

Study 2: Why Four Gospels?

In this study we will look at the four gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are very similar, whilst John's gospel is obviously different, even at first glance.

This study will help us to understand the different perspectives that each of the gospel writers give us, and help us to take a fresh approach to a study of the gospels as a part of the New Testament writings.

Introduction

Precedence of Mark's Gospel

Mark's Gospel

Luke's Gospel

Matthew's Gospel

John's Gospel

Conclusions

Homework and preparation for next week:

- Read the notes as a review of the study
- Why do you think we have four gospels?
- What is your favourite gospel, and why?
- Skim-read Acts chapters 1- 8
 - What verse (chapter 1) summarises the book of Acts
 - Who are the major players in this part of the book?
 - What period of time is covered by these chapters?
 - What are the major events that happened in these chapters?

Notes for study 2: Why Four Gospels?

Introduction

I like passionfruit swirl ice cream. For me, you just can't beat the tangy contrast of the passionfruit with the sweetness of the ice cream. Some people like strawberry, and others like chocolate. Sure, I like them as well, but usually my first pick would be the passionfruit.

It's a bit like that with the gospels. We each have our favourites, although we will use one of the others from time to time. But why do we have four gospels as a part of the canon? Especially when three of them are nearly the same? And why is John's gospel so different than the others?

Matthew, Mark and Luke are known as the "Synoptic Gospels" because they give a similar view of Jesus' life. The word comes from *syn* (together) and *opsis* (view). However, whilst they have a similar view, they are significantly different, and each has its own emphasis. The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia notes¹:

“...each of the three Synoptic Gospels has material peculiar to itself. Mark has a few dozen verses not found in Matthew or Luke; Matthew has some 300 verses not found in Mark or Luke; Luke has some 520 verses not found in Matthew or Mark.”

The question is often posed as to which gospel writers copied from the others. The consensus seems to be that Mark's gospel was written first, and Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels based on what Mark had already written. However, we ***MUST NOT*** overlook the role and power of the Holy Spirit giving inspiration to each of the writers. On a secular level, (if you and I tried to write our accounts of a historic person's life), two writers may well have used one of the gospels and followed it. But if all of the writers were inspired by God, and given the words and the thoughts to write (2 Tim 3:16; 1 Cor 2:13; 2 Pet 1:16, 20-21), then it is perfectly clear and understandable that there would be great similarities and yet significant differences between their accounts.

People observe events from different perspectives. If an accident occurs on a street corner, three witnesses will give three different accounts of the event. If their accounts are all identical, then it is almost certain that there is collusion between them. By questioning and testing their testimony, it will be found that their stories do not agree. However, whilst the three witnesses may at first appear to have discrepancies in their accounts, questioning and testing can lead to the establishment of consistent facts of the event, and the differences accounted because of the different perspective of the testifier. And so it is with the gospels. Each of the writers gives an inspired account, but each comes from a different source, and with a different audience in mind.

Briefly then:

Mark's gospel written first, and written for a Roman audience;

Luke's gospel written after Mark, and written for a Greek audience;

Matthew's gospel written around the same time as Luke, and for a Jewish audience;

John's gospel written much later to the emerging Christian (primarily Gentile) world.

The gospels are not *biographies* about Jesus, but rather are the *memoirs* of Jesus written from the different perspectives of the writers. They contain both *sayings* (ie the teachings *of* Jesus) and *narrative* (ie stories *about* Jesus).

¹ ISBE, vol 2, p. 532

Precedence of Mark's Gospel

The similarity of the synoptic gospels goes far beyond just covering the same story from slightly different perspectives. It is generally believed that Mark's gospel was written first, and then Luke and Matthew used Mark and added their own colour and material to it. Fee & Stuart explain:

“Take, for example, the fact that there is such a high degree of verbal similarity among Matthew, Mark, and Luke in their narratives, as well as in their recording of the sayings of Jesus. Remarkable verbal similarities should not surprise us about the sayings of the one who “spake as never man spake.” But for this to carry over to the narratives is something else again – especially so when one considers (1) that these stories were first told in Aramaic, yet we are talking about the use of Greek words, (2) that Greek word order is extremely free, yet often the similarities extend even to precise word order, and (3) that it is highly unlikely that three people in three different parts of the Roman Empire would tell the same story with the same words – even to such minor points of individual style as prepositions and conjunctions. Yet this is what happens over and over again in the first three gospels.²”

