

The Four Gospels

Cross-Examining Christ's Witnesses

If you met the Son of God, what kind of story would you tell?

How would you take the teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection, and set it all in writing?

This is no ordinary historical event; this is the life and death of the Messiah, whose ultimate goal was the salvation of humankind. Any complete account of Jesus' life needs more than recordings of his words and deeds; otherwise you characterize Jesus as simply a wise teacher or a traveling healer. To truly account for his life and death, the author must establish salvation as Jesus' goal and spread the good news of its fulfillment.

Gospel as a Genre

- “Gospel” comes from the Old English *gōdspel*
 - Translation of the ancient Greek *euangélion* (“good news”)
- More theology than journalism
 - “So that you may have a firm grasp of the words in which you have been instructed” (Luke 1:4)
 - “These are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31)
 - “Memories” or “portraits” of Jesus

Major Elements of the Gospels

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Jesus' birth	Yes	No	Yes	No
Jesus' baptism	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not quite
Healing miracles	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Exorcisms	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Parables	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Transfiguration	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Last Supper	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Crucifixion	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Post-resurrection appearances	Yes	In some manuscripts	Yes	Yes

- Jesus' "baptism" in John: John "saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him" (1:32) but no explicit mention of John baptizing Jesus
- Some manuscripts end the Book of Mark at 16:8: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." A few add only verse 9, where the women who were at the tomb went and told Peter, then Jesus tells them to spread the word. The rest continue on through verse 20.

Comparing the Gospels - Overview

- Matthew, Mark, and Luke share much of their content
 - “Synoptic” (“same view”)
 - Degree of similarity implies shared *written* sources
 - Traditional order of writing: Matthew, Mark, Luke
 - Most modern scholars believe Mark was written first
- John has notable differences in tone, content, and structure
 - “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (1:1)
 - No parables
 - Mostly takes place in Jerusalem

The History of the Texts

- Widely thought to have been written at least a few decades after Jesus' death
 - He could be coming back any minute! (Matthew 10:23)
 - No mention anywhere of Jesus writing anything
 - Historical details
- Did not come with authors' names attached!
 - Earliest references we have are dated around 100 AD or later
 - First mentions of the four canonical gospels were in letters in the late 2nd century
- Some manuscripts of the same gospel differ noticeably in content

Matthew 10:23: "When they persecute you in this town, flee to the next, for truly I tell you, you will not have finished going through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes."

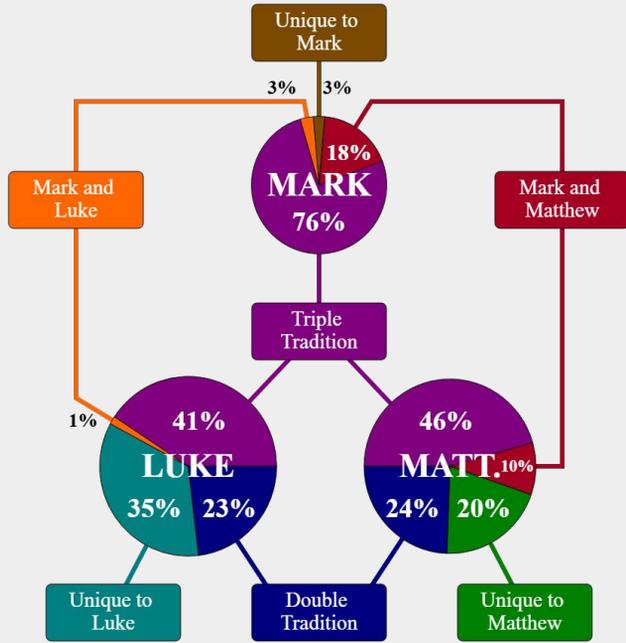
There are some who argue for earlier dating of the Gospels. For instance, Luke and Acts appear to have been written together, since they are both addressed to the same person. (Although "Theophilus" could be a stand-in for anyone who loves God.) Acts ends with Paul heading to trial in Rome. If the account was written later like many say, why did he not include anything about Paul's martyrdom?

