

THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS: MATTHEW, MARK, AND LUKE
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The Four Gospels – the first division of the New Testament

"Gospel" = glad tidings (good news)

The English word "gospel" is a modernization of an Old English term (*gōdspell*) meaning "good story" or "good news," which was itself a translation of *euaggelion*, the Greek word for "glad tidings." *Euaggelion* is used throughout the New Testament to designate the "glad tidings" of salvation through Jesus Christ, the "joyful news" proclaimed in the preaching of the apostles and other early disciples of Christ.

"The Gospel According to...."

The New Testament never uses the term *euaggelia*, the plural of *euaggelion*; for there is only one message of salvation. However, with the expression of the apostolic message of salvation in written form, those writings which described the major teachings and acts of Christ came to be called *euaggelia*, or "gospels" (in English). In the NT, we find **the Gospel according to Matthew**, *according to Mark*, *according to Luke*, and *according to John* – one gospel proclaimed in four distinct books, rooted in one common, apostolic faith. The authors of the gospels "differ from one another in their approaches and expressions, but are united in participating in the tradition of the Church and in making the Church's faith their own. The faith and life of the Church served them as the guiding principle in selecting and arranging their material."

Three stages in the development of the written Gospels:

1. The events of Christ's life and works.
2. The delivery and transmission of these of the Christ story by the apostles after Christ's resurrection.
3. The writing of the Gospels by the evangelists.

Derivations and authorship

The ancient Church regarded the first and fourth gospels as the work of the apostles Matthew and John; whereas the second and third gospels were attributed respectively to Mark, a disciple of St. Peter, and to Luke, a Greek-speaking physician who was a close companion of St. Paul.

According to St. Irenaeus of Lyons (d. c. 200), the Gospel according to Mark contains the substance of St. Peter's preaching about Christ, while the Gospel according to Luke is an expression of the message of salvation proclaimed by St. Paul.

Within the historic life of the Church, the apostolic origin and authority of the four gospels has never been doubted.

When, where, why?

1. St. Mark's gospel was written c. 60-65 AD in Rome. It was apparently intended for an audience of Gentile Christians, although the book contains a number of allusions to the Old Testament. The major purpose of Mark's gospel was to show Jesus as the crucified Messiah, "the fulfiller of the hope of Israel."

2. St. Matthew's gospel was composed in Syrian Antioch, c. 70-75 AD. It was intended for Jewish Christians, and its central theme is the fulfillment of Israel's messianic hope in the person and work of Jesus.
3. St. Luke wrote his gospel and the book of Acts as two volumes of a single work, describing the ministry of Jesus and the history of the early Christian community under the leadership of the apostles. Writing c. 75 AD in southern Greece primarily for Gentile converts to Christianity, Luke emphasizes the universal significance of the Christian gospel: in Christ, salvation has been made possible not only for Jews but for all humankind.
4. St. John's gospel was written in Ephesus (in Asia Minor) during the late 1st century (c. 85-90 A.D.). John "tells us who Christ is and what His meaning is for the world, the Church, and the individual."

The "synoptic" gospels and the gospel of John

Several distinct strands of the apostolic tradition are present in the four gospels.

The 1st, 2d, and 3d gospels seem to be based upon common sources, whereas the Gospel according to St. John is built upon sources not employed by Matthew, Mark, and Luke and is rather different from them in structure and content.

Mt, Mk, and Lk are known as the "synoptic" gospels, for "when we put their material side by side in three columns, we notice that the material is arranged in a similar manner, and very often they use the same words to describe events or to record the sayings of Jesus."

The Sources and Overall Content of the Synoptic Gospels

Sources of the Synoptic Gospels

Mark

The majority of contemporary biblical scholars are agreed that the earliest of the New Testament gospels is that of Mark. It is also widely believed that Mark's gospel was one of the sources utilized in the composition of the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Matthew's gospel contains 1,068 verses, and 500 of these are parallel to 606 out of the 673 verses of Mark. Of the 1,149 verses in Luke, 380 are taken over verbatim from Mark's gospel. Mark contains only 31 verses not duplicated in either Matthew or Luke.

