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# DISCOVERING JESUS

WHY FOUR GOSPELS TO PORTRAY  
ONE PERSON?

T. D. ALEXANDER

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*Discovering Jesus: Why Four Gospels to Portray One Person?*

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# PREFACE

WRITTEN ABOUT two thousand years ago in Greek, the four Gospels are our primary sources of information about the life of Jesus Christ, the most extraordinary person to have ever lived. These authoritative accounts endorsed by the early Christians reveal who Jesus Christ truly is. With good reason, the four Gospels have been highly valued by his followers in every age.

Yet, in spite of this, most Christians do not have a particularly clear understanding of them. Two factors possibly explain this. First, the contents of Matthew, Mark, and Luke overlap considerably. This makes distinguishing between them difficult, and for many Christians, these Gospels tend to blur together. Only John's Gospel stands apart as being noticeably different. Second, the Gospels are often read in piecemeal fashion. Short passages are taken from here and there, without any meaningful attempt being made to see them within the context of a whole Gospel. As a result, exceptionally few Christians, even among those who are educated theologically, are able to describe with certainty the distinctive features and themes of each Gospel.

If you think this is an overstatement, test yourself and your Christian friends with a few questions: How do the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke differ from each other? What is distinctive about each? How does Mark's picture of Jesus differ from that of Matthew (or Luke, or John)? Why is John's Gospel quite unlike the others? Even mature Christians will struggle to answer these questions.

This very basic lack of knowledge about the Gospels is extremely disturbing, especially given their importance as key

witnesses to Jesus Christ. As an attempt to address this problem, this short book provides an opportunity to explore the four Gospels and compare their contents in a largely nontechnical way. The approach adopted is designed to enable ordinary Bible readers to appreciate how the Gospels portray Jesus in four distinctive but complementary ways.

Hopefully, by bringing clarity where there is confusion, this book will help you, the reader, to understand how the four Gospels present Jesus respectively as:

- The son of David who establishes the kingdom of heaven
- The Son of God who suffers to ransom others
- The Savior of the world who seeks the lost
- The Lamb of God who brings eternal life through a new exodus

At a time in history when many well-educated people have only a passing knowledge of what the Bible has to say about Jesus, this introductory guide will enable modern readers to see Jesus through the eyes of his earliest followers. Experiencing Jesus in this way undoubtedly enriches our understanding of who he is, what he has done, and what he continues to do.

The contents of this book first took shape through a course on the Gospels that I taught on several occasions at Union Theological College, Belfast, for church members. The contents have been reworked since then with the hope of making the course materials more widely available, possibly for use in small groups. To prompt discussion and further reflection, questions have been added at the end of each chapter.

It is my hope that this short introduction to the Gospels will prove stimulating, enabling ordinary readers to understand better why the earliest communities of Jesus' followers embraced four accounts of his life. By appreciating the distinctive contribution that each Gospel makes to our understanding

of Jesus, we, too, can begin to derive a much richer picture of who he is.

In the process of bringing this book to fruition, I have benefited from the support of many different people. To those who were course participants at the Institute for Christian Training in Union College, I am exceptionally grateful. Their desire to gain a fuller understanding of the Bible has been a particular stimulus to me. For her practical support and encouragement over many years as my secretary, I am deeply indebted to Renée McCracken. It is with pleasure that I dedicate this book to her. Words cannot adequately express my heartfelt thanks to my wife, Anne, and our children, Jane and David, for the wonderful way in which they have enriched my life by surrounding me with a loving family environment. Lastly, but by no means least, I owe my all to the One about whom this book is written; he is indeed everything that the four Gospels proclaim him to be.

SOLI DEO GLORIA





## CHAPTER ONE

# A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE FOUR GOSPELS

JESUS CHRIST STANDS APART from every other religious leader who has ever lived. Underlining his importance, the Bible contains four remarkable accounts of his life. These four books are known to us by the names of their authors who, according to ancient Christian tradition, are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. For centuries these four accounts of the life of Jesus have been called Gospels, the word *gospel* being derived from the Old English term *godspel* meaning “good story.” The English word *gospel* translates the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning “good news.” This term was used initially to denote the message that Jesus proclaimed. As Mark 1:14 states, “. . . Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel [good news] of God.” The term, however, soon came to be used of the four accounts of the life of Jesus, probably due to its presence in the opening verse of Mark’s Gospel: “The beginning of the gospel [good news] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

One thing is immediately striking about the four Gospels. Three of them have a substantial amount of material in common. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke frequently share the same contents and, as you shall see, often use exactly the same words. For this reason, most readers find it very difficult to remember in which Gospel a particular incident is narrated. Because they share much in common, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are sometimes referred to as the

Synoptic Gospels; the word *synoptic* comes from the Greek term *sunopsis* meaning “seeing together.” John’s Gospel stands out as the black sheep of the family, lacking the family characteristics found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

In order to give a general picture of how the four Gospels differ from each other, this chapter provides a short overview. In later chapters we shall explore more fully their distinctive themes.