On authorship:

- Papias of Hierapolis, as cited by Eusebius in his History of the Church roughly 200 years later, wrote the earliest account we have of the writing of any of the gospels.
 - He said that "Mark, who had been Peter's interpreter, wrote down carefully, but not in order, all that he remembered of the Lord's saying and doings."
 - Of Matthew, all he says is that he "compiled his *Sayings* in the Aramaic language, and everyone translated them as well as he could."
- Bishop Irenaeus of Lyon is the first known to assert our four gospels as the canonical ones in his work *Against Heresies*, c. 180 AD.
 - Interestingly, he basically says there are four gospels because there are four cardinal directions

Some stats:

- 76% of Mark is included in both of the other Synoptics
 - 94% is included in Matthew!
- Only 3% of the material in Mark is unique
 - Some stories are more detailed
 - Certain Aramaic phrases spoken by Jesus, usually in a healing context, are left untranslated
- About a quarter each of Matthew and Luke is shared against Mark
- Over a third of Luke is unique!
 - Most of the nativity story
 - Jesus' Temple dedication
 - Lots of parables
 - Post-resurrection appearances



Honoré, A. M. (1968). "A Statistical Study of the Synoptic Problem"

More detailed stories in Mark

- Healing of the man with the legion, healing of the hemorrhaging woman, and raising of the dead girl are all more detailed.
 - The former two both include more information about how the person was suffering under their affliction
 - In the latter story, Mark includes a verse where some people from the girl's house said she's already dead and they'd just be wasting Jesus' time. He also notes that Jesus only allowed Peter, James, and John to come with him into the girl's house.

Aramaic in Mark:

- *Talitha cumi*: "Get up" (5:41)
- *Ephphatha*: "Be opened" (7:34)

Content

Comparing the Gospels - Mark

- Shortest
 - 200 verses shorter than John,
 - 400 shorter than Matthew
 - Almost 500 shorter than Luke
- Often considered the first written Gospel
- Weakest portrayal of family and disciples
 - Mary is hardly a character
 - Disciples frequently don't understand parables or other lessons
- Urgency
- Secrecy
- Three endings
 - A significant portion of the manuscripts stop at 16:8
 - Some manuscripts add only verse 9, where Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene
 - The rest record his other resurrected appearances

First gospel:

- Length
- Quality of grammar compared to Matthew
- Sharing between Luke and Matthew

Mary is only mentioned four times:

- by a crowd in Nazareth (6:3)
- as one of the women watching Jesus' crucifixion
- Saw where Jesus was laid
- Went to the tomb to anoint his body

Urgency

- The Greek word for "immediately" is used 42 times in Mark, 11 of which are in the first chapter. It only appears once in all of Luke.
- Jesus' ministry in Mark seems to span a few weeks compared to 3ish years in John

Secrecy

- Parables act as a sort of mystery
- Repeatedly tells his disciples, those whom he heals, and the demons he casts out to keep his messianic identity a secret

Endings

- 16:8: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Comparing the Gospels - Matthew

- Historically considered the first gospel, but support has waned over time
- Contains almost all of the material from Mark, but written in more eloquent Greek
 - Minor historical corrections
 - “Herod the tetrarch” (14:1) instead of “King Herod” (Mark 6:14)
 - Omits incorrect reference to Abiathar as high priest while David was fleeing King Saul (Mark 2:26)
 - More positive portrayals of disciples and family
 - Disciples usually understand Jesus’ lessons after he explains them
 - Does not include Mark’s account (3:21) of Jesus’ family attempting to “restrain him”
- Often considered the most Jewish Gospel
 - Begins with a genealogy from Abraham to Joseph
 - Jesus as the new Moses
- Closest version of the Lord’s Prayer to our liturgy
- Eight unique parables

Note on Abiathar - Some say Mark’s historical discrepancy is intentional. Abiathar was removed from the priesthood by King Solomon for rebelling against him; perhaps Jesus’ story was a warning that the Pharisees that he, another descendant of King David, would depose them for opposing him.

[\(https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/revisiting-the-time-of-abiathar-the-high-priest/\)](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/revisiting-the-time-of-abiathar-the-high-priest/)

Jesus as the new Moses:

- Birth narrative
- “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (5:17)
- Sermon on the Mount - Giving of the new “law” on a mountain like Moses?

