

THE GOSPELS

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INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPELS

The four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) present different accounts of the life of Jesus Christ and as such represent the fundamental Christian Scriptures. The Greek word *euangelion* (gospel) means “good news/proclamation.” The Gospels contain the *euangelion* (the basic message) of Christianity. While in English Bibles these books are introduced as “The Gospel according to Matthew” etc., in the original Greek they are simply referred to as “*Kata . . .*” plus the name (e.g., “According to Matthew”). In theological studies the word *gospel* normally refers to the Christian message whereas the term “Gospel” refers to one of these four books. It is helpful to maintain this distinction.

All four Gospels were written in *Koine* (common) Greek. John’s Greek is the simplest while Luke’s Greek is quite sophisticated. This did not so much betray the author’s educational status as his choice of language to suit his audience. While different levels of Greek were used, all four utilised very good Greek. Of greater significance is the fact that, under the inspiration of the Spirit, the authors employed this common form of Greek rather than the more classical Greek that was in vogue for literary works.

What Are the Gospels?

From both literary and theological viewpoints the question of identifying the forms of the Gospels becomes significant. As often recognised, form is a vehicle of meaning and the literary form that is assigned to the Gospels often determines how their message is to be understood. Several suggestions have been made in this regard.

Religious Mythology

It has been suggested that the Gospels are religious mythology in much the same way as the myths found in all of the world’s ancient religions. A religious myth is seen as a story that began with some kernel of historical fact but then evolved over a long period of time into a highly embellished narrative. It is claimed that followers of religious cults often inflate the significance of their founders to attain a greater degree of respectability. In other words, there was once a man called Jesus who went about helping people, doing some good deeds, and preaching messages of peace. Over time, his disciples told and retold his story and with each retelling things were added to embellish the story. Eventually this Jesus began to assume supernatural dimensions and ultimately was portrayed as a god and then worshipped by his disciples.

The 20th cent Swiss theologian, Rudolf Bultmann, even suggested that the Gospels must be completely demythologised in order to ascertain the truth about Jesus. With such an approach, the Gospels lose the value that the Church has always assigned to them and are reduced to the same level as other great mythologies such as the Babylonian *Atrahasis Epic* or the Indian *Ramayana*. This approach essentially deprives the Gospels of all their potency.

Aetiology

An aetiology is a story that is told to help explain how things came into existence or how things began or how they are the way they are. For example, throughout human history the dog is seen as man’s best friend while the pig is mankind’s favourite food. Why is this so?

A long time ago, the first man, a farmer, had two animals, a dog and a pig. He wanted to choose one of them for his special companion and the other for his food. So he decided upon a course of action. He told the animals that he was going away on a long trip and that he wanted them to plough his field while he was gone. He also told them that the hardest working animal would become his pet. While he was gone, the pig, which was not very smart, began to plough the field in earnest with his snout. He worked the entire day. The cunning dog, however, rested under a tree until the pig had finished ploughing the field. As the sun began to set, the dog knew that the farmer would soon return. Quickly he got up and ran all over the field and covered it with his paw prints until there were no signs of the pig's hard work. At the end of the day the farmer returned and saw dog prints all over his field. So he rewarded the dog by making it his pet and butchered the pig for food.

This is an aetiology. Christianity is perhaps the most successful religion in history. Its history is quite outstanding and all this is attributed to one figure, Jesus Christ. According to this theory, Jesus may or may not have existed. The Gospel writers wrote aetiologies to explain the origin and success of Christianity. They did this to ensure a common viewpoint among the Christians and, by flavouring this viewpoint with supernatural and supranormal tales, they enabled Christianity to overcome its competition. This approach is appealing but it flies in the face of centuries of faith and theology. It also completely sidelines the central figure of the Gospels and cannot therefore be an acceptable approach.

Historical Biography

A rather popular view among Christians is that the Gospels are historical biographies of the life of Jesus and as such they are historically factual. This idea maintains that the stories in the Gospels are all true and that the Gospels are accurate accounts of the life of Jesus. Despite its popularity, the view has certain weaknesses.

None of the Gospels actually follows the normal literary format of a biography. Luke is closer to that format while John is completely outside the biography format. None of the Gospels presents a logical or chronological account of Jesus' life. All four are extremely selective in their choice of material. Moreover, the stories about Jesus, by their very nature, are very difficult to verify. How does one verify his divine origin, or the angelic choir at his birth, or the virgin birth? Literary works from the period are quite unhelpful in resolving this issue. So intense did this question burn at one time that one of Christianity's best known missionaries, Albert Schweitzer (19th cent), devoted an great amount of time to produce his famous work *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*.

Gospel

Over the centuries, Christian theologians have simply preferred to treat the Gospels as a completely discrete literary genre, Gospel, with no literary equivalent. This approach recognises that these books contain elements of the views suggested above. Because they deal with material that borders on the supernatural, there is some mythical element involved. The stories told also provide an explanation to the origins of Christianity. Furthermore, there is a great deal of biographical and historical material in the books.

