

MATTHEW, MARK, LUKE, and JOHN

The Four Gospels of Jesus Christ

Introduction

In the decades following the ascension of Jesus into heaven, a few of His followers were led to record His story, the important teachings He shared, and, from their own perspectives, what the life of Jesus meant for the world. These narratives were written and ultimately included in the Bible as the first four books of the New Testament. Whereas the focus of the Old Testament was on the Hebrew people, the Israelites to whom God's promises came through Abraham, New Testament focus is on Jesus Christ and the extension of God's promises to all the world.

The written works are found in the Bible as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, or the gospels. The word *gospel* comes from the Old English word, *godspell*, that translates from the Greek, euangelion, meaning *good tidings* or *good news*. Over time, the word *gospel* has become synonymous with the *good news of Jesus Christ*.

Each of the books is about the same person, Jesus, and shares both like and different elements of His story. Each is considered a gospel. Each were written by different eyewitnesses that complement each other and collaborate the story. Together, they are considered one *gospel* story that the apostle Paul described as “*the gospel of God regarding his Son*” (**Romans 1:1-3**). They provide declarations of the divinity of Jesus, share His miracles and teachings, give the details of His betrayal, trial, death, resurrection, and ascension, as well as offer encouragement to His followers.

The first three books – Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are the *synoptic* gospels, meaning they were written from the ‘same viewpoint’ or can be ‘seen together’ as the same subject matter, treated in similar ways. The gospel of John, on the other hand, shares more about what the life of Jesus meant for the world and devotes considerable verbiage to the important teachings Jesus shared with His disciples at the Last Supper right before His betrayal, suffering, and death (**John 13-17**).

Authorship

There is much debate among scholars today about the authorship of the gospels that the early church declared to be authentic and included in canonized scripture (the

Bible). But much of this debate comes from atheistic and other scholars of recent centuries who have cast doubt on the authorship of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, for a number of reasons:

They assert that the gospel writings were circulated anonymously, with authorship ascribed later. But “the four Gospels were understood from their earliest stages of circulation to have originated with the apostles Matthew and John, Mark the translator of Peter, and Luke the traveling companion of Paul. This fact alone does not prove that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were the authors of the Gospels. It does, however, demonstrate that these names were attached to the Gospels from the time that the texts first began to circulate.”¹

They discount or deny the miracles shared in the gospel accounts, saying they could not have happened, therefore, in their way of thinking, none of the content can be trusted. Anyone who doubts the miracles of the Bible including the one that means most to Christianity – **resurrection**, addresses spiritual matters of faith from a natural or worldly perspective.

They put more credence in contemporary theories and methods, such as Higher Criticism and Form Criticism, then they do the original evidence and testimony of those who knew Jesus and the twelve disciples or from those who heard the story from them during early church history, i.e., in the 21st century they know better than the early church leaders of the first and second centuries.

They strive to make a unique mark for themselves in academic scholarship, since so much has been written about every book, chapter, paragraph, and word of the gospels. To come up with something new is to make a name for oneself.

Church leaders in the first couple of centuries were unanimous in their understanding that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John did the writing, even if they had others pen it for them as they shared what they observed and knew.

Dating

The exact dates the gospels were written are not known. Dates were not penned on the original manuscripts. Carbon dating has not been done on the manuscripts for fear of destroying them.

By evaluating the writing style and examining the material on which it was written, the oldest manuscript, a fragment from the gospel of John, is dated by experts to c. 125 AD.²

Early church leaders indicated that all four gospels were written before 100 AD. From the wide distribution and possession of the writings in all the early churches, some scholars believe they all existed by 90 AD; many believe earlier. “A general consensus of conservative scholars puts Mark at about AD 60-65. Some even put Mark in the 50s AD. Matthew and Luke are usually given a date of writing of about AD 60-70 and John AD 70-90. These are obviously rough approximations.”²

With regard to the approximate dates the gospels were written, we believe that early church leaders can be trusted in their eyewitness accounts and information they received, more than contemporaries who are thousands of years removed.

