The Four Gospels in the NT.

1. There are 27 books in the NT: 4 gospels (Matthew through John), 1 book of history (Acts), 21 epistles (Romans through Jude; 13 epistles of Paul and 8 general epistles), and 1 book of prophecy (Revelation).
2. The 4 gospels record the life of Christ.

### B. Why Four Gospels?

1. To provide different pictures of the character and nature of Jesus. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called “Synoptics”, meaning to “see with” or “see alike”. These gospels “see” the life of Christ “alike”.
2. To provide different accounts of the same event which “fill out” that event. God wanted to tell the same story from different viewpoints to give mankind a fuller portrait of his son Jesus. These different accounts would offer verifiable and corroborating testimony (“at the mouth of two or three witnesses...”).
3. To provide an accurate history of the life of Christ. This history is based upon eyewitness accounts of Jesus’s life that are carefully recorded (Lk. 1:1-4; Jn. 20:24). The material covered by the gospel writers is not exhaustive – Jesus did more than what is recorded (Jn. 21:24).
4. To reward diligent seekers who are willing to look at all the evidence.

### C. Why A Life of Christ?

1. To tell to the world about Jesus, the Savior of the world: “for there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Lk. 2:11). Jesus came to “seek and save the lost” (Lk. 19:10). This is the central message of the entire Bible!
2. Jesus is the solution to the sin problem that goes back to Genesis 3. The entire OT (from Gen. 3:15 to Malachi 3:1) points forward to Jesus and the rest of the NT (Acts through Revelation) points backward to Jesus. The life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus make up the central message of the entire Bible.
3. The OT (Jesus is coming!), the gospel (Jesus is here!), and Acts through Revelation (Jesus is coming again!).
4. To answer these 7 important questions:
  - a) Who is Jesus?

- b) Where did he come from?
  - c) Why did he come to earth?
  - d) What was his message?
  - e) Why did he die?
  - f) Why was his tomb empty?
  - g) Where is he now?
5. To know Jesus, not just to know about Jesus. To give the unbeliever the information needed to believe and obey Jesus (Jn. 20:30-31)! To give the believer confidence and certainty concerning what he has believed (Lk. 1:1-4)!

#### D. Chronology and Harmony.

1. The exact date of Jesus's birth (month, day, and year) is unknown and the exact year of the beginning of his teaching ministry is unknown. Luke says, "about 30 years of age" (3:23). The exact length of his ministry is also unknown. Three and one half years is suggested.
2. Two popular dates for Jesus's birth and ministry are:
  - a) Birth (c. 6 B.C.) and ministry (c. late A.D. 26 to early A.D. 30).
  - b) Birth (c. 4 B.C.) and ministry (c. A.D. 30-33).
3. Harmonies of the gospels written by modern men differ slightly because the exact timing of some of the events in Jesus's life is also unknown. Also, some of the lessons of Jesus are not tied to a specific event. Additionally, the gospel writers did not always use a chronological arrangement in their material.

## II. BASIC INTRODUCTION.

### A. Authors.

1. Matthew – a Jew (Mk. 3:18; Lk. 6:15; Acts 1:13). Matthew means "gift of the Lord". He is the son of Alphaeus (Mk. 2:14) and he is also called Levi (Mk. 2:14; Lk. 5:27, 27). He was a tax-collector (publican) in Capernaum for the Romans. He responded quickly to being called by Jesus and he made a feast for Jesus after he was called (Mt. 9:9; 10:3).
2. Mark – also called John Mark (Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37). His mother's name was Mary, he was the cousin of Barnabas (Col. 4:10), and he was a fellow-worker and companion of Paul (Acts 12:25; 13:5, 13; 15:37, 39; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philemon 24). He may have been the "young man" that fled on the night of Jesus's betrayal (14:51-52) and he may have been converted / mentored by Peter (1 Pet. 5:13).
3. Luke – the beloved physician (Col. 4:14) and travelling companion of Paul (2 Tim. 4:11; Philemon 24; note the "we sections" in the book of Acts, 16:11-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-8; 27:1-28:16). He wrote the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts to Theophilus (lover of God), a Greek (Lk. 1:1-4; Acts 1:1). Both of these

books make up about 28% of the NT. The gospel of Luke tells about Jesus the Savior and the book of Acts tells how the Savior saved the world.