“...Mark wrote his gospel first, probably in part at least from his recollection of Peter's preaching and teaching. Luke and Matthew had access to Mark's gospel and independently used it as a basic source for their own. But they also had access to all kinds of other material about Jesus, some of which they had in common. This common material, however, is scarcely ever presented in the same order in the two gospels, a fact that suggests that neither one had access to the other's writing. Finally, John wrote independently of the other three and thus his gospel has little material in common with them. This, we would note, is *how* the Holy Spirit inspired the writing of the Gospels.³”

Irenaeus (c.250 AD) was an early writer, and says concerning the writing of the four gospels⁴:

"Matthew published his Gospel among the Hebrews in their own language, while Peter and Paul were preaching and founding the church in Rome. After their departure Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also transmitted to us in writing those things which Peter had preached; and Luke, the attendant of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel which Paul had declared. Afterwards John, the disciple of the Lord, who also reclined on his bosom, published his Gospel, while staying at Ephesus in Asia."

Further, Eusebius writes concerning Mark's gospel⁵:

“And so greatly did the splendor of piety illumine the minds of Peter's hearers that they were not satisfied with hearing once only, and were not content with the unwritten teaching of the divine Gospel, but with all sorts of entreaties they besought Mark, a follower of Peter, and the one whose Gospel is extant, that he would leave them a written monument of the doctrine which had been orally communicated to them. Nor did they cease until they had prevailed with the man, and had thus become the occasion of the written Gospel which bears the name of Mark. And they say that Peter when he had learned, through a revelation of the Spirit, of that which had been done, was pleased with the zeal of the men, and that the work obtained the sanction of his authority for the purpose of being used in the churches. Clement in the eighth book of his Hypotyposes gives this account, and with him agrees the bishop of Hierapolis named Papias."

² Fee & Stuart 1: “How to Read the Bible for all its Worth”; ISBN 0-310-38491-5; p.122

³ *ibid.* p.123

⁴ Quoted from Eusebius: “Ecclesiastical History” Book 5, chapter 8

⁵ Eusebius, Book 2, chapter 15

However, the timing of the gospels can be “pegged” by Luke’s writings (see notes under “Luke: Date”).

None of the writers reveal who they are in their writings, but the early writers after them (the “church fathers”) ascribe the gospels to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as we have seen from Irenaeus. And it is fairly easy to piece together which one is which.

Mark’s Gospel

Author

John Mark was the “nephew” (lit: “close relative”, which is why some translations read “nephew” and others “cousin”.) of Barnabas (Col 4:10). His mother was Mary (Acts 12:12) who’s house was used as a place of prayer by the church in Jerusalem. His family apparently had a close association with the apostle Peter, and it was to this house that Peter went after his miraculous release from prison in Jerusalem (Acts 12:7-17). Whilst Mark was *not* an apostle, he certainly had a close knowledge of the early church in Jerusalem, Antioch, and Cyprus. He started with Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey, but turned back at Pamphylia (possibly because Paul contracted Malaria, and he was concerned for his own health). He then went again to Cyprus with Barnabas (Acts 15:39), and was later a helper of Paul (Col 4:10; 2 Tim 4:11; Phm: 24).

Importantly, Peter regarded him as his son in the faith (1 Pet 5:13), and it is generally accepted that Mark wrote the words, but the gospel comes from Peter.

Date

Since Mark’s gospel preceded both Matthew and Luke, then it must have been written before AD 62. Whilst the tradition from Irenaeus has it written after Paul’s death (AD 68), this is not consistent with the timing of the writing of Luke.

For Luke to have access to Mark’s gospel, it would have to be transcribed (they didn’t have OfficeWorks or Kinko’s to photocopy it!), and it would then need to be carried from wherever Mark was, to wherever Luke was. If they were both in Rome, then the time would be short, but it could have been a journey of several months.

Mark is generally given a later (rather than an earlier) date, and it is generally accepted that Matthew and Luke based their gospels on Mark, so therefore Matthew and Luke are also given a later date. Papias was a bishop in Hierapolis, and Irenaeus’ tradition probably comes from him. He says that “*Mark wrote his gospel after Peter and Paul’s departure from Rome*”, which is generally taken to mean after their death (they were both executed in Rome in AD 68, about 1 month after Nero died). However, Papias did not say after their *death* – he says after their *departure*. So, it is possible (although we have no knowledge of it) that Peter was in Rome during Paul’s imprisonment, and that the *departure* was when they left in AD 63 (and Paul went on his fourth missionary journey – more on this when we get to the Pastoral Epistles – 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus). However, since the time of his first imprisonment was Paul’s first visit to Rome, this still creates a problem if Luke was writing Acts during the end of this imprisonment.

