

Week #:	236	Series:	The Gospels	Title:	The Gospels
Scriptures:	Mark 1:15; Luke 2:41-52; Luke 3:1-2; Acts 18:2; Mark 15:34; John 19:13; Mark 7:3; John 11:2; John 12:4 & 6; Matthew 1:22; Matthew 26:56; Matthew 13:43-44; Mark 7:1-5; Mark 5:41; Mark 7:34; Mark 10:46; Mark 15:22; Mark 15:34; Mark 10:43 & 45; Luke 1:3;-4; Luke 1:35; Matthew 9:4-6; Matthew 14:33; Matthew 27:43; John 1:1; John 1:14; John 20:31; Exodus 3:14; John 6:35; John 8:12; John 14:6; John 8:58				

Before digging into the events which are chronicled in the books of the four Gospels, it is important to look at the writers of these books themselves and to whom they were writing their version of the events.

**The Gospels [also called the *Evangelists*] are: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.** They are each thought to be authored by the man for whom the book is named.

### What Is A Gospel:

The Greek word translated *gospel* (*euangelion*) originally meant **good news**. The word became an appropriate word for the long-awaited message Jesus came to bring because he came with a message of hope for the hopeless and freedom for the oppressed. The Gospels were ancient biographies written to teach us about the life and ministry of Jesus.

For example, the first words of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of Mark 1:15 are:

<sup>15</sup>The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.

Then, when four narrations of the life of Jesus were written by his apostles or by close friends of the apostles, it also made sense to call these four documents "Gospels."

The four Gospels taught the life of Jesus from four vantage points to four unique audiences. Because of their similar narrative order, as well as some shared content, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are considered the **Synoptic Gospels** (*synoptic* meaning *to see together*). John's Gospel is not considered a Synoptic Gospel because of its significant number of unparalleled information from the other three Gospels. Even so, each Gospel has its own unique fingerprint.

### What type of history do the four Evangelists tell, and what does it reveal about Jesus?

No modern biographer would ignore all of Jesus' early life, as Mark does, or skip over his formative experiences as a young adult, as all Gospels but Luke do (Luke 2:41-52). Nor would a modern biographer of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, for example, spend half of his account on just the last week of his subject's life, even if the person died tragically. And most modern historical works at least attempt to present themselves as reasonably objective.

But the authors of the four Gospels broke all these rules, especially the last. They were not disinterested observers of Jesus and his movement. No author who launches his work with the phrase "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" is pretending to write as a neutral reporter.

If the Gospels are not like modern works of history, neither are they like folklore. The time gap between the death of Jesus and the writing of the Jesus traditions (between 30 and 60 years) is too short to consider the Gospels as mere legends or folklore, which always have long gestation periods.

If they are neither modern biographies nor legends, what type of history do these Gospels contain? What do they reveal about Jesus? I believe upon close reading that three of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and John) are ancient biographies, and one (Luke) presents itself as an ancient history.

### Revealing character

The Gospels were not written to give a chronology of Jesus' ministry as much as to reveal who He was. Even markers that seem to be precise were only devices to move the narrative along. Mark, for example, frequently uses the term "*immediately*" in transitions, but he usually only means "*after that*."

The authors did not have access to the extensive sources available today; besides, they were more interested in presenting what was typical and revealing a person than in giving a blow-by-blow chronicle of each year of a person's life. So ancient biographies were anecdotal by necessity.

Furthermore, most ancients did not believe a person's character developed over time. Character was viewed as fixed at birth, determined by factors such as gender, generation, and geography; it was revealed gradually but consistently. Ancients also believed that how one died was especially revealing of one's true character. This is one reason the Gospel writers spent so many words recounting Jesus' last week.

One feature of the Gospels that troubles some modern readers is their lack of chronological precision, but this is typical of ancient biographies. Again, the focus is on the persons involved and what they did, not on the space-time coordinates of the event.

Jesus' cleansing of the temple provides a fine illustration. While all four Gospels record only one cleansing, the fourth Gospel places this event near the outset, while the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, Luke) place it during Passion week. A modern reader may think Jesus cleansed the temple twice. But this interpretation overlooks two points:

1. ancient readers would have concluded there was only one cleansing since no Gospel includes two such events;
2. the ancient audience was aware that a biographer had freedom to arrange his material in whatever fashion he felt most revealing of his subject.

In this case, the fourth Evangelist wished to stress at the outset how Jesus replaced the institutions of Judaism with himself (e.g., He is God's Torah or Word, He is the temple, He is the source of new life and purity). Many ancient biographies, such as Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* or Tacitus's *Agricola*, were likewise more interested in events that reveal character than in a strict chronological record.

In some ancient historical (versus biographical) works, especially in the Greek tradition, there was more attention to chronology. This helps explain the "synchronisms" in Luke 3:1-2 or Acts 18:2. A synchronism tries to locate an event in divine history in relation to secular events, like the reign of a certain governor. Thus, Luke and Acts would have seemed to ancients to be less biographical and more historical in character.

### **What can we depend on?**

What kind of historical information, then, do the Gospels give about Jesus?

1. First, the Gospel accounts (especially Matthew, Mark, and John), present a good deal about Jesus' character and how he was evaluated by his contemporaries. These character sketches, however, are largely indirect, and let Jesus' words and deeds speak for themselves.
2. Second, the Gospel writers presented what they deemed were the salient facts readers absolutely must know to understand Jesus' mission, person, and work.
3. Third, these writers presented this information in a broadly chronological way (e.g., Jesus' birth obviously came before his ministry, and his ministry before his death), but they were not concerned with chronological details (except occasionally in Luke).
4. Fourth, this literature was written by and for a special community, a tiny minority in the Roman Empire, so they could know more about their Savior.