4. John – not John the Baptist. This John was the son of Zebedee and the brother of James. He was a fisherman and he was called by Jesus to be an apostle (Mt. 4:21; 10:2; Mk. 1:19; 3:17; Lk. 5:10; 6:14; Acts 1:13). He was part of Jesus’s “inner circle” – Peter, James, and John (Mt. 17:1; Mk. 1:29; 5:37; 9:2; 13:3; Lk. 8:51; 9:28, 49). He made a special request of Jesus (Mk. 10:35, 41; Lk. 9:54; 22:8). He was probably the “disciple whom Jesus loved” (Jn. 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). He was a co-preacher with Peter (Acts 3:1-4, 11; 4:13, 19; 8:14). His brother James was killed with the sword (Acts 12:2). He was a “pillar” in the church (Gal. 2:9). He also wrote 1-3 John and the book of Revelation (1:1, 4; 22:8). He was imprisoned for the cause of Christ (Rev. 1:9).

#### B. Audience.

1. Matthew – likely a Jewish audience. Note the many OT quotations and references (c. 130) to prophecies being “fulfilled”.
2. Mark – likely a Roman audience. Note the interpretation of Aramaic terms in Mark (3:17; 5:41; 7:3-4; 15:22, 34) and Mark’s use of Latin words in place of Greek words (4:21; 6:27; 12:14, 42; 15:15-16, 39). Mark also omits Jewish interests such as the genealogy of Jesus, OT fulfilled prophecies, Jewish customs, etc., that are found in the other gospels.
3. Luke – a Greek, “most excellent Theophilus” (1:3; Acts 1:1; compare with “most excellent” in Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25).
4. John – likely the NT church as a whole and everyone outside the church.

#### C. Date.

1. Matthew – Sometime prior to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. A suggested date is A.D. 58 to 68 (note the words “to this day” in 27:8 and “until this day” in 28:15).
2. Mark – Many Bible scholars believe that Mark was the first gospel to be written, but this cannot be known for certain. A suggested date is A.D. 55 – 65.
3. Luke – This gospel was probably written around the time that the book of Acts was written (right after Acts 28 and Paul’s Roman imprisonment). A suggested date is A.D. 63.
4. John – A suggested date is A.D. 60-90.

#### D. Theme.

1. Matthew – Jesus is the promised (prophesied) Messiah King (1:1 [see Gen. 12:3], 23; 2:2, 6; 3:17; 4:15-17; 21:5, 9; 22:44, 45; 26:64; 27:11, 27-37, 42). Jesus demonstrates his fulfillment of the OT laws, priesthood, sacrifices, types, and prophecies.
2. Mark – Jesus is the sacrificial servant (10:45). Jesus demonstrates his miraculous power.

3. Luke – Jesus is the universal savior (2:10-11; 3:6; 14:22; 15:2; 19:10; 24:47). Jesus shows his merciful grace.
4. John – Jesus is the divine Son of God (1:1, 14, 18; 20:28, 30-31). Jesus demonstrates his divine glory.

#### E. Structure.

1. Matthew is part chronological and part topical / thematic (4:12 – 7:29). Matthew begins with the chronology and birth of Jesus and ends with his ascension. Matthew 12 is the pivotal chapter.
  - a) Matthew contains five key discourses:
    - (1) The Sermon on the Mount (5:3 – 7:27; note 7:28).
    - (2) The instruction of the disciples (10:5-42; note 11:1).
    - (3) The parables of the kingdom (13:3-52; note 13:53).
    - (4) The terms of discipleship (18:3-35; note 19:1).
    - (5) The Olivet discourse (24:4 – 25:46; note 26:1).
  - b) Matthew contains three sets of 10:
    - (1) Ten messages of Jesus (5-7).
    - (2) Ten mighty works of Jesus (8-10).
    - (3) Ten reactions to Jesus (11-18).
2. Mark. Mark begins with the work of John and Jesus and ends with his ascension. His gospel is more topical than chronological. Mark 8 is the pivotal chapter. Mark's ending (16:9-20) has been questioned, but the manuscript / ancient version evidence is in favor of including it in the text.
3. Luke is primarily chronological in arrangement from Jesus's birth to his ascension back into heaven (see 3:1). Luke begins with the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus and ends with his ascension.
4. John is primarily topical / thematic and the subject is the 7 miracles of Jesus which prove his deity and the 7 "I am" sayings (6:35; 8:12; 10:9, 11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:5). John begins with a "prologue" - the pre-existence (pre-incarnation) of Jesus - and ends with Jesus's post-resurrection appearances.