However, the Gospels transcend all of these forms. They are more than myth or aetiology or biography. The Church has always recognised a divine element in their existence, what is often referred to as inspiration. Their authors were not biographers or storytellers but spiritually guided writers. Their information was not limited to research and imagination but they were granted access to data beyond that of normal writers. They are Scripture.

Because the Gospels are Scripture, they have to be understood differently from other books. To try and explain them as we would other literature is a futile exercise. Because they are Scripture, they cannot be viewed simply with literary interest or intellectual curiosity. A hefty dose of faith is necessary to truly come to terms with these unique books.

Why Four Gospels?

When the Church Councils began the process of canonisation (deciding which books are Scripture) there were seven Gospels in circulation. By the 5th century, at the Council of Chalcedon, the Church finally decided upon the 27 books that make up our New Testament. They accepted these four Gospels while rejecting the other existing Gospels.

Ever since Christians have reflected on why there are four Gospels. Perhaps there are different ways to approach this question. One way is to look at the question from the point of view of portrait photography because these books are portraits of Jesus. A good portrait inevitably has more than one viewpoint. There is the frontal view, the profile view, and even the silhouette. A good photographer learns to mix up the various views in order to capture the full image of the subject. Each view provides a different insight into the subject and that is what these books do.

Another way of looking at the question is via biblical analogy. Frequently the Bible portrays important things in an inclusive way by using the number four. It speaks about the four corners of the earth or of the temple. There are four living creatures with four different faces (see Eze 1 and Rev 4-5) in God's presence. The Sanctuary (Exod 25:8) involved a fourfold pattern—Holy of Holies, Holy Place, Courtyard, and camp. The Israelites had a four-tier community—High Priest, priests, Levites, and the people. The Garden of Eden (Gen 2) had four rivers while the New Jerusalem (Rev 21) has four walls. Even Revelation's eschatological prophecies involved four sets of sevens—seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven plagues. All this depicts a God who loves variety and who never presents only one view of things. The four Gospels are designed by God to provide a complete view of Jesus. (See Flynn's book for additional discussion.)

Textual Transmission

Another important issue to consider has to do with the transmission of the text. A question to ask is, "How did the Gospels come to us?" There are fixed steps in this process (see Diagram 1). Step one is the oral stage. None of the Gospels was written until about 30 years after Jesus had returned to heaven. It is believed that Matthew and Mark were written at about the same time, around AD 65. Luke was written not long after but John was not written until about AD 90. For at least 30 years, the Church transmitted the knowledge about Jesus orally. This was done through the preaching from pulpits and in telling the story in smaller settings. Believers talked about Jesus wherever they went and told his story to their children and to whoever would listen. During this stage there was no systematic approach to the story and the occasion dictated the choice of material. The closest thing to a systematic use of material was in the preaching of the church but even that was more thematic.

Stage two is what is referred to as the autograph stage. This is when the various authors sat down and wrote their Gospel. This stage was an intentional one because it was recognised that the Church needed more systematic accounts of Jesus' life. Different approaches were employed in this writing stage. Matthew and Mark appear to be largely based on personal recollections. Luke is more a historical document that was thoroughly researched. John is a theological treatise and is a late reflection on the life and ministry of Jesus. Unfortunately, none of these original documents exists today. The precise fate of these autographs will always be a matter of conjecture but it is more than

likely that the fragility of writing material ensured that such documents could not stand the test of time.

The third stage is perhaps the most significant. This is what is called the manuscripts (MSS) production stage. Recognising the short shelf life of the autographs, copies were quickly made and disseminated throughout the Church. These copies are referred to as manuscripts. Wherever the MSS went, more copies were made of them. Manuscripts were made in all the main centres of Christianity (Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, Constantinople, etc.) and for several centuries. Today we have more than 1500 MSS of the NT and these MSS can be grouped into families by place of origin, accuracy, reliability, and circulation. The science of dealing with all this data is called textual criticism.

In the next stage the MSS become more or less standardised. First the texts were canonised into Scripture. This was followed by a lengthy process to produce a standard Greek text. The first standardised Greek text was known as the *Textus Receptus* (Received Text) and, despite its flaws, it became the source of some of the older translations like the KJV. The first critical Greek text was produced by the Dutch scholar, Erasmus, in the 16th century (a short time prior to the Protestant Reformation). Since then other critical texts have appeared: the Nestle-Aland and the UBS (the text that has influenced the most number of non-English translations).

A final stage is what we can call the translation stage. This is the stage where the Greek text is then translated into other languages. There are more translations into English than into any other language. Through most of the medieval period, the Bible existed only in Latin, which was accessible only to the priests. Through the work of Erasmus, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wycliffe, William Tyndale, and others, the Gospels and the rest of the NT are now available in most of the world's languages.

Diagram 1.



Throughout this very drawn out process, God has ensured the accuracy of his Word. Despite the variants that exist among MSS and translations, the basic message has always remained intact. Perhaps this is the most fitting testimony to this process of transmission. Arguments about which version is more accurate are moot in the face of the evidence. Maybe this brief historical odyssey should remind us of the need to adopt a dynamic view of the Bible because the work of transmission is an ongoing one.

Who Were the Authors?

