

The Four Gospels

by David Padfield

Christians often wonder why there are four accounts of the life of Christ recorded in the New Testament. The basic answer is that the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) all tell us the same story, but from four different viewpoints and to four different audiences.

Let me illustrate this idea. Suppose a young family is standing on a street corner and witnesses an automobile accident. The father might tell you the make and model of the two cars involved. The mother might be able to tell you the color of the cars involved and the number of occupants. Their little boy witnessing the same accident might not know about the make or model of the cars, but he might be able to tell you about the puppy dog who was almost hit, while his little sister would only tell you about the baby doll that got thrown out of the first car at the time of impact. Now, who told the truth? They all told the truth, but from different viewpoints.

The gospel writers all tell us the same basic story about the life of Christ. However, while one writer might choose to emphasize the parables of Jesus, another writer might skip over the parables and dwell on the nature and character of our Lord. Putting all four gospel accounts together gives us a fuller and richer portrait of the life and work of Jesus the Messiah.

"Very often on stained glass windows and the like the gospel writers are represented in symbol by the figures of the four beasts whom the writer of the Revelation saw around the throne ([Revelation 4:7](#)). The emblems are variously distributed among the gospel writers, but a common allocation is that the man stands for Mark, which is the plainest, the most straightforward and the most human of the gospels; the lion stands for Matthew, for he specially saw Jesus as the Messiah and the Lion of the tribe of Judah; the ox stands for Luke, because it is the animal of service and sacrifice, and Luke saw Jesus as the great servant of men and the universal sacrifice for all mankind; the eagle stands for John, because it alone of all living creatures can look straight into the sun and not be dazzled, and John has the most penetrating gaze of all the New Testament writers into the eternal mysteries and the eternal truths and the very mind of God. Many people find themselves closer to God and to Jesus Christ in John than in any other book in the world." (William Barclay, *The Gospel Of John*, p. 1).

Gospel Of Matthew

Matthew was a Galilean Jew and is often referred to as "Matthew the tax collector" ([Matt. 10:2](#)). It is the unanimous consent of the "church fathers" such as Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius and Jerome that Matthew wrote his gospel in Hebrew and it was later translated into Greek.

While Matthew does not state the purpose of his book like John did ([John 20:30-31](#)), it is obvious to even the casual reader that he wrote to prove that in Jesus of Nazareth is to be found the fulfillment of all Messianic prophecy. Some have commented that the gospel of Matthew was written by a Jew, about a Jew, to other Jews -- and this is certainly the case.

Try to picture a Greek opening the gospel of Matthew for the first time. Within the first few verses he would read of the [genealogy of Christ](#). Among the Jews this would have seemed both logical and appropriate, but to a Greek it would have been unintelligible. He would also read of Jesus being the Messiah -- a term which no Greek would have been able to fully comprehend. The point is that the gospel of Matthew was never intended for a Greek audience.

There are more than forty Old Testament passages quoted in Matthew in connection with even the minor events of the life of Christ. Matthew would often mention some minor detail in the life of Christ and then go on to show that the event was a fulfillment of prophecy. Matthew explains that Christ was born of a virgin "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet" ([Matt. 1:22](#); [Isa. 7:14](#)). The chief priests told Herod that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, "for thus it is written by the prophet" ([Matt. 2:5](#); [Micah 5:2](#)). When Herod ordered the slaughter of the innocent children, it was seen as a fulfillment of "what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet" ([Matt. 2:17](#); [Hos. 11:1](#)). [John the Baptist](#) prepared the way for Jesus, "for this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah" ([Matt. 3:3](#); [Isa. 40:3](#)).

Christ began His ministry in "[Capernaum](#), which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet" ([Matt. 4:13-14](#); [Isa. 9:1-2](#)). Even the teaching method of Jesus was a matter of prophecy. Matthew explains that "Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: 'I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world.'" ([Matt. 13:34-35](#); [Psa. 78:2](#)).

