

The Life and Teachings Of Jesus

Part I: Harmonizing the Gospels

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The religious world has some pretty wild beliefs about the life of Jesus and what He did when He lived on earth as a mortal man.

One major denomination teaches that He visited America and preached to the Indians. One well-known TV preacher claims Jesus visited England, Ireland, and southern France. Many churches insist He visited hell and preached to demons and lost souls.

Of course, the sources for these beliefs are spurious and unreliable. When we want to learn about the life of Jesus, there is one source and one source alone that we can go to. And that is the section of the Bible we call the Gospels.

It is understandable that Christians would like to know more about Jesus' life as a physical man. But the fact remains that most of what we know about His thirty-three years of earthly ministry comes from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

If we want to know really Christ, it is vital that we understand these four books. Let's briefly look at the Gospels with the idea that, the more we learn about them, the more we can understand their focal point, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Differences in the Gospels

As we read the four Gospels, it does not take long to realize that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are very similar to each other and that John is quite different than the other three.

This fact can be clearly demonstrated by glancing through one of the several Harmonies of the Gospels which you can find in most libraries and Bible book stores. In case you have never seen a Harmony of the Gospels, here is what you will find in such a book.

When a scholar puts together a harmony, he takes an event in the life of Christ and he lays out all four gospel versions of that event side-by-side on the same page. For example, Jesus fed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. We can read about this event

in Matthew 14 or Mark 6 or Luke 1 or John 6. It shows up in all four Gospels. A Harmony of the Gospels will put all four accounts of the event on the same pages.

But this example of all four Gospels covering one event is not typical. When studying the Bible, a common occurrence seems to be that we find Matthew, Mark, and Luke reporting an incident while John makes no mention of it. Or we find the reverse. John will report an incident, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke will ignore the event completely.

For this reason, Bible scholars call Matthew, Mark, and Luke the Synoptic Gospels. Synoptic comes from the word synonymous, meaning “the same.” The Synoptic Gospels are very similar in structure, in contrast to John, which is usually somewhat different.

Let's look at an example of how the Synoptic Gospels are different from John by examining the story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River. We find that Matthew, Mark, and Luke relate the incident, but John makes no mention of it.

Again, John sometimes provides information that is omitted in the Synoptic Gospels. For example, John 1:1 is a verse which tells how Christ has existed from the beginning of time--long before His physical birth in Bethlehem. This passage tells us about His pre-existence in great detail. Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not mention it at all.

There has been a great deal of discussion as to whether or not Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were really the authors of the four gospels which bear their names. This conjecture is a reasonable possibility. It must be remembered that:

1) In reading each Gospel, you will find that it does not clearly identify the author. Nowhere do you find a phrase in the Gospels which says, "This book was written by the apostle Matthew or Mark.

2) The punctuation that we see in our Bibles is not part always of the inspired text. That is why churches run into a problem of where the thief on the cross is today. If we were to move the comma in Luke 23:43 (as translated in the King James Bible), it would give us a whole new meaning.

This also applies to the names of the books of the Bible. The names which appear in various versions of the Bible are NOT part of the inspired text—whether we are reading the Old Testament or the New Testament. In the Old Testament, a better title of each book would be the first words of that book. For example, the name of the first book in the Bible is correctly called "Genesis" because Genesis means "beginning" and the first words in that book are “In the Beginning,” or “In a Beginning.” A better title for the book of Exodus, however, would be "These the Names" because these are the first words of that book. A better title for the book of Leviticus would be "And the Lord Called."

Like punctuation, the titles of the books in the Bible (both Old Testament and New Testament) were added later.

Thus, we cannot say with 100% certainty that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were the authors of the Gospels because the book titles in our Bibles were not in the original text. However, it is probably a good assumption the Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were the authors of the four Gospels. Perhaps it really does not matter who wrote each book. The important point is that all four are still part of the inspired Word of God.

Now that we have discussed the Gospels as a whole, let's briefly look at each one individually to see what unique characteristics each offers us.

The Gospel of Mark

Why are we covering Mark first? Isn't Mark the second book of the New Testament? Shouldn't Mark be discussed *after* Matthew? We look at Mark first because it was most likely written before the other three Gospels. Mark was probably written in the early 60s AD. It may have even been composed earlier, which brings us to an interesting point. If the first Gospel was not written until around 60 A.D., what did the church read from the time it was formed on Pentecost in 31 A.D. until that, time? From 31 A.D to the 60s A.D. was almost a 30 year time span.

The answer is simple. The early church, besides using the Old Testament which they had in written form, relied heavily on oral accounts of the life of Jesus. At that time, they could listen to FIRST HAND accounts of people who actually saw Jesus and talked to Him. Many had touched actually Him. Many had been healed by Him. There were hundreds who saw Him after the resurrection. The early church was blessed with many eyewitnesses to the life and resurrection of Jesus. For this reason, the Gospels were not as important to the early Church as they are to us today.