Each Gospel carries the name of the author who wrote it. While this fact is in dispute these days, it is a well-established tradition through nearly two thousand years of Christian history. The authors are identified as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Nevertheless, we should examine each one separately and determine his particular qualification for this task.

Matthew

The first Gospel carries the name of Matthew, a disciple of Jesus whose call is recorded in chapter 9. The call of Matthew is corroborated by both Mark (in Ch 2) and Luke (in Ch 5). His full name was Levi Matthew and he was a Galilean Jew who served as tax collector for the Roman imperial authorities. Because of his profession, Matthew was ostracised by his countrymen as a collaborator and excluded

from normal participation at the synagogues and the temple. It is not difficult to imagine why Matthew so readily responded to Jesus' call. In spite of his profession he was very much a Jew with all the passion and desires that his Jewishness brought. Like most of his people his one greatest desire would have been to live to see the coming of the Messiah. Being strategically stationed as he was, the latest talk of the town would have readily caught his attention and sparked an interest in this newest sensation, Jesus of Nazareth.

Not much is said about Matthew during his training period with Jesus. He was one of those disciples who mostly existed in the background. Nevertheless, we must assume that his life was as profoundly affected as that of all the others. Tradition maintains that Matthew eventually became a missionary and was martyred in Ethiopia.

As a tax collector, Matthew was a man who paid meticulous attention to details and this is borne out in his book. As a Jew, he was profoundly influenced by the messianic hope of his day and was a keen student of the Hebrew Bible. The manner in which he handled the Hebrew Bible is testimony to this fact. He was also one of the selected twelve, which provided him with a vantage view on Jesus and since he was one of the background disciples he had more time for observation and was less embroiled in the limelight activities of Jesus' ministry. These factors contributed immensely to his qualifications as a Gospel writer.

Mark

The second Gospel, which many scholars contend that it is probably the first Gospel written, is traditionally attributed to John Mark, the son of Mary of Jerusalem who was one of the women sponsors of Jesus' ministry (see Luke 8). He was more than likely the young man who ran away virtually naked from the Garden of Gethsemane during the arrest of Jesus (Mark 14:51). He was also a missionary companion of Barnabas and Paul during the first missionary journey (Acts 13) but deserted the team to return home. Paul's reluctance to reemploy this young man led to an irreparable rift between Barnabas and Paul (Acts 15). The very endearing reference to Mark by Peter (see 1 Pet 5:13) suggests that at some stage he became a close companion of the apostle. We can infer from all this chronological data that John Mark was just a young boy during the life of Jesus.

Here was a young boy who had met Jesus personally and his recollection of Jesus would have definitely focused on what Jesus did. The Gospel is more attuned to miracles than the others. His mother was a close personal friend and supporter of Jesus and Mark was part of that first generation of Christians. His close association with Barnabas, Paul, and Peter meant that he knew more about Jesus than anyone else of his generation. His personal acquaintance with Jesus and his access to some of Jesus' main leaders positioned him well for the task of Gospel writing.

Luke

The third Gospel was written by Luke, a missionary companion of Paul from the second missionary journey onwards. He was a Greek from Turkey and a medical doctor by profession. To the best of our knowledge, Luke never met Jesus personally and his acquaintance with Jesus was second hand. This fact is obvious in his own admission that he needed to conduct thorough research in order to write his Gospel (Luke 1:1-3). Judging by the sophistication of his Greek, we can also assume that he was a man of learning and culture. Apart from this we know little else about Luke.

Because of his training and background, Luke brought a more 'scientific' approach to Gospel writing than did the other authors. His book is more chronological and biographical than the others. His command of the language allowed him to express things in a more sophisticated and detached manner. He also brought with him the objectivity of an outsider. He was not a disciple of Jesus like

Matthew. He was not a privileged church kid like Mark. He was a convert who had to learn about Jesus from others. All this ensured that his work is the most objective.

John

The Gospel of John was written some thirty years after the other three. The author is John, a disciple of Jesus. Biographically, we know more about him than any of the other writers. His father was Zebedee, who owned a fishing business (Mark 1:19-20), and his mother was Salome, a supporter of Jesus' cause. His brother James was also one of the twelve disciples. More importantly John along with Andrew were disciples of John the Baptist and responded instantly to the Baptist's identification of Jesus as Messiah (see John 1). This meant that John actually became a follower of Jesus before the official selection of disciples by Jesus. It appears that he was in his late teens when he met Jesus and, judging by family details in the Gospels, he was a cousin of Jesus. John developed a special relationship with Jesus and was inducted into the inner circle that comprised Peter, James, and John.

Two things stand out about this young man. He was the only disciple present at Calvary and was entrusted by Jesus with the care of his mother, Mary (John 19). From the book of Acts we learn that he was a close companion of Peter and this placed him alongside the man that Jesus designated as the leader of the group. Later in life John would set up his missionary base in Ephesus, become the target of Roman ire, and live to be a very old man. He was the only one of the twelve disciples who died of natural causes. All in all he would contribute five books to the NT, second only to Paul.

John had special qualifications as a writer. His unique position in relation to Jesus, his special relationship with Peter, his longevity, and his obvious theological tendency enabled him to write a Gospel that is truly a theological masterpiece.