## MARK

The shortest of the Gospels is Mark’s. Today most scholars believe that it was the first to be composed; the reasons for this are discussed in chapter 11. Mark’s compelling record of the life of Jesus exhibits a number of noteworthy features.

**MAP 1.1**



Mark’s Gospel focuses on the adult ministry of Jesus. It tells us nothing about the birth of Jesus, unlike Matthew and Luke. Mark mainly records the actions of Jesus, rather than his teaching. Jesus is portrayed as a very dynamic individual, an image underlined by Mark’s style of writing. He often uses the present tense (historical present) to describe past events, giving the impression of

of immediacy. This perception is reinforced by his frequent use of the term “immediately” (it appears forty-one times; e.g., Mark 1:10, 12, 18, 20, 21).

The structure of Mark's Gospel follows a clear geographical itinerary which takes the reader from Galilee to Jerusalem. The turning point in the story comes at Caesarea Philippi, north of Galilee, where Peter makes the important affirmation that Jesus is the Christ (Mark 8:27–29). From there the story moves to Jerusalem.

Reflecting the geographical movement of the story, Mark's Gospel displays a relatively straightforward structure, as shown in the chart below.

**CHART 1.1**

<b>Mark</b>	
1:1–13	Introduction
1:14–6:13	Ministry in Galilee
6:14–8:26	Wider Ministry in the North
8:27–10:52	Toward Jerusalem
11:1–13:37	Confrontation in Jerusalem
14:1–16:8	Passion and Resurrection

This geographical movement from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south is mirrored by a dramatic development in the plot of Mark's Gospel. The story moves from the enthusiasm of the Galilean crowds to the hostility of the Jerusalem authorities. This shift in location plays an important role in explaining why Jesus is eventually put to death. However, as we shall see in chapters 3 and 4, Mark's Gospel has something much more profound to say about the reason behind the crucifixion of Jesus.

## **MATTHEW**

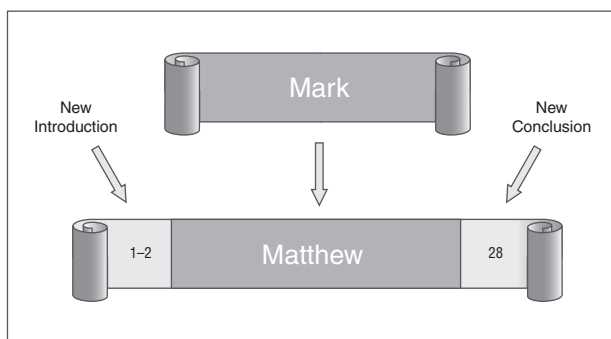
Matthew's Gospel is almost twice the length of Mark's and contains about 90 percent of Mark's material. Not surprisingly,

strong similarities exist between the two of them. As the following chart illustrates, Matthew keeps the general geographical-chronological structure used by Mark.

**CHART 1.2**

	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Matthew</b>
Introduction	1:1–13	1:1–4:11
Ministry in Galilee	1:14–6:13	4:12–13:58
Wider Ministry in the North	6:14–8:26	14:1–16:12
Toward Jerusalem	8:27–10:52	16:13–20:34
Confrontation in Jerusalem	11:1–13:37	21:1–25:46
Passion and Resurrection	14:1–16:8	26:1–28:20

While Matthew has much in common with Mark, there are two important structural differences. First, Matthew adds new material to the beginning and the end of Mark's account.

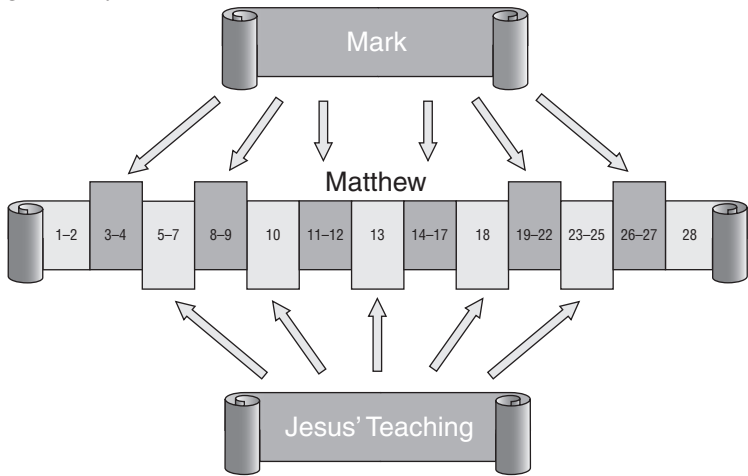
**CHART 1.3**

At the start of his Gospel, Matthew introduces additional information concerning the birth of Jesus. In chapter 1, he reveals how Joseph adopts Jesus as his own son, making him heir to the royal line of David. Subsequently, Matthew records