Sources

Like authorship and dating of the gospels, their sources are debated by scholars as well. For reasons about to be shared, some contemporary scholars attribute “Q” as the source of the synoptic gospels. We believe the sources of the gospels to be the individuals for whom they are named. The following paragraphs from www.gotquestions.org speak to the Q source.³

“The gospel of “Q” gets its title from the German word quelle which means “source.” The whole idea of a Q gospel is based on the concept that the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are so similar that they must have copied from each other and/or another source. This other source has been given the name “Q.” The predominant argument for the existence of a Q gospel is essentially this: (1) The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written after A.D. 70 and therefore could not have been written by the Apostle Matthew, John Mark, or Luke the doctor. (2) Since the authors of the Gospels were not firsthand witnesses, they must have used other sources. (3) Since Mark is the shortest Gospel and has the least original material, Mark was written first and Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source. (4) Since there are many similarities in Matthew and Luke which do not occur in Mark, Matthew and Luke must have had another source. (5) This source, Q, was likely a collection of sayings of Jesus, similar to the gospel to Thomas.

When considering the possibility of a Q gospel, it is important to remember that no evidence whatsoever has ever been found for the existence of a Q gospel. Not even a

single manuscript fragment of Q has ever been found. None of the early church fathers mentioned anything that could have been the Q gospel. Second, there is strong evidence that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written between A.D. 50 and 65, not after A.D. 70. Many of the early church fathers attributed the Gospels to the Apostle Matthew, John Mark, and Luke the doctor. Third, since the Gospels were written by Matthew, Mark, and Luke, they were written by actual eyewitnesses of Jesus and/or close companions of eyewitnesses of Jesus. Therefore, it is natural that we should expect many similarities. If the Gospels record actual words spoken by Jesus, we should expect the eyewitnesses to report Jesus saying the same things.

Finally, there is nothing wrong with the idea of the Gospel writers using the other Gospels as sources. Luke states in Luke chapter 1 that he used sources. It is possible that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source. It is possible that there was another source in addition to Mark. The possible use of a "Q" source is not the reason why the Q gospel concept should be rejected. The use of a source which contained the sayings of Jesus does not take away from the inspiration of Scripture. The reason the Q gospel should be rejected is the presupposition of most Q gospel advocates - namely, that the Gospels are not divinely inspired.

The vast majority of those who promote the Q gospel concept do not believe the Bible is inspired (God-breathed). The vast majority of proponents of Q do not believe that the Gospels were written by the Apostles and their close associates, or that the Gospels were written within the generation of the Apostles. They do not believe it is possible that two or three authors could use the exact same words without using each other's writings as sources. Crucially, most Q advocates reject the inspiration of the Holy Spirit helping the Gospel writers to accurately record the words and works of Jesus Christ. Again, the use of a "Q" source is not the problem. The problem is the reason why most Q gospel advocates believe a "Q" was used, namely a denial of the inspiration of Scripture **(Matthew 5:18; 24:35; John 10:35; 16:12, 13; 17:17; 1 Corinthians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; Hebrews 4:12; 2 Peter 1:20, 21).**"³

Main Messages of the Gospels

As previously noted, all the gospels share a common story of the life of Jesus Christ and his impact on the eternal destiny of humanity. The gospel narratives are told in a slightly different way with some material overlapping and some unique. The next page shows an excellent summary of the complementary content of the four gospels:⁴

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Who is Christ?	King	Servant	Man	God
Which genealogy?	King	No genealogy	Man	God
As a body part	Mouth	Hands and feet	Mind	Heart
Ends with	Resurrection	Ascension	Promise of the Holy Spirit	Promise of return
The challenge	Submit to Christ as Lord	Serve as Christ did	Follow His footsteps	Believe in Him
Target audience	Jewish Christians	Non-Jews	Gentile Christians	All unbelievers
Purpose	Making disciples	Making disciples	Making disciples	Making converts

Following are high-level views of the main messages found in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (from www.overviewbible.com).⁵

Matthew

“Traditionally penned by the apostle of the same name, Matthew is the first gospel of the four. This gospel was written for people familiar with the Old Testament, both the Law of Moses and the prophets. Matthew makes more references to the Old Testament than any other gospel. Matthew takes great care to show how Jesus fulfills the prophecies made about him earlier in the Bible —especially focusing on Jesus’ role as the Messiah (the promised king descended from David). Today, Matthew is the perfect book to **bridge the gap between the Old Testament and the New**.

