

Confirmation 2020-21
Session 16 – Gospels
January 17, 2021

Background Information

When someone asks me how to begin reading the Bible, I always tell them to begin with the Gospels, and more specifically the Gospel of John.

When one comes to faith in Jesus Christ it is usually because they are touched by his life, ministry, death, and resurrection. The story of Jesus is found primarily in four books of the New Testament called the Gospels, an Old English translation of the Greek word, εὐαγγέλιον, which means *good news*. Why does it take four books to tell one story? I am so glad you asked.

In the Pentecost story of Acts 2, the Disciples (ones who are disciplined in the way of their lord), now Apostles (ones who are sent with a message), are blown out of the upper room where they had been cloistered for fear of the Jews following the crucifixion of their Lord Jesus. The Holy Spirit had come upon them and they began to tell the Good News (Gospel) of Jesus Christ from their own experience of Jesus.

At first, these stories were what we now call *oral history*, meaning it was spoken first by one of the apostles, as in the case of Matthew, Mark, and John but then repeated often by others as "the Gospel according to Matthew" for example. Luke was not a firsthand eye-witness to the life and ministry of Jesus. But he was educated and articulate and wealthy enough to write down what he heard from the other Apostles for his friend Theophilus.

I should note that the authors of the Gospels are often referred to as *gospelers* or *evangelists*. Matthew, Mark, and John were firsthand eyewitnesses, but that doesn't mean the Gospels bearing their names were written by them. Illiteracy prevailed in the First Century and so it

is unlikely that many of the books of the New Testament were *written* by the authors in the way we would write today – our thoughts put on paper by our own hands. In the case of written documents such as letters and contracts, the letters were often dictated to scribes. And in the case of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John, they were likely not written down for perhaps a generation or two after the Resurrection of Jesus and then by someone other than the one to whom the Gospel is ascribed. These are not the Gospels *written by* so-and-so, but the Gospels *according to* so-and-so, because all of them survived through oral history until someone wrote them down.

Books were not yet available. What written material that was available was expensive to produce and not many people were able to read and write, so oral history was simply the way stories were transmitted. But thankfully, eventually the Gospels according to so-and-so were written down for later generations including us.

What you need to know

The canon of scripture, the Bible, contains four Gospels. Why four? That is a good question. There are many answers, but one answer is that each of the Apostles went to different audiences and so their story was influenced by whom they were telling it to.

Does that make each gospel different? Yes, slightly. Each gospeler added certain stories that they thought would reach their particular audience. But that does not make them wrong.

If all of us were together and witnessed a car wreck we each might see it differently or remember details differently. I might see the age of the driver. You might notice the make of the driver's car, another might notice the make of the victim's car, and another may remember that the traffic light was red. We can all be right in what we remembered, and still, remember the story differently.

The Gospels were among the last books written of the New Testament canon. This makes sense because the rest of the New Testament is made up of mostly pastoral letters to Christian communities. The Gospels were not written down until it became clear that Jesus' return was not imminent as the first generation Apostles thought. It was then that the stories were written down for future generations.

About the Lutheran Study Bible (LSB)

The introduction to the Gospel of Matthew begins on page 1604.

The introduction to the Gospel of Mark begins on page 1659.

The introduction to the Gospel of Luke begins on page 1694.

The introduction to the Gospel of John begins on page 1752.

Please read the introduction to each Gospel. A reading from one of the Gospels is read each week when we gather for worship. It is what I, as a pastor, preach on most often. Especially read the articles entitled “Background File,” “What’s the Story?” and “What’s the Message” for each book. These articles can be found at the beginning of every book of the Bible and are very helpful in getting a basic understanding of each book’s content.

Into the Story

Three of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are known as the synoptic gospels, synoptic defined as meaning "forming a general, common view concerning its content, order, and statement."

It is thought that Matthew and Luke borrowed content from Mark. Those parts that are almost identical come from what scholars call the Q-source. The differences in each are phrases, concepts, and tailoring the message to a particular audience. Only Luke includes the beautiful nativity. Only Matthew includes the visitation of the Magi. Only Mark mentions that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus witnessed the burial of Jesus. John has many unique inclusions.

Non-Christians use these differences and unique characteristics as a way of saying that the Bible is full of errors and inconsistencies and therefore an unreliable testimony to an unbelievable story.

The gospels are properly placed at the beginning of the New Testament because without the life and ministry of Jesus, there would be no rest of the New Testament. And what follows the gospels are mostly the pastoral letters that further expound the teaching of the Christian faith as it matured and spread from Jerusalem.

Let's take a look at the nuances of each Gospel.

Matthew uses a handful of phrases that tell us a lot about who he's writing to and what he wants his audience to know. Again and again, we see phrases like "to fulfill" or "so it has been written" or "spoken through the prophet." That's one of the ways we know that Matthew's original audience was Jewish Christians. He was carefully placing Jesus' story within the history of the Israelites. The author of Matthew was thinking about preserving the story of Jesus, not about writing new scripture – certainly not about creating a "new" testament.

The careful work in Matthew is probably due to two considerations. First, the Jewish Christians were growing in number, but at this point, most converts had never met Jesus – their knowledge of him was second hand, and they likely needed assurance about this new faith. Second, the Jewish community had recently witnessed the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, which they regarded as the home of the actual presence of God.