the hypocritical reaction of King Herod to the news that learned strangers from the East have come to honor the birth of a new king. By adding this new material to Mark's account, Matthew emphasizes Jesus' royal status. At the end of his Gospel, Matthew includes new information about events that occur after the resurrection of Jesus, emphasizing in particular his return to Galilee. This frames Matthew's account of the adult life of Jesus by bringing the story back to Galilee.

Second, Matthew adds into Mark's mainly action-packed story five blocks of teaching by Jesus.

**CHART 1.4**



Although Matthew takes over almost all of Mark's material, he is not constrained by Mark's order. Matthew adopts a more topical arrangement and sometimes significantly changes the order in which Mark describes things. While he reorders many of the episodes in Mark's account, Matthew ensures that the five additional blocks of teaching by Jesus are carefully integrated into the whole account. Consequently, the content

## 22 DISCOVERING JESUS

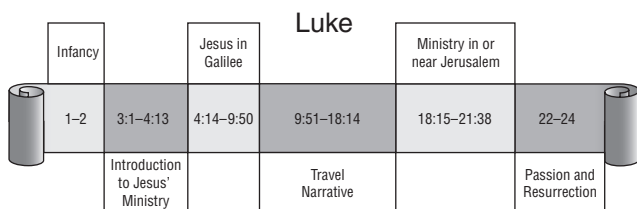
of these five speeches harmonizes well with the overall development of Matthew’s story.

We shall say more about these features when we look at Matthew’s Gospel in chapters 5 and 6.

### LUKE

Luke’s Gospel is the first of two volumes, the sequel being the book of Acts, an account of how the early church expanded, eventually reaching Rome. Luke’s account of the life of Jesus falls into a number of distinct sections.

**CHART 1.5**



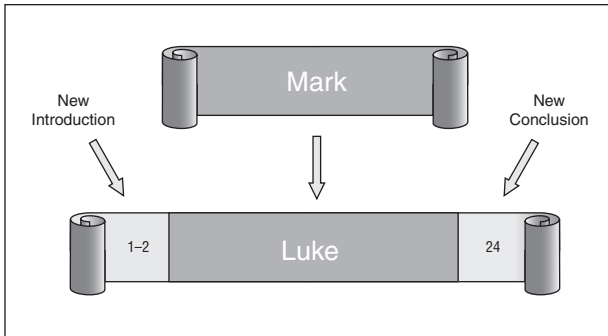
Like Matthew, Luke follows Mark by having the same basic geographical structure for his account of Jesus’ adult life. After a period of ministry in Galilee, Jesus travels to Jerusalem where he is crucified. Although Luke borrows much material from Mark, no Markan material is used in the “Travel Narrative” in Luke 9:51–18:14.

**CHART 1.6**

Mark	Luke
1:3-3:19	3:1-6:19
4:1-9:40	8:4-9:50
—	9:51-18:14
10:13-16:6	18:15-24:11

Luke incorporates about half of Mark's Gospel into his biography of Jesus. Like Matthew, he adds new material relating to the birth and resurrection of Jesus.

**CHART 1.7**



Luke's additions at the start of his Gospel, however, are quite different from those of Matthew. Matthew's introductory chapters focus on the theme of kingship and do so by linking Jesus to the royal line of David. Luke, in marked contrast, records quite different events.

First, Luke has a special interest in the Jerusalem temple. He begins with Zechariah's encountering an angel in the temple. Luke later mentions how Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple to consecrate him to the Lord. Then, as a youth, Jesus views the temple as his "Father's house." Having highlighted the temple in his early chapters, Luke concludes his Gospel with the observation that the disciples "were continually in the temple blessing God."

Second, in his opening two chapters, Luke gives prominence to certain women and also, to a lesser degree, to some shepherds. Remarkably, from a first-century Jewish perspective, God reveals his purposes to these groups. This reflects Luke's

special interest in those who were considered to be of lower status within society.

At the conclusion of his Gospel, Luke places Jesus near Jerusalem, whereas Matthew ends with the resurrected Jesus returning to Galilee. Luke is particularly interested in the ascension of Jesus. Not only does Luke conclude his account by mentioning that Jesus “parted from them and was carried up into heaven” (24:51), but he repeats this at the start of Acts (1:9–11). Significantly, Luke makes the same point earlier in Luke 9 as Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem:

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. (51)

At the very start of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, Luke wants to highlight the idea of his being “carried up into heaven.”

