

## The Four Gospels: A summary

The word “gospel” means “good news.” The English word comes from a combination of two old English words, “god” (meaning “good”) and “spel” (meaning “story”). The Greek word was *euangelium*, a combination of the words for “good” and “message.” Our English words “evangelist,” “evangelism” etc. come directed from the Greek. So an “evangelist” is one who brings good news; and we refer to the writers of the four gospels as “evangelists.”

The gospels were not intended to be biographies of Jesus. Rather, they were teaching and preaching material—material written from a particular point of view to accomplish a particular purpose. They are more like portraits of Jesus than photographs—that is, they give a particular writer’s interpretation, rather than a precisely scientific historical account.

Our Bible contains four gospels, which have been titled “the gospel according to . . .” Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Those titles were not part of the original manuscripts, however, but were added later by the church, based on tradition as to who the writer was. The first three are known as “synoptic” gospels—a word meaning “seen with the same eye.” They are called this because anyone who looks at these three gospels sees quickly that they have similar patterns, styles sequences, and they generally follow the same outline of Jesus’ ministry. John is entirely different. Scholars generally agree that the synoptic gospels are in some way related to each other. The most popular theory is that Mark was the earliest, and that Matthew and Luke were both familiar with Mark and used it as a kind of starting point. John, if he knew of the other three, generally ignored them in his work.

### MARK

- Author: Tradition says it was John Mark, a young friend of Peter, and that he was recording Peter’s recollections.
- Date: In its present form, perhaps about 65 AD (though it may incorporate earlier material).
- Audience: The “Gentile” church (i.e., non-Jewish Christians).
- Purpose: Perhaps intended as a kind of missionary tract—a brief account of Jesus for those who were just coming to know about him.
- Characteristics: (a) Primarily a *story*; not many teachings or saying, but an emphasis on what Jesus *did*.  
(b) Active and fast-moving. Note how often the word “immediately” appears; it gives the feeling of events happening very rapidly.  
(c) Vivid and terse. Frequent little details, which lends some credence to the idea that Mark was in part reproducing eye-witness accounts from Peter.

### MATTHEW

- Author: Tradition says Matthew, one of the twelve disciples. One theory among scholars today is that the disciple may have written a collection of Jesus’ sayings which forms a major part of the gospel (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount), but that the book in its present form was more likely written by someone else.

- Date: The Perhaps around 80 AD, in its present form (though it may incorporate earlier material).
- Audience: Probably the church in Palestine or Syria, where Christians were still primarily of Jewish descent.
- Purpose: To present Jesus as fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, and to show the church as the “New Israel,” the new people of God.
- Characteristics: (a) “Jewishness”—emphasis on Old Testament quotations, for instance.  
 (b) Emphasis on Jesus’ teaching (e.g., Sermon on the Mount).  
 (c) Seems to reflect second or third generation of the church by idealizing the disciples (eliminating or tempering instances in Mark that would tend to show the disciples in a negative light).

## **LUKE**

- Author: Luke, a Gentile physician who was a companion of Paul.
- Date: About 70-80 AD.
- Audience: Possibly a Roman community (in Rome or elsewhere).
- Purpose: To present Jesus as universal Savior, whose life, death and resurrection is significant to Romans, not just to Jews.
- Characteristics: (a) Strong interest in social relationships—emphasis on outcasts, oppressed, women, children, etc.  
 (b) Emphasis on parables; the most beautiful and beloved parables are mostly from Luke (Prodigal Son, Good Samaritan, etc.); Matthew actually has more parables, but Luke’s tend to be more elaborate and complex.

## **JOHN**

- Author: Many theories. The most popular tradition is that it was John, the disciple of Jesus (the son of Zebedee), but this is uncertain; there are several persons named John in the New Testament and the early church. There is some indication that the gospel is the work of someone who knew John the disciple, and who perhaps wrote the current gospel incorporating material written by John the disciple.
- Date: Probably about 90-100 AD.
- Audience: The Greek world (i.e., the educated people of the day); or possibly a specific “Johannine community.”
- Purpose: To provide a “spiritual gospel” which supplements the synoptic gospels. To describe a series of “signs” that indicate the truth about who Jesus was.
- Characteristics: (a) No parables or short sayings.  
 (b) Long discourses from Jesus which are more “theological” in content than, say, the Sermon on the Mount.  
 (c) Miracles are treated as “signs”—that is, Jesus does them, not just to help people, but to demonstrate who he is; or said another way, the author or editor has used these miracle stories as a way to make theological points.