

Understanding the Four Gospels

Looking into the Face of Jesus
The Life of Christ, 1: Pages 1-10
Manuscript: Lesson Plan 1

Introduction

As we begin our year-long study of the life of Christ, we need to ask and answer an important question: why does the NT contain four Gospels?

To answer this question, let us ask some additional questions that may help us understand why the NT contains four Gospels.

Who Wrote the Four Gospels?

First, we ask who wrote the four Gospels? The first was written by Matthew. Matthew was a former tax collector whom Jesus called to be an apostle.

The second Gospel, Mark, was written by John Mark. John Mark is mentioned several times in the Book of Acts. He was a young preacher.

The third Gospel, Luke, was written by Luke, a physician who accompanied Paul on several of his missionary journeys.

The final Gospel, John, was written by a former fisherman and the “beloved” apostle of Christ.

Synoptic or Autoptic—Which One?

Another question we need to ask is are the Gospels synoptic or autoptic?

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are synoptic. They all present similar views of Jesus. No doubt they were written before AD 70.

John is considered autoptic because he took a different approach. Autoptic can be understood to convey a “self-view” or that of an “eyewitness.” His book has more of an eyewitness approach. It must have been that it was written later, perhaps around AD 85-95.

How Do the Four Accounts Help Us?

A third question to help us understand why the NT has four Gospels concerns how the four accounts help us. First, they show how important the story of Jesus is. Look at the space the Gospels are given. The Gospels are 46% of the NT.

They also help us by authenticating the story of Jesus. When there are more witnesses, the evidence becomes more complete. Four men relating perfectly the perfect life of Jesus—what could be better than that?

A third way the four Gospels help us is that they reveal the multifaceted nature of Jesus. Matthew reveals Jesus as the Messiah. Mark shows Jesus to be the wonder-Worker. Luke portrays Jesus as the Savior of the world. And John provides proof that Jesus is the Son of God.

How Do the Four Gospels Compare to Each Other?

We also should compare the four Gospels to each other. Matthew wrote for the Jews. He quoted over 100 OT Scriptures, and he used terms familiar to the Jews. He presented Jesus as a King. The word “kingdom” appears 55 times. He seemed to focus on the teachings of Jesus. He included five teaching sections. He wrote of

Jesus' teachings, kingdom, and authority. Today's appeal is to the Bible student. His purpose was to present Jesus as the promised Messiah

Mark wrote to a non-Jewish audience. No genealogies were used. He explained Jewish traditions. Many think Mark was writing to a Roman audience. He used Latin phrases. According to Clement of Alexandria, Mark received a request from Christians at Rome to record "The Life of Christ" as he had heard it from Peter. He seemed to focus on what Jesus did versus what Jesus taught. He presented Jesus as a Servant. He focused on His miracles showing the love and care of Jesus. His appeal today is to the average person. His purpose was to present Jesus as the powerful Savior.

Luke seems to be written for the intellectual—the student. Many believe Luke had a Greek audience in mind. His genealogy goes all the way back to Adam (Luke 3:23–38). He presented Jesus as the Son of Man. He emphasized Jesus' perfect humanity. His appeal today is to scholars, thinkers, and idealists. His purpose was to present Jesus as the perfect Savior of the world.

John's Gospel had its own special interest—Jesus, the Logos. By the time John wrote his Gospel, erroneous views had risen concerning the nature of Jesus. To counter these views, John presented Jesus as the "Son of God." He stressed Jesus' Deity. His appeal today is that it is considered the "universal" gospel because it appeals to everyone. His purpose was to present Jesus as the personal Savior, the Son of God.

How Were They Written?

A final question to ask in answering the big question of why are there four Gospels is how were they written?

The Gospels supplement one another. We need all four. What would we do without John's 90 percent new material, or Matthew's teaching material, or Mark's abbreviated material, or Luke's historical material? We stand amazed at its composite picture of Jesus.

The Gospels sometimes give different information, but a little study resolves the seeming contradictions. However, many people worry about how the three Synoptic Gospels are similar. They think they copied one another. We do not know how God wrote the Bible. The great scholar R. C. H. Lenski makes a good statement regarding this question:

These witnesses [the Gospel writers] also had the promise of the Spirit, John 14:26; 16:14. In our explanation of just how the Gospels were written, we dare not omit this divine guidance and control. All purely naturalistic explanations fail from the start. Without the Spirit's control, all the Gospels, and each by itself, stand as inexplicable phenomena. They simply could not have been produced. But they were produced and stand before us majestically in eloquent silence. The Spirit is back of them. He used each of these writers, taking each as he was, with all the ability and the means each commanded, and enabled them to write, each in his own way, so that the writing was what the Spirit wanted for the church in all the coming ages. No wonder that all inspired writing thus stands in

a class by itself, supreme over all other writing and stamped forever as divine.¹

Conclusion

Can the Gospel Accounts be trusted? Listen to the account of Simon Greenleaf's study of the Gospels.

One of the greatest American lawyers of the past was Simon Greenleaf, who wrote one of the most important works on the law of evidence ever to appear in the English language. His book, *A Treatise on the Law of Evidence*, was unsurpassed on the subject for nearly one hundred years. It ran through sixteen editions. When he was a mature lawyer at the age of sixty-three, just seven years before his death, Simon Greenleaf published a volume in which he examined the testimony of the four evangelists to Jesus Christ. He used the same laws of evidence employed in courts of justice in the civilized world. He said, "Our profession leads us to explore the mazes of falsehood, to detect its artifices, to pierce its thickets veils, to follow and expose its sophistries, to compare the statements of different witnesses with severity, to discover truth and separate it from error." In this book, which ran to 543 pages, Simon Greenleaf came to the conclusion that the Gospels are absolutely trustworthy and that the four evangelists could not possibly have lied about Jesus Christ, for their testimony rings true.²

Think about the perfection principle. How could four men write perfectly about the perfect life of Jesus? The only explanation is that God inspired each one of them and that God knew we would need each of the four Gospel Accounts.

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¹R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1946), 15, 16.

²John Phillips, *Exploring the Scriptures* (London: Victory Press, 1965), 189–90.