Whereas Mark’s Gospel concentrates on the crucifixion of Jesus, Luke’s Gospel and the book of Acts emphasize the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. As Peter expresses it in Acts 2:36, (following a long passage on the topic of the resurrection) “God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” For Luke, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus confirms his true status as the Savior of the world.

Luke’s Gospel contains much material that is not found in the other Gospels. Of the twenty-eight parables that he records, fifteen are unique to him. These include such well-known parables as the good Samaritan (the good man from Samaria) and the prodigal son(s). Although Luke includes a considerable quantity of Jesus’ teaching, he does not gather it together in blocks as Matthew does.

We shall explore Luke’s Gospel in more detail in chapters 7 and 8.

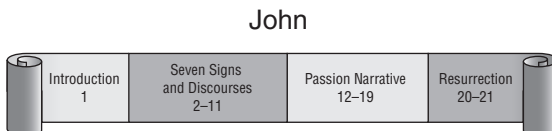


## JOHN

John's Gospel is the most distinctive of the four Gospels and shows none of the obvious similarities that exist between the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John does not adopt the geographical-chronological structure that is so apparent in the Synoptic Gospels. Although John notes Jesus' connection with Galilee, he concentrates on Jesus' time in Jerusalem. Unlike Mark and the other Synoptic Gospels, John records three journeys by Jesus to Jerusalem (2:13; 5:1; 7:10). Jesus' presence in Jerusalem is always linked to a festival (e.g., chapter 5 deals with Passover; chapters 7–8 deal with the Feast of Tabernacles). Furthermore, John differs from the Synoptic Gospels by having fewer parables and no exorcisms. By dropping the geographical-chronological structure of the Synoptic Gospels, John has the freedom to shape his account in a very different way. Consequently, the structure of John's Gospel is unique. This also reflects the fact that much of his content has no parallels in the Synoptic Gospels.

John's Gospel falls into two halves. The first half of the Gospel is dominated by two features. First, John draws attention to seven signs (or miracles). These go from the changing of water into wine through to the resurrection of Lazarus. Second, John records a number of dialogues between Jesus and a handful of individuals (e.g., Nicodemus, the woman of Samaria, the man who was ill for thirty-eight years, the man born blind). None of these conversations appear in the Synoptic Gospels.

### CHART 1.8



John differs from the Synoptic Gospels by having fewer but longer episodes. Professor Graham Stanton notes that they tend to follow a similar pattern: an incident (often a miracle) leads into a dialogue, which in turn is followed by a long monologue (e.g., Nicodemus [3:1–36], the Samaritan woman [4:1–42], the man lying ill by the pool of Bethesda [5:1–47; some manuscripts read Bethzatha], the feeding of the five thousand [6:1–71], Jesus at the feast of tabernacles [7:1–8:59], and the man born blind [9:1–41]).<sup>1</sup>

The second half of John's Gospel is dominated by the Farewell Discourse of Jesus to his disciples (13–17). John differs in his presentation of the Last Supper and the events following it. He does not describe the agony of Jesus in Gethsemane, but rather focuses on the calm and reassured way in which Jesus greeted his captors (18:4). When Jesus affirms, "I am he" (John 18:5), they draw back and fall to the ground (John 18:6). Throughout John's Passion Narrative, Jesus is in control of events.

We shall look in more detail at John's Gospel in chapters 9 and 10.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are highly fascinating documents and the relationship between them is complex. Each author has clearly given careful thought to his composition.

In looking at the Gospels we should not lose sight of their overall intention. As the term *gospel* reminds us, they are good news. This good news centers on Jesus Christ. As we shall explore in more detail in subsequent chapters, the four Gospels give us different, but complementary, perspectives on Jesus. The

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<sup>1</sup>G. N. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 100.

end result is a very compelling and rich description of a most extraordinary and unique individual.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Why do you think that the early church preserved and valued four accounts of the life of Jesus Christ?
2. Which Gospel do you feel most drawn toward? Why?
3. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke have much material in common. What makes John's Gospel so different?
4. The Gospels are "good news." How are they still "good news" today?

“At a time in history when many well-educated people have only a passing knowledge of what the Bible has to say about Jesus, this introductory guide will enable modern readers to see Jesus through the eyes of his earliest followers. Experiencing Jesus in this way undoubtedly enriches our understanding of who he is, what he has done, and what he continues to do.”

#### FROM THE PREFACE

“A solid introduction to the key themes of the Gospels. Accessible and clear, *Discovering Jesus* will get you well-oriented and open up a lifetime of reflection about Jesus.”

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Dallas Theological Seminary

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Denver Seminary

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