Even though the Jewish people were scattered and no longer really in control of the Temple, its destruction would have rattled the core beliefs about God. Matthew works to align Jesus with the Jewish scriptures, hoping to show the Jewish people that God was still with them and that following the way of Jesus was the path forward in their faith.

Mark is believed to be the first canonical gospel written. Matthew and Luke borrow extensively from Mark; in fact, between Matthew and Luke, the majority of Mark is reproduced word-for-word. So in many ways, Mark is the original source material for much of what we know about Jesus. Like the other Gospels, Mark was likely written by a few people and compiled by someone traditionally thought to be Mark, a friend of Peter and Paul. This explains a bit of the rushed and often disjointed feeling of Mark's narrative.

One of the most unique things about Mark is the abruptness of what is believed to be its original ending. The women arrive at the tomb in Chapter 16 to find Jesus gone. An angelic figure tells them that Jesus is not there - he has been raised. He encourages them to go tell the disciples but they're frozen in fear and say nothing to anyone. Later manuscripts tack on less breathtaking conclusions: Jesus appears to the disciples, commissions them, and then ascends to heaven.

Thinking of Mark as having two main movements helps us make sense of this gospel. Mark begins with an upward movement of power and glory, starting with Jesus' baptism. Everything goes great. Jesus heals the sick, casts out demons, teaches with authority, and controls the wind and waves. Along the way, the increasing crowds are in direct proportion to the opposition of their religious leaders. The second half of the story involves a downward movement of Jesus's suffering and death, and the abandonment by all his followers. Here the opposite continues, and Jesus winds up feeling abandoned even by God. That's really the gist of Mark's Gospel as he tries to encourage new believers to know the story of their faith and take heart in the truth of Jesus as the Messiah.

Luke's approach is easier to understand when we understand the world he and his readers were living in. The Roman Empire tolerated Jewish religious practice, but the followers of Christ were neither Jewish nor Roman, so the believers were misunderstood and persecuted. The emerging Christian movement was so misconstrued that they were commonly charged by the Romans with atheism or even cannibalism. As

though making a case to a jury, Luke's gospel argues for the legitimacy of the Christian movement by showing the strength of the ties between Jesus and Judaism. By emphasizing Jesus as innocent, the author of Luke demonstrates that Jesus and his followers are no threat to the empire and thus should be given a place among the accepted religions. Luke lays the groundwork of his case by addressing his letter to Theopolis - which means "lover of or friend of God." Whether Theopolis was an actual person or a symbol for all present and future Christians as lovers of God, the effect is the same: followers of Christ are followers of the one true God.

However, Luke is preoccupied not only with the Roman perception of Christians but with shaping and emerging Christian identity. Luke is characterized by persistent attention to and praise of the poor, marginalized, and oppressed. As an unrecognized religious sect, the followers of Jesus were, for the most part, on the fringes of society. Luke paints a picture of Jesus as the one who would tend to outsiders and those on the margins of religious and social circles. Luke's account shows that these are the people who consistently recognize Jesus and respond to his call. In short, Luke's message to the early lovers of God is the same simple message that students need to hear today: Jesus is for you, and an encounter with him will change your life.

John's gospel is unique among the others. The Gospels tell us about the life of Jesus. They are full of stories and parables and all the highs and lows of Christ's time on Earth. But the gospel of John is different. It doesn't have the same tone or language or even main ideas as the other three accounts of Jesus. While those differences can sometimes trip readers up, the more we learn about what this gospel is up to, the more sense it starts to make.

In the very first verse of John's Gospel, he hits his reader with a deep theological truth that is both poetic and incredibly hard to wrap our minds around: "In the beginning was the Word." This first verse sets the

stage for what the author is about to do. His purpose is to point us beyond what we can see.

The author of John wants us to look more deeply and ask about the source of Jesus's life and abilities. This Gospel provides a lens through which readers can see an alternate reality. The author asks readers to look beyond what we know, what we can see, what we experience, and see God's presence in and around us. This is one of the major reasons this Gospel focuses on different stories than the others and why so many of these stories are focused on Jesus' miracle powers. In John, Jesus' ability to perform miracles was evidence of the fact that Jesus and God were one, and that through Jesus, God was at work in the world. This perspective also helps explain the more convoluted "I am" statements Jesus makes - the author is using every means at his disposal (stories, direct "I am" statements, philosophy, and theology, history) to help us see Jesus for who he really is

Essay Questions

In your own words, answer one questions per Gospel below in 100-150 words each and return them to Pastor Jesse by email at pastor@zionohio.org no later than next Sunday, January 24

Matthew

Read Matthew 1:1 – 2:6. Why is it important to point out that Jesus' birth coincides with the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah?

What parts of the birth narrative would have been important to Matthew's Jewish audience?

Mark

Read Mark 8:27-30. I have said that Jesus' question in :29 is the second most important question (the first most important question, in my opinion, is, "Who does Jesus say you are?"). Do you agree or disagree and why?

Why would Jesus ask the disciples who people think he is? What do you make of their answers (John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets)?

Luke

In Luke, important things happen again and again over meals. Why do you suppose that is?

Jesus called the Temple his Father's house. What does this tell you about the way Jesus viewed God?

John

Read John 20:17. What did Jesus mean when he spoke the phrase, "My Father and your Father"?

Read John 11:38-44. What does the story of the raising of Lazarus tell us about who Jesus is and what Jesus can do?