The Audiences

Reflective reading of the Gospels reveals that each author intended his work to reach different target groups. Matthew's intensive usage of the Hebrew Bible and continuous reference to the Jewish messianic hope imply that his target audience were the Jews. He utilised their Scripture and their most cherished hope to try and convince them that Jesus was indeed the fulfilment of everything that their prophets had spoken of.

Mark's focus on the activity of Jesus suggests that he had the practical minded Romans as his audience. The Romans were people who prided themselves in the things that they built. They were an industrious people and often thought of Rome as the epitome of all that is good in humanity. Mark's message would have resonated fairly well with them.

Luke evidently wrote for the more elite of society, those who were educated and cultured. His audience would have comprised primarily of Greeks. The Greeks were artists, poets, philosophers, and educators. They took pride in their theatres and dramas and in their great schools. Luke presented Jesus in a manner appealing to such a sophisticated audience. Luke's detailed attention on the less privileged of society would have also struck a chord with the educated Greeks who often saw the cruel practicality of the Romans as a direct affront to their more cultured ways.

John's theological approach clearly targeted the Christians. This is especially borne out by the dating of the Gospel. When he wrote his Gospel, he was the last of that first generation of eyewitnesses. By the time he wrote his book, heretical teachings were starting to infiltrate the church. John saw that the Church needed to understand who this Jesus really was. The simplicity of his language also suggests that he intended the book to be read and understood by every member of the Church. The

apologetic style of the Gospel suggests that he also wanted the book to be available for consumption by those critical of the Christian gospel. In a sense John had a dual target in mind.

Background Issues

When studying any book of the Bible it is crucial to understand the background behind the material. Such background data serve as the frame against which the text itself is placed and must be articulated. Without this background material the biblical text appears to exist in a vacuum and that has never been God's communication style. There are three significant factors in any background investigation: historical, cultural, and religious data.

Historical Materials

During the first century Palestine was effectively a Roman province. As an imperial power, Rome exercised its authority with impunity and cruelty. While some religious liberties were granted to the Jews, this was inevitably held in balance by Roman geopolitics. Palestine was divided into three distinct provinces. Galilee in the north was left largely in the control of the Herod family who served as virtual stooges of the Romans. The central province was inhabited by the Samaritans who were as hated by the Jews as the Romans. The southern province of Judea came under the direct rule of a Roman Proconsul (Governor). Palestine was considered the most ungovernable province of Rome and anyone assigned as Proconsul of Judea saw the assignment as a virtual exile. Rome enforced its rule in two main ways, through the collection of punitive taxes and via the dreaded and hated Roman legions. Roman attempts to woo Jewish sentiments, such as the building of highways and aqueducts, were openly spurned by the Jews who saw Roman presence in Palestine as an affront to the covenant with Yahweh.

The Jews were allowed to retain their ruling council, the Sanhedrin, but its powers were stringently restricted. The Sanhedrin served a largely religious role with no executive authority. The Sanhedrin was composed almost entirely of Sadducees, the priestly party, and Pharisees, the chief religious party of the Jews. While the Pharisees usually made up most of the numbers, it was the Sadducees who always held the chairmanship. These two parties entertained vastly contradictory political ideologies and their inability to work together made Roman rule a little easier. While the Sadducees willingly embraced Roman ways for political gains, the Pharisees fanatically rejected anything non-Jewish. The Council was rather fractured and its influence over the people limited at best.

Galilee was the hotbed of political revolt. The group of Jewish rebels known as Zealots started in Galilee. Their primary mission in life was the overthrow of Roman rule and the establishment of a Jewish kingdom after the model of the Maccabean Revolt of the 2nd cent BC. The Zealots' methods included coercion, kidnappings, and assassinations. Romans and suspected Jewish collaborators were equally targeted. Present within the Zealot organisation was an extremely violent faction (very much in the mould of present day Al Qaeda or Hamas) known as the Sicarii (for the dagger they carried). The Sicarii specialised in suicide missions of assassinations. It is quite astounding that Jesus not only lived mostly in Galilee but chose mostly Galileans as his disciples. One of these disciples, Simon, was a Zealot (some have suggested a Sicarii). The truly explosive mix of disciples is better understood when we realise that also included by Jesus was Matthew, a collaborator. Barabbas and the two men crucified with Jesus were most likely Zealots or perhaps even Sicarii.

Every Galilean revolt was ruthlessly put down by the Roman army. The Zealots would eventually precipitate the famous Jewish wars of AD 70-73, which resulted in the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the permanent dispersion of the Jewish people from their homeland. A group of Zealots would hole up in the fortress of Masada for three years before succumbing to the Romans.

Despite the violence of the Zealot revolts, the Zealots, more than any other group, were responsible for keeping alive the messianic hope among the Jews. This explains the excitement that both John the Baptist and Jesus caused. It also explains the ultimate Jewish rejection of Jesus.

Cultural Issues

Palestine society comprised of three very different classes of people. There were the despised Samaritans with whom no self-respecting Jew would speak to or do business with. They practised an ancient form of Judaism that was viewed by the Jews as a corrupt form. The Jewish dislike for Gentiles was only exceeded by their dislike for Samaritans. These people were completely shunned by the Jewish population. The rabbis had edicts against anyone associating with Samaritans.