In the famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “**Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them**” (**Matthew 5:17**).”⁵

Mark

“This is the shortest gospel. In fact, it’s possible that this gospel was written so that it could be easily memorized and told aloud — written to “go viral,” if you will. According to early church tradition, this gospel was written by John Mark, the same guy who backed out of his missionary journey with Paul and Barnabas (**Acts 15:37-39**). Mark purportedly aided the apostle Peter later in life, and this gospel is an arranged collection of Peter’s memories of Jesus.

Mark was written for a wide audience. This gospel focuses on Jesus' role as the suffering servant and son of God. While the other gospels contain long discourses and sermons of Jesus, Mark is all about action. This is where we see Jesus doing things, and then doing more things. It's very action-oriented (the word "immediately" shows up frequently), and of the four gospels, **Mark reads most like a story.**"⁵

Luke

"This is the longest of the four gospels—in fact, it's the longest book of the New Testament for that matter. Luke is the historical, journalistic Gospel: **a thorough account of the episodes in Jesus' life arranged in chronological order.** This gospel was written to establish believers in the teachings of Jesus (**Luke 1:1-4**).

Church tradition recognizes the first-century physician as the author and editor of this book, which is how it gets its name. Luke may be one of the only non-Hebrew authors of the Bible based on a few clues we pick up in the New Testament. This gospel presents Jesus as the seeking savior of all nations (**Luke 2:30-32**). It was and continues to be a rich story of Jesus' life and ministry for both those who don't know much about Jesus and those who have a great deal of familiarity with the Old Testament."⁵

John

John is the persuasive Gospel. It's written to show the miracles of Jesus, so that those who read his story will believe in him and have everlasting life (**John 20:30-31**). John's account of Jesus' teachings and miracles emphasize the divine nature of Jesus Christ. To John, Jesus is the cosmic Son of God, come to destroy the works of the devil. The whole book is arranged to present Jesus this way.

That means the gospel of John has a very different feel from the other three. The way the gospel starts is a good example. Mark begins with Jesus' baptism. Luke begins with the happenings surrounding Jesus' birth. Matthew begins with Abraham and traces the generations down to Jesus. But John takes us all the way back to the very first words of the Bible: "**In the beginning**" (**John 1:1**). John is telling the story of the divine being who became flesh, dwelt among us, and died so that we might have everlasting life."⁵

Closing Thoughts

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — the four gospels of the New Testament and Christianity, have touched the lives of countless people for two millennia and led them to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. We believe that the message of the gospel

points to Jesus as the **source of true life**. Time has not diminished its validity nor its message. The gospel message tells the story of Jesus and challenges those who have not received salvation to claim it through Him.

This is an introduction on the subject of **Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John**, writers of the gospel narratives. Here are a few other resources you may wish to explore:

Books

Who's Who in the New Testament, Ronald Brownrigg, 1971, pp. [306-313](#), [274-279](#), [260-268](#), [217-243](#)

Who's Who in the Bible, Reader's Digest Biographical Dictionary, 1994, pp. [289-290](#), [281-282](#), [272-273](#), [232-236](#)

Websites

¹ [How Do We Know Who Wrote the Gospels in the New Testament? \(timothypauljones.com\)](#)

² [What are the dates when the four gospels were first written? How do we know? – Evidence for Christianity](#)

³ [What is the Q gospel? Is there any evidence for the gospel of Q? | GotQuestions.org](#)

⁴ [A Chart on the Four Gospels | Redeeming God](#)

⁵ [Guide to the Four Gospels | OverviewBible](#)

[Evidence for an Early Dating of the Four Gospels | Evidence Unseen](#)

[\(PDF\) Early Church Fathers on the Authorship of the NT Gospels | Ron Jones - Academia.edu](#)

[When were the Gospels written? | GotQuestions.org](#)

[What Are the Gospels, and Why Are There Four of... | Zondervan Academic](#)

[The Gospels Portray the Life of Jesus Christ \(learnreligions.com\)](#)

[What is the Gospel? | Bible.org](#)

[When were the Gospels written? | GotQuestions.org](#)

[Authorship of the Gospels - Evidence for God's Unchanging Word](#)