

# The Greatest Life Ever Lived

A Study in the Incarnate Life of Jesus Christ and An Exposition of the Four Gospels

LESSON IV: INTRODUCTION -- THE FOUR GOSPELS

## FOUR GOSPELS?

“From the earliest days of the recorded history of the NT church there has been four, and *only* four, widely recognized Gospels. To emphasize the fact that they set forth one and the same gospel, the term ‘fourfold Gospel’ or ‘evangelical instrument’ is at times ascribed to them. Thus Tertullian, in his work *Against Marcion* (begun about A.D. 207), states: ‘We posit as our first principle that the evangelical instrument has apostles as its authors, to whom was assigned by the Lord himself this duty of publishing the gospel.... Of these apostles, therefore, John and Matthew first instill faith into us, while the apostolic men, Luke and Mark, renew it’. Even somewhat earlier, in a work dating from about A.D. 182-188, the great theologian and traveler Irenaeus, sums up what was apparently the consensus of the entire church of his day, in these words: ‘It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer than they are’. [Hendriksen, *Matthew*]

Eusebius places the four gospels among books never controverted among the churches. By end of 2nd century these four gospels alone were undisputed and universally circulated among the early churches, stood at the head of church catalogs and of all the Greek manuscripts, and were freely used. Note there have been / are other gospel narratives, but only the four gospels we have today were held to be authoritative and inspired.

## WHY FOUR GOSPELS?

“The position which best fits the facts [concerning the synoptic problem] and honors the Christ of the Synoptics if that the Holy Spirit presents, without contradiction, though three different human writers, the *one* Messiah-King, Servant-Savior, God-Man. Each presents Him under a different aspect for a particular purpose, but the threefold presentation is of the one and same divine-human Person. So multi-faceted is the glory of Christ’s person and so far-reaching are the ramifications of His finished redemption that one Gospel account could not portray His full-born splendor.” [Unger, *Bible Handbook*]

“...when any man becomes conscious of some event or circumstance or person, the event or circumstance or person will strike his consciousness in a very individual way. He does not perceive the vision that he may happen to be sharing at the moment with other people in precisely the same way that they perceive it. Each of us looks out upon the world and perceives it uniquely. We see the many things as *we* are, not as *they* are....This does not mean that there is no absolute Truth. It only means that in certain areas where perceptions differ, not all will perceive the truth in the same way.” [Custance, *Hidden Things of God’s Revelation*]

<b>COMPARISON OF THE FOUR GOSPELS</b>			
<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Luke</b>	<b>John</b>
The Prophesied King	The Obedient Servant	The Perfect Man	The Divine Son
Lionlike (Ez 1:10; Rev 4:6,7)	Oxlike	Manlike	Eaglelike
Prophetic	Practical	Historical	Spiritual
to the Jew	to the Roman	to the Greek	to believers
* to Shem	* to Ham	* to Japeth	* to all
The Davidic King	The Servant of the Lord	The Son of Man	The Word of God
David’s Righteous Branch	My Servant the Branch	The Man the Branch	The Branch of the Lord
(Jer 23:5,6)	(Zech 3:8)	(Zech 6:12)	(Isa 4:2)
	Official		Personal
	Synoptic		Supplementary
	outward, public, Galilean, earthly		inward, private, Judean, heavenly
<b>CHRIST’S WORDS IN THE FOUR GOSPELS</b>			
1071 verses	678 verses	1151 verses	879 verses
644 spoken by Jesus (60%)	285 spoken by Jesus (42%)	586 spoken by Jesus (50%)	419 spoken by Jesus (50%)
<b>THE FOUR GOSPELS AND THE OLD TESTAMENT</b>			
53 quotes from OT	36 quotes from OT	25 quotes from OT	20 quotes from OT
76 allusions to OT	27 allusions to OT	42 allusions to OT	105 allusions to OT

{table taken with modifications from *Unger’s Bible Handbook*; “\* \* \*” taken from Arthur Custance’s *Doorway Papers* vol 7}

## *Matthew*

One of the most favorite of the early church. One author states: "...in the time of Irenaeus [second century AD] the Church and Christian literature were more deeply influenced by the Gospel of Matthew than by any other New Testament book."

Matthew was by birth a Galilean Jew and by profession, a publican; therefore he saw Jesus in view of the Kingdom. His call, 9:9 (while Mark and Luke call him by his other name, Levi); an apostle and former tax collector, 10:3; perhaps the house Jesus sat with tax collectors and sinners, 9:10; perhaps a house Jesus visited frequently 13:1; 17:25 ?

THEME: "Jesus is the Messiah, and in Him Jewish prophecy is fulfilled", portraying Jesus as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Rev 4:6,7; 5:5; 22:16)

subject matter arrangement used rather than strict chronological sequence

Probably originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic. Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in the middle of the second century, states: "Matthew composed the oracles in the Hebrew dialect and everyone translated them as he was able." The early church writers therefore referred to an original work of Matthew, of which the Greek Gospel of Matthew was the accepted translation. Some scholars, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, believe even today that the Greek Matthew was written first and is a translation of the Aramaic Matthew. Many other scholars today hold to the Greek Matthew as an original work in itself, probably using Mark as a basis for its composition. Matthew may have translated his original work or republished it in an enlarged Greek edition, using some of Mark's material for guidelines.

## *Mark*

The son of a certain Mary in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12) and possibly the young man that fled the night of the betrayal (14:51,52). He later accompanied Paul and his uncle Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 12:25; 13:5) but for some reason left them (Acts 13:13). On Paul's second journey, he and Barnabas split over Mark coming with them, Paul taking Silas and Barnabas taking Mark (Acts 15:37-40). Later Paul and Mark are reconciled (Col 4:10,11; 2 Tim 4:11). Also a companion of Peter (1 Peter 5:13) and tradition tells us that Mark acted in Rome as Peter's amanuensis. He was a man who had a heart for service, therefore he saw Jesus as the ultimate Servant. Represented by an ox or calf (1 Cor 9:9; Prov 14:4; Phil 2:7)

Briefest of the gospels, full of action and movement, showing Jesus acting rather than speaking, deeds rather than teaching. "Straightway" and "immediately" used more than 40 times.