Galileans were Jews but they were viewed as the country folk, the rednecks of Jewish society. Most Galileans were either farmers or fishermen. Their speech carried a heavy accent, their manners were rough, and they were treated with condescension by the Jews from Judea. Galileans lived a simpler and less sophisticated life than their southern counterparts. But it was these rough men who became the backbone of Jesus' ministry and future kingdom.

The people of Judea were better educated and more cultured. Vocations varied considerably and most of the influential people of Jewish society originated in Judea. This partially explains the unwillingness of the Jewish establishment to accept Jesus. Life in Judea centred around the temple and its services. Religion was a major part of life in Judea with both the Sadducees and the Pharisees locating their activities mostly around the temple areas. Jerusalem also had a theatre, a sports coliseum, and Roman-type baths for public entertainment. These things were often contentious issues between the two parties. By and large the people of Judea thought of themselves as better placed in every way as compared with their northern counterparts. It is highly significant that Jesus had only one Judean, Judas Iscariot, in his circle of disciples.

A particularly difficult cultural phenomenon for modern Christians to deal with was the second class status assigned to women. At the temple women could only go as far as the Court of Women. In synagogues they had to sit in the curtained galleries. In courts of law their testimony was not worth very much, three women equalled one man. Jewish men were forbidden to talk to a woman in public even one's own family members. Women could not hold any property and had few legal rights. Men could initiate divorce with ease but women were not allowed to do so. Pharisees even prayed this thanks: "Lord, I thank you for not making me a sinner, or a Gentile, or a woman." It was a totally chauvinistic world and women were discriminated against to such an extent that education was largely reserved for boys. Despite this negative picture, Jewish women were genuinely envied by their Roman and Greek counterparts whose life was even less attractive. When this is taken into account, it becomes rather apparent that Jesus' approach to this question was nothing short of revolutionary.

Religious Concerns

The religious scene in Palestine was a rather mixed one and was dominated by three main religious parties. The smallest of these, but arguably the most significant to early Christianity, was the party known as Essenes. The Essenes were closely associated with the Pharisees but far more conservative. They were an all-male group and lived in communes in the Judean desert. Their best known community was located at Qumran on the northwest shores of the Dead Sea. They spent most of their time studying, making copies of, and commentating on the Scriptures. Their library collection, the Dead Sea Scrolls, has proven invaluable in helping us understand the Hebrew Bible and their theology. They were a pacifist group who looked forward to the coming of a prince of light to liberate

the world from its darkness. John the Baptist was quite likely an Essene and even Jesus may have had some contact with them.

The Sadducees were the priestly party. All their members came from the priestly clans and they were theologically liberal. Their desire to appease the Romans led to their compromising on many issues of faith. While they controlled the chairmanship of the Sanhedrin and the proceedings at the temple, they had very little impact on the people. Most Jews saw the Sadducees as compromisers and therefore not truly representative of the Jewish way. Jesus had some confrontations with them but they really came on strong during the passion week of Christ.

The largest and most influential group was the Pharisees. The name is derived from the Greek *pharisaioi* (separated ones) and was initially used by their detractors as a term of derision. They called themselves by the Hebrew name *haverim* (brothers). While there were some very rich Pharisees (Nicodemus, Joseph), the majority lived very simple lives. The Pharisees were conservative and legalists in their theological bias. Their obsession was the Torah and its interpretation. Their most cherished aim was the preservation of the sanctity of the Torah. Education was of prime importance to them and they produced many of the great rabbis of history. They commanded the respect of the ordinary people and were the real power brokers in the synagogues. The Pharisees held marriage to be sacred and required every adult male to be married. They also tended to live in communities and were quick to rally to each other's aid. However, they generally held the common people in disdain and saw themselves as spiritually superior. They were the chief protagonists of Jesus and yet many Pharisees did become his disciples.

The religious scene of Palestine was dominated by two types of activities. The first activity comprised the regular Sabbath services, which were held in the synagogues. The architecture and liturgy of the synagogues would be adopted *carte blanche* by the NT Church. These services were lay-driven and every male could conceivably participate. In reality the Pharisees had a big say in the services and in the interpretation of the Torah. Synagogues were found in every town and village because the rabbis had ruled that wherever ten adult Jewish men lived a synagogue should be built. The impact of the synagogue on the Church cannot be underestimated.

The second main activity comprised the festivals, which centred on the temple. Jewish men were required to attend all the major festivals regardless of where they lived. In the Gospels we read of Jesus' family making the long trek to Jerusalem to celebrate the festivals. These activities were the domain of the priests and people also saw these pilgrimages as a necessary effort to maintain their faith and keep alive their messianic hope.

However, it was the spirit of the age that matters most. Because of world conditions and developments within Judaism, the 1st century was an age of expectation. People anticipated a coming messiah, prayed for the event, and focused their hopes on it. Expectant mothers prayed that they may be privileged enough to give birth to the messiah. Every newborn male child was looked upon as a potential fulfilment of the prophecies. This is one reason why Paul wrote that Jesus was born at the right time (Gal 4:4). However, the expectations were mostly for a great deliverer king like David and they were not as prepared to accept a suffering messiah. Despite the early excitement caused by the ministry of Jesus, many people became quickly disillusioned with Jesus because he did not fit their expectation.