Unique parables:

- 4 about the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven (weeds and wheat, treasure, pearl, net)
- Unforgiving Servant
- Laborers in the Vineyard
- Two Sons

Comparing the Gospels - Luke

- More detailed birth narrative
 - The Magnificat
 - Elizabeth and Zechariah
 - Born in a manger in Bethlehem
- Jesus' dedication and teaching in the Temple as a child
- Chapter 3 includes a genealogy all the way back to Adam
- 10 unique parables, including the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector
- Slightly altered Lord's Prayer
- More composed on the cross than in Mark and Matthew
 - In those books: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
 - "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (23:34)
 - "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (23:46)
- Ties into Acts

- The inclusion of Jesus' stories as a child is somewhat reminiscent of the *Lives* (biographies) written by Plutarch in the same period
- Genealogy back to Adam (rather than the one in Matthew which begins with Abraham) indicates a Gentile audience

Matthew vs. Luke - Sermon on the Mount/Plain

Matthew 5-7

- Beatitudes: 9 blessings
 - More focused on spiritual matters
 - "Poor in spirit"
 - "Hunger and thirst for righteousness"
 - "Pure in heart"
- On loving your enemies:
 - "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect"
- "You have heard it said... So I say to you"
- Lots of discourse on personal conduct
- Includes Lord's Prayer

Luke 6:17-49

- Starts with some healing
- Beatitudes: 4 blessings paralleled by 4 "woes"
 - Poor vs. rich, hungry vs. full, weeping vs. laughing, hated vs. respected
 - More focused on temporal matters
- On loving your enemies:
 - "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful"
- Lord's Prayer appears several chapters later

Matthew vs. Luke - The Lord's Prayer (NRSVUE)

Matthew 6

Our Father in heaven, may your name be revered as holy.
May your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

Luke 11

Father, may your name be revered as holy.
May your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.

Matthew's is more focused on heaven and other cosmological aspects: Our Father ***in heaven***; on earth ***as it is in heaven***; rescue us from ***the evil one***.

Luke's seems to be a little more focused on day-to-day life: Give us *each day* our daily bread.

The "today" vs. "each day" could also point to differences in eschatology between the two authors:

- "today" because we may all be taken up to heaven tomorrow, versus
- "each day" because the Kingdom of Heaven has already arrived and it is our calling as Christians to serve that kingdom.

Comparing the Gospels - John

- Begins with a more abstract statement of Jesus' divine status
- Discourses instead of parables; not talking about the Kingdom of God but about himself
 - "I am the bread of life" (6:35)
 - "I am the light of the world" (8:12)
 - "Before Abraham was, I am" (8:58)
 - "I am the good shepherd" (10:11)
 - "The Father and I are one" (10:30)
 - "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25)
 - "I am the way and the truth and the life" (14:6)
 - "I am the true vine" (15:1)
- Jesus on the cross: "It is finished" (19:30)
- Notable unique material:
 - Turning water to wine
 - Conversations with Nicodemus
 - The Samaritan woman at the well
 - Raising of Lazarus
 - Washing the disciples' feet
 - Resurrection appearance to "Doubting Thomas"

John and the Jewish Calendar

- Healing on the Sabbath (ch. 5)
- Passover (ch. 6)
 - Multiplies the loaves and fish (vv. 1-14)
 - Jesus as the Bread of Life (vv. 32-51)
 - Jesus' body and blood are the way to eternal life (vv. 51-58)
- Feast of Tabernacles/Booths (ch. 7-9)
 - Water and light
 - Praying for rain before the winter
 - Procession from the pool of Siloam to the Temple in a brightly lit courtyard
- "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink" (7:37-38)
- Woman caught in adultery (8:1-11)
- Blind man receives sight by washing in Siloam (9:11)
- Dedication (10:22-42)
 - Jesus refers to himself as "the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world" (v. 36)

Feast of Tabernacles/Booths (Sukkot):

- Eight days of camping in tents in Jerusalem, praying for rain before winter
- Procession from the pool of Siloam to the Temple, where the water was poured out in a courtyard lit with massive torches
- Connection to the woman caught in adultery not as obvious; the accusers start leaving once Jesus begins to write in the dirt! Part of the Sukkot teaching involved Jeremiah 17:13, which in some translations includes a line about those who turn away from the Lord having their names "written in the dust."

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