Mark and John also appear to have been written, for audiences that had inadequate knowledge of Jesus, ' Jewish world, including the meaning of Aramaic words (Mark 15:34; John 19:13) and Jewish customs (Mark 7:3).

In the case of the fourth Gospel, the audience was not expected to have personally known the characters in the story (see John 11:2, 12:4,6). This Gospel was written for non-Jewish converts to Christianity.'

### **The Gospel According to Matthew:**

The Gospel According to Matthew was written with a Jewish audience in mind. This is evident because Matthew's Gospel quotes a good deal of Old Testament passages with the intent of showing their fulfillment with the coming of Jesus as the predicted Messiah.

A significant word found throughout the fabric of Matthew is “fulfill” or “fulfilled.” After narrating an event in Jesus’ life, Matthew often connects it to the Old Testament: for example,

Matthew 1:22

This took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet”

Matthew 26:56

This has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled.

“Fulfill” or “fulfilled” is used sixteen times in the book of Matthew, and the majority of the references draw a connection between Jesus and an Old Testament foreshadowing.

Additionally, the theme of the “*kingdom of heaven*” runs throughout the Gospel of Matthew. In the days of Jesus, there was a clear expectation of the coming of the kingdom of God, which had been predicted by the Old Testament writers. Many of the Jewish people of Jesus’ day had anticipated a militaristic kingdom, but there was often a mismatch between expectations and Jesus’ message. Yet through his many parables in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus painted an inviting, even if surprising, picture of a kingdom that would conquer far more than a physical army could ever do.

This “*kingdom of righteousness*”—described so comprehensively in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount—was a limitless treasure (Matthew 13:44) that would outlast the powers of darkness. In it, “the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matthew 13:43).

### **The Gospel According to Mark:**

The Gospel According to Mark was written to a predominantly Gentile audience. We see this in how Mark describes Jewish customs (Mark 7:1–5) and phrases (Mark 5:41; 7:34; 10:46; 15:22, 34) as though his audience was unfamiliar with these things.

The Gospel of Mark invites the Christian to embrace humble service as exemplified in Jesus Christ, as he explains in Mark 10:43 and 45

<sup>43</sup> Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.

<sup>45</sup> For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”

Mark’s Gospel also concerns itself with the coming of the kingdom of God. Mark uses the phrase the “kingdom of God” in parallel with the “kingdom of heaven” language in the Gospel of Matthew. Then, whereas Matthew’s Gospel intersperses Jesus’ miraculous deeds with sermons, Mark’s Gospel tends to focus more on Jesus’ miracles in a fast-paced narrative that spends the final third of the book on Jesus’ final week in Jerusalem before his resurrection.

### **The Gospel According to Luke:**

The Gospel According to Luke was written to the “*most excellent Theophilus*” (Luke 1:3). His title suggested he was a Roman official. This Gospel was an investigated account, in which Luke carefully and accurately researched the testimony of witnesses. Through a meticulous process of documenting historical detail, Luke provides a detailed sketch of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. His stated purpose was given in Luke 1:3-4

<sup>3</sup> Therefore, Your Excellency, since I have carefully investigated all these things from the beginning, it seemed good to me that I too should write you an accurate and ordered narrative, <sup>4</sup> so that you might know how well-founded are the things about which you have been taught.

The Gospel of Luke uniquely emphasizes Jesus’ mission to all of humanity, from hopeless sinners to historic outcasts. This is not surprising, given that Luke seems to be the only Gentile author in the New Testament (with the possible exception of Hebrews).

Jesus' intention to reach outside of conventional molds for making disciples can be seen in some of the parables unique to Luke's Gospel, such as the parable of the prodigal son, the parable of the good Samaritan, and the parable of the pharisee and the tax collector. Luke, a close friend of the apostle Paul, wrote his Gospel as the first in a two-part series ending with the book of Acts.

### **The Gospel According to John:**

The Gospel According to John is considered the last of the four Gospels to be written. Written by Jesus' disciple John in his old age, this document combines a simple style with theological reflections on the events that happened when John was a young man.

While the Synoptic Gospels displayed Jesus' divine nature, for example, in instances such as being incarnated and born of a virgin (Luke 1:35), forgiving sins (Matthew 9:4–6), receiving worship (Matthew 14:33), and calling himself divine names (Matthew 27:43), the Gospel of John makes Jesus' divinity a point of emphasis. John's opening prologue places an accent on the theological truth that God became flesh: John 1:1

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John 1:14

<sup>14</sup> The Word became a human being and lived with us, and we saw his *Sh'khinah*, the *Sh'khinah* of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.

The author strategically chooses a set of seven miracles as manifestations of Jesus' divine glory. The author explains that many signs were done among the disciples, yet the ones written were so the reader would believe that Jesus is the Son of God (John 20:31).

The Gospel of John also includes seven "*I am*" statements in which Jesus fleshes out his character in a manner that matches God's way of referring to himself. In Exodus 3:14, God told Moses, "*I am who I am*," when Moses asked his name. In the same way, Jesus uses language that accents his divinity so the reader can clearly see the uniqueness of his sonship. For example:

- "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35)
- "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12)
- "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6)

At one point, Jesus even told a shocked audience,

- "Before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58).

This Gospel was written during the rise of what became known as "*Gnostic*" teachings, which rejected the importance of physical substance; thus, John wrote in part to remind people of the truth that God indeed came in the flesh.

### **The Gospels:**

The Gospels provide a comprehensive portrait of Jesus, allowing the readers to see his central place in the scheme of redemption. The climactic death, burial, and resurrection is the destination of each Gospel while narrating different snapshots of his life and teachings to arrive at this target.