The Synoptic Problem

The word "synoptic" refers to the three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The word comes from the Greek word *sunopsis* which means "seeing together." These three Gospels are called synoptic

Gospels because of the similarity of viewpoint and content. While there are differences among the three, there are great similarities. The Synoptic Gospels follow a general geographic sequence (Galilee, the North, Judea and Perea, and Jerusalem). John does not follow this sequence. The Synoptics also narrate many of the same events most of which are not even recorded by John. Furthermore, some of the most important characteristics of the Synoptics are not found in John (e.g., the commission of the Twelve, the transfiguration, etc.).

Nevertheless, some questions remain. How did these authors get their materials about Jesus? Why are the Synoptics so similar in so many places? What accounts for the differences? This is the so-called synoptic problem. In trying to resolve this problem, scholars have postulated several different answers.

Common Dependence on One Original Gospel

One theory is that the Synoptics all borrowed from one common source, an original but lost Gospel. It has been suggested that this original Gospel may have actually been written in Hebrew or Aramaic. Today, this theory is not popular among scholars.

Common Dependence on Oral Source

Some have suggested that the Synoptics are depended on a relatively fixed oral version of Jesus' story. Some scholars still maintain this approach but it is no longer popular.

Interdependence

This approach suggests that two of the writers used one or more of the other Gospels in constructing their own. Advocates of this view say that this is the best available explanation for the similarities and differences in the Synoptics. This approach is not really new but it is a popular one. There are three main versions of the theory.

Augustine's Proposal

Augustine taught that Mathew was the first Gospel. Mark borrowed material from Matthew. Then Luke borrowed materials from both Mathew and Mark. This was the standard view until the 19th century.

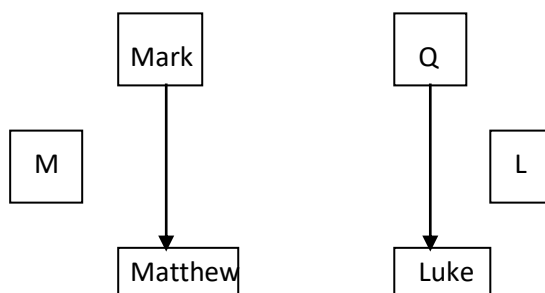
The "Two-Gospel" Hypothesis

This approach maintains that Matthew is the first Gospel and Luke was the second Gospel. Mark was dependent on both Matthew and Luke. This is quite a popular view today.

The "Two-Source" Hypothesis

This hypothesis holds that there were two original sources, Mark (the first Gospel) and "Q" ("Q" is German for 'quelle' which means "source"). It is believed that Q is a lost collection of Jesus' sayings. These two sources have been used independently by Matthew and Luke. Sometimes the materials peculiar to Matthew are labelled "M" and those distinct to Luke are called "L" and the theory is referred to as the "four source" hypothesis. Both are popular versions of the theory.

Diagram 2.



The Johannine Corpus

John is the second most important writer in the NT. All in all, John wrote five books: 3 epistles (letters), an Apocalypse, and a Gospel. This collection of material is often referred to as the Johannine corpus (collection). John employs a similar Greek in all his works, despite the somewhat broken Greek that is used in Revelation. His theology is fairly consistent with love as the dominant concept in the Gospel and the epistles. All his works come from more or less the same period, the latter part of the 1st century and it appears that they were all written in Ephesus. Generally, John's works are considered the latest NT books and as such reflect the changing times of the period.

Here, we must focus on the Gospel of John. This book was written some 30 years after the Synoptic Gospels. It was written in rather simple Greek and was evidently intended for a mainly church readership. The Gospel is different from the Synoptics both in its structure and content. The book commences with a theological statement about Jesus. It does not contain any nativity stories. There are no parables and a limited number of miracles. The miracles highlighted by John are not found in the other Gospels. John tells stories that are unique, records long sermons, and give us the longest prayer that Jesus offered. John's theological perspective is also distinct from the other Gospels. While the Synoptics focus sharply on the humanity of Jesus, John zooms in on the divinity of Christ. The Synoptics are very interested in the mind of Jesus, John zeroes in on the heart of Christ. The Synoptics narrate events in the life of Jesus, John theologises about the significance of Christ.

The only part of John that bears any resemblance to the Synoptics is his account of the Passion Week of Jesus. However, even in this narrative John's account is considerably different from the other Gospels (e.g., the upper room scene). In a sense John provides an important view into Jesus: a view derived from theological reflection.

It is also important to note that John and Revelation were written fairly close to each other. Both were written after his Patmos exile (after his apocalyptic visions). The impact of John's encounter in these visions would have naturally influenced his gospel perspective. This factor must be kept in mind when dealing with the Gospel. John is unique as a writer because he had intimate views of Christ both as a human and as the awesome God of the Apocalypse. The two books represent one of the broadest spectrums of theology available in the NT: awesome God, on the one hand, and humble rabbi, on the other hand.