#### F. Characteristics.

1. Matthew – known for his extensive use of OT references (c. 130) and emphasis on the "kingdom of heaven" (mentioned 30-32 times in Matthew and only in Matthew; "kingdom" is mentioned 53 times). Matthew has more to say about Jesus as the "son of David" than any other gospel. Matthew acts like a teacher and his key word is "fulfilled" (13x). He focuses on Jesus's sermons. Matthew has been described as "the bridge" between the OT and NT.
2. Mark – Mark is the shortest and simplest of the four gospels. Mark moves right to the public ministry of Jesus in Mark 1. He focuses more on Jesus's actions

than Jesus's teachings. His gospel is known for its brevity in recording the events of Jesus. Jesus moves rapidly ("straightway" or "immediately", 42 times) from one place to another (1:10, 12, 20-21, 23, 29-30, 42-43, etc.). Jesus is an active servant who is constantly on the move. A Roman audience would appreciate Jesus's quick and decisive actions. About 40% of this gospel is devoted to the last eight days of Jesus's ministry (11:1 – 16:18). Mark acts like a preacher and his key word is "straightway". He focuses on Jesus's miracles (18 of 35 miracles).

3. Luke – Jesus is portrayed as associating with all kinds of people: women, lepers, the poor, tax-collectors, etc. For women see Luke 7:11-12, 36-50; 8:2-3; 10:38-42; 11:27; 13:10-17; 15:8; 23:2, etc. For the downtrodden see Luke 3:12; 4:29; 7:29; 15:1-2; 10:29-37; 15:1-2; 17:11-19; 18:9-14; 23:43. Luke also contains songs not found in the other gospels (1:46-55, 67-79; 2:14, 28-32). Jesus is a human who associates with all humans. In Luke, Jesus is the Son of Man (humanity), while in John, he is the Son of God (deity). Luke acts like an historian and his key word is "son of man". He focuses on Jesus's parables.
4. John – the record of Jesus's ministry is set within the framework of 7 miracles and 4 Jewish feasts. John acts like a theologian and his key word is "believe" (3:18; 8:24; 9:35; 20:26-31). He focuses on Jesus's doctrines: Jesus is (spiritual) "light" and "life".

#### G. Location and Time.

1. Matthew.
  - a) Matthew 1:1 – 4:11 (Bethlehem and Nazareth).
  - b) Matthew 4:12 – 18:35 (Galilee).
  - c) Matthew 19:1 – 28:20 (Judea and Jerusalem).
2. Mark.
  - a) Mark 1:1 – 10:52, Galilee and Perea (c. 3 years, 6 months).
  - b) Mark 11:1 – 16:20, Judea and Jerusalem (8 days).
3. Luke.
  - a) Luke 1:1 – 4:13 (Israel).
  - b) Luke 4:14 – 9:50 (Galilee).
  - c) Luke 9:51 – 19:27 (Israel).
  - d) Luke 19:28 – 24:53 (Jerusalem).
4. John.
  - a) John 1:1 – 21:25 (Israel, Judea, and Jerusalem).
  - b) John 1:1 – 12:50 (a few years).
  - c) John 13:1 – 17:26 (a few hours).
  - d) John 18:1 – 21:25 (a few weeks).

## H. Uniqueness.

1. Matthew – the following is material unique to Matthew:
  - a) Matthew 1:1; 1:18–2:23; 5:17-20, 21-24, 27-29, 31, 33-38, 43; 6:1-8, 16-19; 7:6, 15-17, 28-29; 9:27-31, 35-38; 10:22-23; 11:1, 28-30; 13:24-30, 36-43, 44-52; 14:28-31; 16:17-19; 17:24-27; 18:15-21, 21-35; 19:10-12; 20:1-16; 21:28-32; nearly all of chapter 23; 25:1-13, 31-46; 27:3-10, 24-25, 52-53, 62-66; 28:11-15, 16-20.
  - b) Material in other Gospels but significantly different in Matthew: 1:2-17; most of chapter 5–7 (esp. 5:3-12; 6:9-15; 7:15-20); most of chapter 10; 12:33-37; 16:13-23; much of chapter 18; 22:1-14; 25:14-30.
2. Mark – the following material is unique to Mark:
  - a) Mark 1:1 (introductory verse); 3:19b-21 (Jesus’s family comes for him); 4:26-29 (parable of seed growing of itself); 7:31-37 (deaf man in Decapolis); 8:22-26 (blind man of Bethsaida); 14:51-52 (young man runs away after Jesus’s arrest); 16:14-18 (commissioning of the eleven).
3. Luke – the following material is unique to Luke:
  - a) Luke 1:1-4; 1:5–2:52; 3:10-14; 4:14-30; 5:1-11; 6:24-26; 7:11-17; 8:1-3; much of 9:51— 18:14; 19:1-10, 39-44; 22:15-17, 31-32, 35-38; 23:2-16, 27-31, 34, 39-43, 46; 24:13-35, 36-49, 50-53.
  - b) Material in other gospels but significantly different in Luke: 3:1-2, 23-38; 6:20-26; 7:36-50; 9:18-22; 11:1-8; 14:16-24; 19:12-27; 21:34-38; 22:15-38; 24:1-12
4. John – the following material is unique to John:
  - a) The abrupt and exalted introduction of Jesus in John 1 stands in stark contrast to Matthew’s and Luke’s presentations, which begin with Jesus’s early life (Mark comes the closest to John’s abrupt beginning but that Gospel falls far short of the explicit promotion of Jesus’s divinity).
  - b) The cleansing of the temple appears early in the ministry of Jesus in the fourth gospel as opposed to its appearance late in the Synoptics (John 2:13-22; cf. Matt. 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46) (note John’s use of 10 verses to describe the temple cleansing as opposed to the use of two or three in the Synoptics).
  - c) The absence of Jesus’s temptation and transfiguration is striking when compared to the Synoptics (Matt. 4:1-11; Mark 1:11-13; Luke 4:1-13 and Matt. 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-8 respectively).
  - d) The failure to include an exorcism by Jesus in the fourth Gospel is surprising compared to the prevalence of exorcisms in the Synoptics.
  - e) The absence of the institution of the communion meal (Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-20).
  - f) The narrative content of John 2 - 4 is absent from the Synoptics.