Generally today accepted as the earliest formal gospel. Note almost all of Mark may be found in Matthew and Luke: Matthew has the substance of more than 600 of Mark's 661 verses, retaining 51% of Mark's actual words. Luke seems to have about 350 verses in common with Mark, and about 53% of the actual words Mark used. In other words, about 90% of Mark may be found in Matthew, and about half in Luke. Only four paragraphs of Mark do not appear in either Matthew or Luke.

Accepted universally (?) that Mark was Peter's "interpreter", i.e., that much of Mark's material found its source in Peter, and Mark was expounding and preserving Peter's preaching. Clement of Alexandria stresses the fact that this however is no "Gospel of Peter", who neither condemned nor encouraged the idea; but rather it was produced in response of the ones who had heard Peter preach and would hear him no more.

## *Luke*

Author of the Gospel of Luke the same as Acts (cp 1:1-4 with Acts 1:1), which tradition unanimously affirms to be Luke, a Gentile physician (Col 4:14) Note that many Greek scholars find medical language throughout the gospel and book of Acts. Some testimonies recorded as a physician would: when Matthew and Mark talk of a fever, Luke adds it was a "high fever" (Mt 8:14; Mk 1:30; Lk 4:38); a man as being "full of leprosy" meaning an advanced case, and not just leprosy (Lk 5:12); and that the bleeding woman had spent all her money on doctors is omitted by Luke (8:43; Mk 5:26). Luke alone records so many details of the birth, and Mary has been suggested as a source of some of Luke's material.

The fact that Luke was Gentile rests mainly on Col 4:11,14 which Paul makes a difference between Luke and the "circumcism" (Jew) and there are some which do believe Luke to be Jewish. Others note his absence of using Semitic words, and omitting much of the disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees, which would be interesting to a Jew but less so to a Gentile. If a Gentile, he may possibly be the only Gentile writer of the scriptures.

The date of this writing is of course linked with the date of Acts, since Acts must have been written later than the Gospel. Since no event after 62 AD is written in Acts, and a date around 58-62 AD is generally accepted. Not all agree.

As a Gentile physician and co-worker with Paul (who was sent to both Jew and Gentile, trying to reach all men), Luke's gospel naturally links Jesus with Adam, stressing His humanity. Luke gives more miracles and parables than the other gospel writers, giving at least 6 miracles and 17 parables not given elsewhere. He often shows the Lord in prayer, stressing His humanity and dependence upon God. Note Jesus with human sympathy (Hos 11:4; Heb 5:1,2).

Luke's style is considered by Greek scholars as being very good, classical Greek. His vocabulary is extensive, using 266 words not used elsewhere in the NT (a lot considering the material is much the same as Matthew and Mark). His quotes are almost

always from the LXX. Called by Renan the infidel “the most beautiful book in the world”, and speaking of the scriptures from a strict literary point of view, Isaiah and Luke surpass all other books of the sacred library.

## *John*

Has been designated since the second century “according to John”, referring to John the son of Zebedee. Both John and his brother James (the “inner circle” along with Peter, Mk 5:37; Lk 8:51; Jn 21:1-7) were Galilean fishermen, and members of a prosperous family, evidenced by their father employing servants (Mk 1:20). Both he and his brother were impetuous and fiery, earning them the nickname “sons of thunder” (Mk 3:17).

Repeatedly he bears weight on the reliability of his witness (1:14; 19:35; 21:24). That he was a fisherman witnessing the event may be seen in chapter 21: the record of the size and number of fish caught, and the fact that the net did not give way under the strain (vss 8, 11). Moreover, the testimony of Peter looking as it were over the Lord’s shoulder and seeing John coming points to one being present at the time (vs 20,21).

Evidence that he was a Jew may be seen in the first-hand knowledge of the land of Palestine, and that he was well acquainted with the practices, beliefs, and schools of thoughts within Judaism (but note he never mentions the Sadducees).

Tradition says John the son of Zebedee lived to a great age and was buried at Ephesus. If tradition is correct, John is said to have been alive when Trajan started his reign in 98 AD. Irenaeus speaks of “John the disciple of the Lord who reclined on His breast and issued out (i.e. ‘gave out’ or ‘published’) the Gospel at Ephesus.” If John did not do the actual writing, it was definitely composed in his name and under his authority. The date typically given is around 90 AD for his writings.

John’s purpose may be summed up by Clement of Alexandria: “Last of all, John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospels, being urged by his friends and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel.” The early church fathers agreed upon the fact John wrote to supplement the other gospels. Eusebius records that John testified of the truth in the other gospel narratives, but admitted they lacked a record of the events of the early days of Christ’s ministry prior to the imprisonment of John the Baptist. John himself stated his purpose in 20:30,31.

About 92% of the content of John’s gospel is unique and not found in the synoptic gospels. By comparison, Matthew has 42%, Luke 59% and Mark 7% unique content.

Prevalent in John’s time when he wrote his gospel was a growing belief that the Son of God had no existence prior to His birth from Mary, which John pointedly attacks (John 1:1-5; 1 John). Whether this was part of his purpose behind writing his gospel or whether it was just used by the Spirit of God to combat those errors is unknown.

Key words are love (agapeo), love (phileo), truth, sin, amen amen, I know, glory, eternal life, the Jews (referring to the Jewish leaders, not the common people in this gospel), word, witness, Father, and faith.