The [death of Christ on Calvary's cross](#) was also a matter of prophecy, and Matthew goes into detail to explain this fact. Christ was betrayed into the hands of the enemy for thirty pieces of silver, as prophesied by Jeremiah ([Matt. 27:9-10](#); [Jer. 32:6-9](#)). When He was crucified, the soldiers "divided His garments, casting lots, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet: 'They divided My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots.'" ([Matt. 27:35](#); [Psa. 22:18](#)). Even His words on the cross were a matter of prophecy, for there in agony He quoted the words of the Psalm of the Cross, "'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?'" ([Matt. 27:46](#); [Psa. 22:1](#)).

The Gospel Of Mark

The gospel of Mark was written to a Roman audience. If one verse could reflect the message of the book, it would be this: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" ([Mark 10:45](#)). In the book of Mark Christ is presented as the ideal servant. Unlike Matthew, Mark does not give us the genealogy of Christ, for the genealogy of a servant is not important.

Since Mark was not writing to a Jewish audience, he had to explain Jewish customs and settings to his readers. Matthew tells us of the question the scribes and Pharisees had over the fact the disciples of Jesus did "not wash their hands when they eat bread" ([Matt. 15:1-11](#)). When Mark tells the same story he has to explain the washing of hands was a ceremonial cleansing, not the washing of dirt off the body. "For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received

and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches." ([Mark 7:3-4](#)).

When Jesus predicted the destruction of the Temple, Mark tells us that Jesus "sat on the [Mount of Olives](#) opposite the temple" ([Mark 13:3](#)). Every Jew knew the Mount of Olives was "opposite the temple," but Roman readers would have had no idea as to its location.

Mark also has to explain the day of Unleavened Bread was "when they killed the Passover lamb," something every Jew would have known since birth, but about which a Roman would have been unfamiliar.

The Gospel Of Luke

Luke has the distinction of being the only Gentile writer in the Bible. He is referred to by Paul as "Luke the beloved physician" ([Col. 4:14](#)). It has been observed that preachers usually see men at their best, lawyers see men at their worst, and doctors see men as they really are. Luke sets forth the humanity of the Son of Man and presents in chronological order the life of Christ. As a physician, he is more exacting in his use of language. When he refers to a leper he uses the exact medical term to describe the condition, i.e., "full of leprosy" ([Luke 5:12](#)). In [Mark 3:1](#) we read of the man with the withered hand whom Jesus healed on the Sabbath -- Luke adds it was his right hand which was withered, something a physician would note ([Luke 6:6](#)). It is also the physician who notes that in the Garden our Lord's "sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" ([Luke 22:44](#)).

"An example of Luke's care is the way in which he dates the emergence of John the Baptist. He does so by no fewer than six contemporary datings. 'In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar (1), Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea (2), Herod being tetrarch of Galilee (3), and his brother Philip being tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis (4), and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene (5) in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas (6), the word of God came to John' ([Luke 3:1, 2](#)). Here is a man who is writing with care and who will be as accurate as it is possible for him to be." (William Barclay, *The Gospel Of Luke*, p. 3).

The Gospel Of John

Unlike the other gospel writers, John clearly states the purpose of his book. After describing the appearance of Christ to Thomas and the rest of the apostles, John writes: "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name." ([John 20:30-31](#)).

The whole purpose of the gospel of John was to prove the [Deity of Jesus Christ](#). Instead of giving the genealogy of Christ, John goes back into eternity to tell us that, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." ([John 1:1-4](#)).

"The humanity of Jesus Christ is genuine, as John makes clear, but it is not an ordinary human life that John discloses. It is that of one who before His incarnation existed with God, as very God (Jo. 1:1, 14, 18), and who came to earth to reveal the Father to men ... If we wish to know God, look at Jesus Who has revealed Him in

personal bodily form, in human personality, the actual combination or union of God with man." (Robertson, *Epochs in the Life of the Apostle John*, pp. 167, 172).

I have always been impressed with the descriptive terms John uses for Christ in the first chapter of his book. Not only was He "the Word" Who "became flesh" ([John 1:14](#)), but He is "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" ([John 1:29](#)). He is further described as "the Son of God," "the Messiah" and "Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" ([John 1:29, 34, 45](#)). Nathaniel refers to Him as "Rabbi," "the Son of God" and "the King of Israel" ([John 1:49](#)). Jesus ends the chapter by referring to Himself as "the Son of Man" ([John 1:51](#)).

The four gospels truly give us a marvelous glimpse into the life of the Son of God who died for us!