- g) The “I Am” Sayings are distinctive to the fourth Gospel.
- h) John’s reliance on signs to prove Jesus’s divinity is unique to John. 9. In John, Jesus makes three trips to Jerusalem for the Passover as opposed to one in the Synoptics (John 2:13; 6:4; 11:55—12:1 cf. Matt. 26; Mark 14; Luke 22).
- i) The raising of Lazarus in John 11 is absent from the Synoptics.
- j) The extended treatment of Jesus’s last few hours and the farewell discourses do not find parallels in the other gospels (John 13–17).
- k) John’s breathing of the Holy Spirit in chapter 20 and the appendix of John 21 is glaringly absent from the Synoptics.
- l) The post-cross call of Peter in John 21 is recorded only by John.

#### I. Outline.

1. Matthew: Jesus is the promised Messiah King.
  - a) The presentation of the king (1:1 – 10:42).
  - b) The rejection of the king (11:1 – 28:20).
2. Mark: Jesus is the sacrificial servant.
  - a) The servants of the Servant (1-3).
  - b) The service of the Servant (4-7).
  - c) The saying of the Servant (8-10).
  - d) The suffering of the Servant (11-16)
3. Luke: Jesus is the universal savior.
  - a) Seeking the lost (1:1 – 18:43).
  - b) Saving the lost (19:1 – 24:53).
4. John: Jesus is the divine Son of God.
  - a) Incarnation of the Son of God (1:1-18).
  - b) Presentation of the Son of God (1:19 – 4:54).
  - c) Opposition to the Son of God (5:1 – 12:50).
  - d) Valediction of the Son of God (13:1 – 17:26).
  - e) Consummation of the Son of God (18:1 – 21:25).

#### J. Sources.

1. Some Bible students believe that Matthew, Luke, and John, used the gospel of Mark as primary source material for their gospels.
2. Other Bible students believe that “Q” (“Quelle”, German = source) was an unknown document that provided source material for the gospels.

3. With the exception of extra documents referred to by Luke (1:1-2), the entire study of so-called gospel “sources” can be very subjective, questionable, and unproductive.

#### K. Discrepancies.

1. Do the four gospels contain contradictory information?
2. No, they only contain information that appears to be contradictory in some places. Information that differs slightly is not necessarily contradictory. It is information that differs at times because of the different eyewitness perspectives.

### III. CONCLUSION.

#### A. Can We Trust the Gospels?

1. The modern critics say, “No!”
2. The inspiration of the gospel writers gives us cause to trust the gospel message (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

#### B. Why Study the Life of Christ?

1. We do not read just to learn some 1<sup>st</sup> century history.
2. We read not just for information, but for transformation (Rom. 8:29).
3. You must make a decision about Jesus (Jn. 3:5; 20:30-31)!

#### C. Is Jesus ...

1. Your king (Mt. 25:31-34)?
2. Your pattern for service (Mk. 9:35; 10:43-44)?
3. Your savior (Lk. 15:3ff)?
4. Your God (Jn. 5:25; 20:28)?

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