If we ignore Papias, then the most likely date then, for Mark’s gospel is AD 61 (or before) [In my opinion].

Audience

Mark’s gospel is addressed to the Romans. Bridge notes⁶:

“They were pragmatic, practical, active realists (which is why they conquered the known world). If someone attracted their attention or made a bid for their loyalty, they would ask a simple question: “What did he do?” Mark tells us exactly that. In a fast-moving tale, as brief as the report of a modern journalist, he shows Jesus in

⁶ Bridge: p.28

action. The story is full of verbs and adverbs. It bowls along at an almost breathless pace. This is what happened when Jesus stormed into people's lives, says Mark. Here is the Servant King, the Man for Others, giving himself totally to the transforming of people's situations. There is teaching, too – straight from the lips of Jesus. It sounds blunt, searching, brief, succinct and very straight. This is what Jesus did: he acted and spoke with power.”

Themes

Mark writes in fast-paced and rapid-fire mode as he tells what Jesus did. If you have a “red-letter” bible (with Jesus' words in red), have a quick flick through the four gospels. You will note that there is a lot less of what Jesus *said* in Mark compared to the other gospels – with his emphasis more on what Jesus *did*. Mark is described as a writer who cannot tell a story badly, and each story and section in his gospel is brief, succinct, and to the point – exactly as a Roman would want to have it.

Mark draws a lot on Isaiah, and quotes from him many times, and points to it in the opening statement “...*The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* ² *It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way..."* (Mk 1:1-2 NIV).

The gospel is presented in four parts:

- Jesus calls his disciples, drives out demons, heals the sick, then announces that this is all related to the kingdom (1:1- 3:6; 1:15).
- His miracles and teaching are given and amaze the crowds. The disciples are instructed privately, but do not understand the message. He is opposed by the powers that be (3:7- 8:21)
- His teaching is given primarily to the apostles. He explains the nature of the kingdom – as a suffering servant, and as the way of the cross (8:22-10:45)
- The triumphant entry into Jerusalem, but the culminating rise of opposition leading to the crucifixion (10:46-15:47). The story powerfully concludes with triumph of the resurrection, and the response of the brethren to that fact (16:1-20).

Luke's Gospel

Author

Luke the beloved physician (Col 4:14) was an oftentimes companion of Paul. He spent some time with Paul during both his first and second Roman imprisonments (Col 4:14; Phm 24; and 2 Tim 4:11 respectively), and also travelled with him at times during the second and third journeys, and on his journey to Rome. In his gospel, he refers to the man who has “dropsy” (Lk 14:2) with the medical term for this *hudropikos* the only time in the New Testament that this term is used. There are over 50 occasions where words that are common to both the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts occur, but are not used in any other book of the New Testament. In Acts 28:6, he uses the term *pimpremi* “to swell up” - which is the usual medical term for such a condition.

Luke was not an apostle, and was a Gentile, since Paul excludes him from the list of Jews with him whilst under house arrest in Rome (Col 4:9-15). He is the only Gentile author in the bible.

There is significant external evidence from writers as early as two generations removed from the apostles, that confirm Luke as the author of the third gospel and Acts. Among these are Irenaeus (180 AD), Clement of Alexandria (190 AD), and Tertullian (200 AD). Luke's gospel and Acts have an almost duplicate introduction, and the gospel contains “...*all that Jesus **began** both to do and to teach...*” (Acts 1:1), whilst Acts begins with the crucifixion and ascension and traces the spread of the gospel *into all the world*.

Date

Rather than view Luke's gospel and Acts as two works by the same author, they are really two parts of the same work. Acts was written whilst Paul was in his first Roman imprisonment. [Luke mentions that Paul spent 2 years in his own hired house (Acts 28:30), but closes the account without mentioning his release. He then tells us nothing of the next 5 years of Paul's ministry and travels.] But importantly, he *opens* the Acts narrative referring to "...the **former account** ... of all that Jesus began both to do and to teach..." (Acts 1:1). Clearly, when he wrote Acts, he had already written his gospel. Luke was one of Paul's companions during his first Roman imprisonment, and he is mentioned in Paul's greetings in some of the prison epistles (Col 4:14; Phm: 24). It is almost certainly that this is the time that he composed the Acts narrative. This places the writing of Acts at AD 63, and therefore the writing of Luke's gospel before that time. It is possible that he wrote his gospel earlier during those two years of Paul's house arrest, which would make it around AD 62. [If Luke based his work on Mark, then Mark must have been written before AD 62- see "Mark – date"].