"Q"

Matthew and Luke also share approximately 250 verses of material not paralleled in Mark; and "sometimes this common material appears in...practically identical language, while sometimes the verbal divergence is considerable." Most biblical researchers have concluded that the non-Markan material common to Matthew and Luke derives from an early written (but no longer extant) source called "Q" (after the German word Quelle, which means "source"). Possibly compiled by St. Matthew prior to the composition of his gospel, Q was a collection of the sayings of Jesus which apparently circulated among Christian communities in ancient Judea, Syria, Asia Minor, and Greece." Matthew and Luke, working independently of one another, incorporated the material contained in Q into their respective gospels.

"M" and "L"

Furthermore, the Gospel of Matthew contains approximately 300 verses not paralleled in the other gospels, while Luke contains some 520 verses peculiar to itself. These blocks of unique

material are known as "M" and "L," respectively. The origins of these materials are not known, but many scholars have speculated that M represents traditions about Jesus which were preserved in the churches of Judea, while L is derived from traditions maintained in the church of Caesarea. Whether the traditions behind M and L were oral or written is, at present; an unresolved issue in biblical scholarship.

Not biographies

The synoptic gospels are constructed in biographical form – that is, they present the apostolic message of salvation through an apparently chronological account of the major events in the life of Jesus.

However, they are not complete or scientific biographies of Christ.

They tell us very little of the first thirty years of our Lord's life.

They do not describe his appearance, education, or psychological development.

They concentrate exclusively upon those aspects of Christ's earthly life that are crucial to the salvation of mankind and the world. They tell us who Jesus was, what he said, and what he did – and they seek to explain the sense in which his identity, teachings, and works have made our salvation from evil and death a real possibility.

Image/portrait, not a photograph: The gospels have often been compared to an icon and thought of as a verbal icon of Christ.

The synoptic gospels: theological interpretations of the earthly ministry of Jesus, written expressions of the apostolic proclamation of salvation. Their ultimate aim is not to present a biographical study of Jesus's life but to witness to the fulfillment of God's redemptive purpose in the person and work of Christ.

What do they cover?

The synoptic gospels describe only two periods in the life of Jesus. Matthew and Luke present substantial blocks of material on the Lord's birth and childhood; and all three synoptics contain extensive accounts of the public ministry of Christ, which, according to tradition, took place during the last three years of his earthly life. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are virtually silent concerning the years between the Lord's early childhood and the commencement of his public ministry. The only exception is found in Luke 2:41-51 (telling of the twelve-year-old Jesus' discussions with the rabbis in the Jerusalem Temple). Apart from this story, all we are told is that, as a child, Jesus was strong, filled with wisdom, and blessed by the grace of God (Lk 2:40); and that as a young man he advanced in wisdom, grew in physical stature, and lived in spiritual harmony with God and in favor with his fellow man (Lk 2:52).

Assuming that Christ was thirty-three years old when he was crucified (per tradition), the synoptics tell us practically nothing of nearly thirty years of our Lord's life. During these "silent years," or "years of preparation," no doubt, the Son of God, in communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, was made ready for his public ministry; but what exactly went on during that time has not been revealed to the world.

There are, to be sure, ancient apocryphal writings containing speculations upon the hidden events of Christ's youth and early manhood, but the historic Church has repeatedly condemned such writings as spiritually dangerous and/or heretical.

From an Orthodox Christian point of view, detailed knowledge of the "silent years" belongs to God alone, and for the purposes of our salvation from the bondage of sin and death, the gospels of Matthew and Luke tell us all we need to know of the early life of Christ.

The Specific Content of the Synoptic Gospels

Overview

1. The Birth and Childhood of Christ
2. The Ministry of St. John the Baptist
3. The Baptism and Temptation of Christ
4. Christ's Ministry in Galilee
5. The Transfiguration of Christ
6. Christ's Journey through Judea to Jerusalem
7. The Trial and Death of Christ
8. The Resurrection and Ascension of Christ