For centuries Protestant churches advocated the "primacy of the Gospel of Mark"; that is, they reasoned that the Gospel of Mark was written before the other three. Therefore, they say Mark had preeminence over the other two Synoptic Gospels. They believed that Matthew and Luke borrowed heavily from Mark. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, claimed that the book of Matthew should have preeminence of the other three Gospel. They based their assertion on tradition. They said, "Since the Gospels have always been published with Matthew first, then Matthew should have preeminence.

Actually, the principle used in the traditional arrangement of the books of the New Testament has never been fully understood. We do not know why the Gospels are in the order they are. Even so, the placement of one book before another does nothing to diminish the worth of the former or the latter. Is the book of Hebrews of any less value than the two books of Corinthians? Would the book of Revelation be of any more value to us if it were placed earlier in the New Testament? No. No one can say that one Gospel has preeminence over the others.

Of Mark's 661 verses, about 200 deal with miracles. Scholars feel it was probably written under Peter's influence. One half of Mark's Gospel is devoted to the last few weeks of Jesus' life. Mark heightened the dramatic mood of his account by using the present tense and repeating his favorite word "immediately."

Mark tells us about the human traits of Jesus: He wonders, hungers, pities, groans, fears, prays, and grows angry and fatigued. Although Mark is the least polished in literary form in Greek, of the Gospels, it is the most concerned with laying out the everyday fabric of Jesus' human existence.

Finally, a word about Mark himself. Colossians 4:10 tells us that he was a blood relative of Barnabas--very likely his first cousin or nephew.

The Gospel of Matthew

The book of Matthew was probably written somewhere between 65 A.D. and 74 A.D. Some feel it is placed first because its genealogy fits nicely with that of II Chronicles. Many

historians believe that the last book of the Old Testament was not Malachi, but II Chronicles. If this supposition is correct, then the opening genealogy of Matthew follows perfectly behind the closing genealogy of the second book of Chronicles.

And just as the book of Hebrews was a book written by a Jew for the Jews, the Gospel of Matthew is a book written to appeal to the Jews of the first century. It places much emphasis on the Old Testament. It shows that Jesus can trace His lineage back to David--and anyone who could do that in the days of Christ was could claim some degree of importance.

The Gospel of Matthew goes to great lengths to show the Jews that Jesus' life followed a pattern set by the Old Testament scriptures. Many times Matthew uses the phrase, "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying..."

When looking at Christ through Matthew's eyes, we see Him as the fulfillment of the promises of the Hebrew Scriptures--the Messiah of Israel. In fact, Matthew's Gospel was probably written in the Hebrew dialect of Aramaic and later translated into Greek. We can't say this for sure. And we certainly cannot state that the entire New Testament was originally written in Hebrew and then translated into the Greek texts we have today. There is absolutely no proof of this.

If a detective were to write a Gospel, it might be much like the book of Matthew. The Gospel takes a "just the facts" approach with very little editorializing. Matthew is very businesslike in his retelling of the life of Jesus.

The book of Matthew puts the parables together. It groups Jesus' healings together and then places His teachings together. These groupings have been made with a disregard for chronology.

Nevertheless, it is the usually easiest of the four Gospels to read in the English language regardless of which translation you use.

Without the book of Matthew, we would not know the story of the royal political intrigue involved in the birth of Christ. History portrays King Herod as a civilized man--educated at the Roman court. Matthew shows him to be a blood-thirsty baby killer. Without the book of Matthew, we would not know of the thousands of children slaughtered shortly after the birth of Jesus. No other biblical or extra-biblical source provides us with this information.

The book of Matthew is most often misused by anti-Semites as they attempt to show that the Jews were not only responsible for the murder of Christ, but that their universal persecution was brought on by their own actions. After Pilate says he does not want to have anything to do with the crucifixion of Jesus, the Jews say, "Let his blood be on us and on our children" (Matthew 27:25). Several Christian denominations have taught that this is the reason why the Jews have suffered so much over the last 2,000 years. Scripture, of course, does not bear this out. Scripture (both Old and New Testament) condemn anti-Semitism as well as racism.)

Without the book of Matthew, we would not learn of the following incidents:

== Joseph's refusal to scandalize Mary even though she was pregnant and unmarried.

== The Magi visiting Jesus in His house when He was at least a year old or maybe even older.

== The sermon on the Mount where Christ said, "I have not come to do away with the law but to fulfill it."

== Christ's admonition, "Don't blow the trumpet like the Pharisees when you give; give you offerings privately."

== Jesus' prophecy that the only sign of His Messiahship was that He would the earth for three days and three like Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three days and three nights. All this and more would be lost if did not have the book of Matthew.