Audience

Luke's gospel is written for the Greeks. He has a sponsor Theophilus, who must have had some stature, as he is addressed as "*most excellent Theophilus*". We know nothing else about him, except that he is the recipient of both of Luke's letters, and he has a Greek name. It is likely that he was the patron of the works, and provided the financial backing to enable the work to be published. (In the first century, all of this would be done by hand copying by scribes).

Concerning Luke, Bridge notes⁷:

"Himself a cultured and well-read professional, he addresses that pervasive culture which had captured the minds of mankind before the Romans marched, and given everyone a second language. The Greeks asked of anyone who bid for their attention: 'What was he like?' Luke tells us. In a style close to that of the classical historians, he gives us the *bio* of Jesus – his 'life' ... With deft touches of his brush, he paints a landscape rather than a portrait, a montage rather than a photograph. Jesus is forever impacting people's lives with his actions and words; always intervening to dispel doubt, explode prejudice and change situations. Most of all he is the Man for people. Fictional characters on the margin of acceptability crowd his parables: the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the folk who excused themselves from the party, the widow who pestered the magistrate for justice. But real people also crowd the pages and they too are the marginalised. Mary Magdalene of the doubtful reputation; Peter the argumentative fisherman; Zacchaeus the shady government official; the leper who could not be touched – these are the people who met him, and this is what they found him to be like says Luke. Jesus is the Saviour of mankind."

Themes

Whilst Luke was not an apostle, he states in his introduction that he has "...*perfect understanding of all things from the very first...*" (Lk 1:3). He describes other writers "...*those who were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word...*" (Lk 1:2) from whom he received the message. He then states the purpose of his in writing "...*to write to you an orderly account ... that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed...*" (Lk 1:3-4).

So, in Luke's writing we see *orderliness*. He sets out to "...*write an orderly account...*" of Jesus' ministry (Lk 1:1-3), and he is regarded by many as *an historian of the first order*⁸.

⁷ Bridge, p.29

⁸ Ramsay, p. 4

Luke introduces Jesus, and links Him to the Old Testament promises. After a brief introduction, he shows Jesus' genealogy to show that He was a descendant of David, (and with a Gentile flavour, a descendent of Adam), and was justified in claiming to be King of the Jews. The gospel is in four parts:

- Introduction, (1:1- 4:13) which sets the scene, establishes Jesus' credentials, and establishes the themes to come – God's concern for the poor, the Holy Spirit, the restoration of Israel, and the good news about Jesus. John's ministry and Jesus' ministry are linked together, and he tells about His baptism and testing in the wilderness.
- The ministry in Galilee (4:14 – 9:50) has an emphasis on the poor, on the Gentiles, and His rejection by some of the Israelites.
- The journey towards Jerusalem (9:51 – 19:45) shows Jesus' concern for others, despite His own situation and impending suffering.
- The final week in Jerusalem (19:45 – 24:53) has Jesus teaching in the Temple, the second cleansing of the Temple, the crucifixion and resurrection which are shown to be divinely planned.

Matthew's Gospel

Author

Matthew was an apostle, and the tax-collector called by Jesus (Mt 9:9). He was also known as *Levi*, which showed which tribe he belonged to. Luke calls him "...*Levi, son of Alphaeus...*" (Lk 2:14), which suggests that he may have been a brother of James and Judas ("not Iscariot" who was also known as Lebbeus Thaddaeus). As a tax-collector he collected money for the Roman government, and was despised by the Jews

Date

The date of Matthew's gospel is unknown, but is ascribed to a date after Mark. It was probably around the same time as Luke's gospel, which I have ascribed to AD 62 (although many may disagree).

Audience

Concerning Matthew, Bridge notes⁹:

"Matthew *speaks to the Jews* (a hundred clues make that clear). Above all, a Jew asks of anyone, 'Who is he?' Awareness of the call of God to a special people lay at the heart of the Jewish life. So the first questions asked are 'Where does he fit into the story of God's people?' 'Where is he coming from?' 'Who is he?' Matthew tells us. Jesus is a descendent of Abraham, the first Semite to hear God's distinguishing call. He is a descendent of David, Israel's greatest King, to whom was promised a greater to come. The family tree that opens Matthew's book (so unpromisingly to modern Western eyes) tells the Jewish reader what he first wants to know. The drama then unfolds, with the same repeated refrain: 'Who is Jesus?' He is Messiah, He is the focus and fulfilment of all God's promises and purposes. Behold your King, says Matthew."