The Synoptics and John

It is helpful to make a diagrammatic comparison between the Synoptics and John before examining the individuality of each Gospel. As earlier stated, John differs from the Synoptics in terms of structure and content. The following diagram encapsulates these differences more succinctly.

Diagram 3.

The Synoptics	John
Chiefly concerned with Jesus' ministry in the north, around Galilee	Gives more coverage to Jesus' ministry in the south, around Judea
Much emphasis on "kingdom" inheritance	More emphasis on the person of Jesus and eternal inheritance
Jesus as Son of David, Son of man	Jesus especially as Son of God
The gospel of the infant church	The gospel of the maturing church
The earthly story	The heavenly meaning
Jesus' sayings generally short	More of long discourses of Jesus
Comparatively little commentary by the gospel writer	Much commentary by John
Only one mention of a Passover	Three, possibly four, Passovers cited

The Uniqueness of the Gospels

The NT provides four different portraits of Jesus and each of these portraits is rather unique in its own rights. An appraisal of each Gospel is an essential part of understanding the books. Each writer has a different take on, a specific emphasis, and a unique experience with Jesus. In studying anything of this scope it is imperative that both the "trees" and the "forest" be examined in order to ascertain the full significance of the message. In this section we will look at the individual contribution of the Gospels whereas in the following section we will reflect upon the theological significance of all four Gospels.

In perusing through the literature, many different approaches have been used to dissect the Gospels. I would like to utilise a simpler approach by highlighting three primary characteristics in each Gospel.

Matthew

With regards to the Gospel of Matthew, three features stand out: the Jewishness of the book, its topical approach to the material, and its emphasis on the concept of king.

Jewishness of Matthew

- Links gospel with the OT and refutes any suggestion that Jews must give up the OT to accept Christ.
- In 1:1 there is a conscious reference to Genesis.
- In 11:14 the mention of Elijah is a direct reference to Mal 4: 4-5.
- Links Jesus to David and Abraham (1:1) and therefore to the two great covenants of the OT.
- There are 62 references to and 44 quotations from the OT, more than all the other three Gospels combined.

Matthew's Topical Approach

- Interested in Jesus' sermons resulting in a topical rather than a chronological arrangement.
- Contains five discourses of Jesus—Sermon on the Mount (5-7), instructions to the Twelve (10), kingdom parables (13), kingdom lifestyle (18-20), and the Mt of Olives discourse (23-25).

Matthew's Concept of King

- Matthew employs various royalty terms (68 times) – “king” is applied to Jesus 14 times; “kingdom” is found 17 times; “kingdom of heaven” is used 32 times; and “kingdom of God” is used 5 times.
- The phrase Jesus son of David is used 8 times.
- The Magis’ question in 2:2 implies a royalty concept.
- Satan’s offer in 4:1-11 accentuates this concept.
- Jesus’ use of the authoritative statement “I say to you” implies kingship. The phrase is found 50 times.
- Often people worship Jesus, an act rarely found in the other Gospels.

Mark

The Gospel of Mark is characterised by its rather Roman flavour, its busyness, and its emphasis on servanthood.

Mark’s Romanness

- Writer’s name is John Mark. John was a Jewish name but Mark was a Roman name. The Gospel carries the name Mark.
- Rarely quotes from the OT.
- Explains Aramaic words that readers would not understand, e.g., *Boanerges* (3:17) and *Talitha koum* (5:41).
- Pictures Jesus as a man of action; the Gospel is brief and vivid and moves with great speed from scene to scene, house to house, synagogue to synagogue, and town to town. People and places keep changing. There are few discourses and concentrates on miracles.
- Employs repetitions in a way similar to Latin, e.g., 5:42 “astonished with great astonishment.”
- Peter is a major figure in the gospel and he is portrayed as a rugged man with immense energy and a natural leader. Romans loved such leaders.

Mark’s Busyness

- Jesus was perennially at work.
- Many busy days are recorded, e.g., 1:21-34.
- 12 of the 16 chapters begin with “and” and hint at continuous activity.
- Use of the historic present.
- Use of “immediately” and similar words (40 times) more than all NT books combined.

Mark’s Concept of Servant (Donald Barnhouse called Mark the “Servant Gospel”)

- Omits the fanfare of the birth, the choir of angels, the adoration of shepherds, and the worshipping wise men. A servant’s life is unheralded.
- Fits Mark’s own occupation as attendant (Acts 13:5).
- Jesus is unostentatious and wants to shun publicity (3:7; 7:17, 24). He often withdraws from public view (1:35-38) and prefers the villages (6:6).
- Less talking in Mark with 20 miracles recorded but only 4 parables.
- “Gospel” is used 12 times in the four Gospels but 8 of them are in Mark—a servant carries a message.
- Frequent mention of Jesus’ hands (6:5; 7:32-33; 9:27).

Luke

Luke's Gospel projects a strong Gentile ambience and focuses on Jesus' humanity and the concept of compassion.