The Gospel of Luke

The book of Luke was probably written around 65-70 A.D. If George Lucas or Cecil B. DeMille were to write a Gospel, they would probably use Luke's methods. Luke's version is poetic and urbane. It features angelic choirs, astonished shepherds, and country landscapes--all illuminated by heavenly light. The special effects are great.

But Luke has not much character development. He is the writer who makes frequent use of the phrase, "Son of man."

Furthermore, as Mark's Gospel was probably written under the guidance of Peter. Luke's Gospel may have been written under the guidance of Paul. Bible scholars feel that the author of Luke was probably the same person who wrote Acts, the book which goes into great detail about Paul's life. In fact, they believe that Luke and Acts are two volumes of the same set, with the Gospel of Luke being volume I and Acts being volume II.

The Gospel of Luke is very Hellenistic in approach. Many Jews at that time were impressed by the Greek culture and tried to emulate it. This Gospel writer seemed to follow the writing style of Hellenist authors.

The author of this Gospel was no doubt a well-educated person. And this makes sense when we remember that Luke had been a physician prior to his conversion. By today's standards, it would be like a surgeon giving up his practice so that he could preach. The church would have the benefit of an intelligent man. Such was the case of Luke.

Luke's command of the Greek language is impeccable. But when he needs to discuss a Hebraic matter, he very easily switches to a Hebrew style of writing--similar to an effective politician who can speak perfect English in a legislative debate at the capitol, but then go back to a good-ole boy country drawl when he's home stumping for votes.

Luke places special emphasis on the fact that salvation is available to everyone. No one is excluded because of race, sex, or merit. Luke talks about salvation for Samaritans and pagans. He tells us that salvation is for women, outcasts, publicans, and sinners--even the poor. Again, all of this has the flavor of the apostle Paul.

No other gospel gives such a comprehensive history of Jesus' life. Luke is very complete--almost like a professor in science lab discussing a medical procedure from A to Z with every detail in between.

If we did not have the book of Luke we would miss the following important events:

- == The promise of the birth of John the Baptist.
- == The story of the shepherds in the fields when Jesus was born.
- == Jesus' visit to the Temple where at the age of 12 he was able to intelligently discuss God's Word with doctors of theology.
- == John the Baptist's imprisonment.
- == The parable of the good Samaritan.
- == The parable of Martha and Mary.
- == The parable of the rich fool.
- == The prodigal son.

The Gospel of John

John's gospel was probably written around 90 AD. Most likely all of the original disciples (except for John) had been martyred by this time. The book of John stands out because of its uniqueness. John tells us that Christ has always existed. John probably included this passage to combat the teachings of the sect called Gnostics, who taught that Jesus did not exist until he was born in Bethlehem.

No demons are mentioned in John's Gospel.

John, always points to Christ. He never points to men. In the book of John, men are made to look weak and fallible. But Christ is referred to as:

- == The Son of God.
- == The I AM.
- == The Way.
- == The Truth.
- == The Resurrection.
- == The Door.
- == The Shepherd.
- == The Vine.
- == The Temple.
- == The Lamb.

John goes to great lengths to point the reader away from man and toward Christ. Even John the Baptizer is played down. In John's gospel, the Baptizer says, "I'm not worthy to even touch His sandals."

We know that the apostle John was the one who took care of Jesus' mother after the crucifixion, yet John does not even mention her name! He only refers to her as the "mother of Jesus." And he does so only twice. This omission was probably made to combat the already growing worship of Mary that was developing in the Roman church. It's interesting to note that John does not hesitate to mention the name "Mary." But he uses it when referring to the other Mary's, such as Mary Magdalen.

John refuses to use the word "apostle," probably to combat the misuse of that office, which was beginning even then. The primacy of Peter would never fit into the pages of the Gospel of John; in fact, there is very little of Peter in John's narrative. Again, John points us toward Christ and away from men.

The grammar of John's Gospel is very simple, but the thoughts are profound, probably more profound than in any other New Testament book.

The Gospels Don't Tell Us Everything

Hopefully, the reader can now better understand the dynamics and the unique qualities of each of these four great books we call the Gospels.

At this point, one could be tempted to ask, "Since each writer left out key events which had to be covered by one of the other three writers, have other dramatic events and teachings been lost simply because none of the four Gospel writers recorded them?"

The answer is Yes! What we have in these four Gospels is only the tip of the iceberg. Much more was lost than was retained when it comes to recounting the life of our Savior.

"And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen" (John 21:25).

We have a record of only a fraction of the things done by Christ Jesus. But this information has not been lost forever, has it? We know that we will have the opportunity to hear about ALL of the events of His life from Jesus Himself when He returns to rule as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. May God speed that day!

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