Themes

Matthew presents the Galilean ministry of Jesus, and written with a particular emphasis on the ministry to the Jews. Matthew alone tells us the parables of the kingdom, and he uses the word "kingdom" 52 times (compared to 41 times in Luke; 18 in Mark; 3 times in John).

⁹ Bridge, p. 29

Matthew has three main sections:

- Early days of the Messiah (Mt 1- 4:16)
- The signs and works of the Messiah (Mt 4:17-16:20)
- Jesus' passion (Mt 16:21-28:20)

John's Gospel

Author

John was one of Jesus' closest disciples, along with his brother James, the two sons of Zebedee, who were also known as *sons of thunder*. James was the first apostle to die (Acts 12:2, AD 43), and John was the last (c. AD 100/101, in Ephesus). John speaks of himself in his gospel in the third person "...*that disciple whom Jesus loved...*" (Jn 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7,20) although it is evident from the context that he is talking about himself (21:24). He presents an eyewitness account of Jesus' life (c/f 1 Jn 1:1-3).

Date

John's gospel was written at the end of the first century, quite likely *after* Revelation was written, which places the date around AD 95-98.

Audience

By the time John wrote his gospel the church was well developed and had spread widely throughout the (then known) world. The church was primarily made up of Gentiles, and like John's epistles, he probably has the brethren in Asia Minor (around Ephesus) in mind as his prime recipients.

John wrote at a time when the eye-witnesses of Jesus were becoming few and far between. He gives a first-hand account of Jesus, and tells us why He came. Bridge notes¹⁰:

"John writes to the emerging Christian world. Here is mature theological reflection from a man who lived close by the Master's side in simple Galilee. But he also heard Christ take on theologians of Jerusalem in subtle dialect, and match the earnest speculations of the Qumran community. And he lived long enough, did John, to influence far-off Roman Asia and resist the insinuating influences of oriental mysticism; all in the name of Jesus whom he knew to be the Son of God. The question posed by so many as the Church built a life for itself, in the sinful, sophisticated, subtle world of the East, was 'Why did Jesus come?' The reason, John tells us, was to bring men and women to the life-giving knowledge of God, through his life, death, resurrection and indwelling presence."

Themes

John commences his gospel by introducing Jesus as *the word* – and none other than one who had been with the Father from the very beginning – even before the creation of the world. Jesus is God who became man and lived among us.

John's gospel is in two main sections:

- Jesus reveals himself to his disciples, and to His followers (1:19- 12:50). In this period, John presents seven miracles (a "complete" number) to prove who Jesus is. He also tells of three Passover visits to Jerusalem, where the synoptic gospels only mention one.
- The discourse of Jesus after the Passover supper (13:2- 17:26). The other gospels only give the slightest outline of this period, and through John we see the most intimate view of Jesus

¹⁰ Bridge, p. 30

and His love and concern for the disciples. John then describes the trial, crucifixion, and resurrection (18:1- 21:25)

Rather than an emphasis on the narrative of what Jesus did, John focuses on a picture of Jesus himself.

Conclusions

So, in the four gospels we have different views of the memoirs concerning Jesus, written for different audiences, and each giving a different perspective on Jesus' life.

Matthew:	“Who is Jesus?”	He is Messiah. The focus and fulfilment of God’s promises and purposes.
Mark:	“What did He do?”	He acted and spoke with power.
Luke:	“What was He like?”	He is the Saviour of mankind, the friend of those on the margins of society.
John:	“Why did He come?”	To bring life-giving knowledge of God through His life, death, resurrection, and indwelling presence.

Each writer compliments the others (not contradicts them), and so we can gain a much more complete picture of Jesus' life than we would from just one gospel. Monser notes¹¹:

Together, they (the four gospels) bear the same relation to the whole apostolic tradition as they bear severally to one another. The common record and the separate records have a representative value. The three synoptic Gospels are not mere repetitions of one narrative, but distinct views of a complex whole. They are the same, yet they are fresh. The great landmarks of the history are unchanged; the same salient points reappear in all, but they are found in new combinations and with new details, as the features of a landscape or the outlines of a figure when viewed from various points.

¹¹ Monser, p. 406