Luke's Gentile Ambience

- The author is a Greek physician with a superior education, great command of the language, and a polished writing style.
- The Gospel is directed to a Greek of eminent position, the "most excellent Theophilus."
- Jesus is presented as the ideal man, a very Greek ideal. This Jesus (like the ideal man in Greek thought) is strong yet able to weep, meek yet radiates courage, and tough yet tender.
- Greeks stand for Gentile everywhere. There are favourable references to Gentiles (2:32; 4:25-27; 21:24). The site of the crucifixion is designated by its Gentile name, Calvary.

Christ's Humanity

- The Phrase "son of man" is used 24 times.
- Provides the most complete coverage of Jesus' birth, which includes the birth of John the Baptist, Gabriel's announcement, Jesus' dedication and circumcision, Anna and Simeon's adoration, and Mary's memoirs.
- Mentions Jesus' age: the temple visit at 12 and the baptism at 30.
- Jesus is linked to human history: the decree of Augustus and the governorship of Quirinius in 2:1-2; the mention of Tiberius, Pilate, Herod and others in 3:1-2.
- Jesus' temptations parallel those of Adam and Eve.
- Common human practices are mentioned: prayer (over 20 times Jesus is praying; 3 prayer parables) and praise (5 songs—Elizabeth's in 1:41-45; Mary's in 1:46-55; Zacharias' in 1:67-79; the angels' in 2:8-14; and Simeon's in 2:28-32).

Luke's Concept of Compassion

- 4:18 is the only declaration of mission of its kind in the Gospels.
- Despised Samaritans are portrayed in a favourable way.
- Women hold a high place. The birth of Jesus is seen from Mary's viewpoint. The only record about Elizabeth and Anna, the widow of Nain, the sinner woman who washes Jesus' feet, and the two sisters. Luke tells parables with women as main characters.
- It is the "Gospel of the home" and relates Jesus' home visits to Simon, Mary and Martha, a chief Pharisee, Zacchaeus. It also tells parables with home as setting.
- Luke tells stories about the only child (7:12-13; 8:42; 9:38).
- The poor, the disabled, and sinners figure prominently.

John

John's Gospel has a dual thrust. On the one hand, it is a theological treatise for the benefit of a maturing church, and on the other hand, it serves a definite evangelistic purpose. As such, the Gospel of John emphasises the divinity of Jesus and is presented in a simple manner.

Jesus as God

- Focus on a lofty view of Jesus as God (see 1:1-3). Choice of material (miracles, discourses, claims, conversations) is very selective and is driven by this focus.

- First statement of the book asserts Jesus' divinity (1:1-3) and the phrase "Son of God" (1:34) is used for Jesus.
- Jesus' divinity is also depicted in his first miracle (2:1-11), the attribute of pre-existence (8:58), and his own claim (5:22, 28, 29).
- There are significant omissions in John – no genealogy (God has no beginning) and no temptations (God cannot be tempted).
- At the Passion there is no cry of "if it is possible," no sweat of blood, no crying women, no Simon to carry the cross, no cry of God-forsakenness, and no mocking of the crowd.
- Includes facts not found elsewhere – facts that assert deity; soldiers falling back (18:6); Jesus' seamless robe (19:23); and even in death he is in command (19:30).

John's simplicity

- Simple words to express profound thoughts – "believe" (98 times), "world" (78 times), "know" (55 times), "life" (50 times), "witness" (46 times), "glory" (40 times), and "love" (40 times).
- Presents conflicting opposites – light versus darkness; love versus hate; life versus death; flesh versus spirit; slavery versus liberty.
- Depth of meaning is conveyed through ordinary words, e.g., "word" (40 times) means computation, account, measure, sum, consideration, value, reputation, argument, principle, law, thesis, narrative, phrase, message, dialogue, proverb, language, wisdom, etc. The Greek word *logos* requires about 40 different words in English.

John's use of sevens

- John is fond of 7, which typifies divine perfection, and uses this symbolism in both the Gospel and Revelation.
- 7 times: we read "these things I have spoken to you;" Jesus addressed the woman at the well; Jesus spoke of himself as bread of life; and mentioned his 'hour'.
- 7 miracles: water to wine (2); healing nobleman's son (4); healing cripple at Bethesda (5); feeding 500 (6); walking on water (6); healing a man born blind (9); and raising Lazarus (11). These miracles begin with wedding and end with the grave.
- 7 witnesses: John the Baptist (1); Nathaniel (1); the Samaritan woman (4); Peter (6); Martha (11); Thomas (20); and John himself (21).
- 7 "I AM'S": bread of life (5:35); light of the world (8:12); door (10:9); good shepherd (10:11); resurrection and life (11:25); way, truth, and life (14:6); and true vine (15:5).

John's use of "believe"

- The word "believe" occurs 98 times, more frequent than any other word.
- Jesus received a mixed reception from people and opinions about him were divided (7:43; 9:16; 10:19).
- Even after his greatest miracle the reception is still mixed (11:45, 53).
- John speaks about the unbelief of Israel (1:5, 11).
- Importance of believing: it is the right to becoming an heir (1:12); it provides access to immortality (3:16).
- Belief is a commitment to a person, Jesus. The word is always a verb, never a noun. It is usually accompanied by "in/into" and "Jesus" as in the expression "believe in Jesus."