

NT Overview – Part 1 – The Gospels

Someone has written: -

If you want *The Daily Telegraph* version with a conservative slant then turn to *Matthew*

If you want the *Daily Mirror* version turn to *Mark* –bold headlines, brief articles, simple language

If you want *The Guardian* version with its concern for the poor and underprivileged turn to *Luke*

If you want the reflection and analysis of *The Times* then turn to *John*

Matthew

Author - Matthew

He is the only gospel writer to name the Tax Collector called by Jesus as Matthew (Matt 9:9)

His writing demonstrates an interest in numbers

Date

It is generally accepted that it was written after Mark's gospel (late 50's/early 60's) but before the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70) dating it in the late 60's

Main Themes

- Matthew is concerned to connect ***Jesus to the Old Testament*** – OT quoted 65 times
- ***Jesus the Messiah*** – the Promised One of the OT
(The Gk word translated as Messiah is “Kristos” = ‘Christ’)
 - Genealogy (1:1-17)
 - Birth (1:18; 2:4)
 - Peter's Confession (16:16)
 - Death (27:22)
- ***Jesus as the King***
 - Genealogy
 - Visit of the Magi (2:1-2)
 - Judgement (25:31)
 - Death (27:37)
 - Ascension (28:18)
- ***Teaching of Jesus*** – (60% of his gospel is Jesus' words). The ***'Kingdom of heaven'*** is a recurring theme (e.g. 3:2; 10:7; 13:24,31,44,45; 25:1). He underlines ***the law*** given to Moses (5:17-48; 22:37-40; 23:23)

Readership

Jewish Christians – reminding them of who Jesus was, what he taught, why he died and therefore how we should be living life now

It is also probable, that while his main focus was the Jewish believers, he was also concerned that the Gentile believers understood the Jewish origins of the faith

Mark

Author - John Mark: -

- He was the cousin of Barnabas – (Col 4:10)
- His mother was called Mary and the Church met in their home (Acts 12:12)
- Accompanied Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:5)
- Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13)
- This caused a sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36-40)
- Very close relationship between Peter and Mark – Peter refers to Mark as his son – may have been through Peter that Mark came to faith (1 Pet 5:13)
- It is generally accepted that the main source of material for Mark's gospel was Peter
- Paul's relationship with Mark was later restored (2 Tim 4:11)

Date

Accepted as the earliest of the gospels to be written – possibly late 50's, but at least written by mid 60's

The last section of Mark's gospel – Mark 16:9-20, appears in most of the modern translations of the Bible with a note saying something like "The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20"

It is understood that this section was added by one of the early Church leaders – the Greek used is different from that used by Mark in the rest of the book

Main Themes

The most action packed – his account starts with the beginning of Jesus ministry. He uses the word 'Immediately' over 40 times. His material is largely ordered chronologically and divides roughly into two main sections: -

- Jesus ministry in the area around Galilee when he was based in Capernaum
- The road to the cross (starting 8:31)

Mark starts his gospel (the only writer to actually refer to the book as 'good news') declaring two truths about Jesus (1:1): -

- **Jesus Christ** – an emphasis on Jesus as **Messiah** – the Promised One (8:29)
- **The Son of God** – Baptism (1:11), Evil Spirits (3:11; 5:7), Transfiguration (9:7), Death (15:39)

But by far Jesus favourite title for himself, and the most commonly used by Mark, '**Son of Man**', appears in 14 places (e.g. 2:10, 28; 9:12)

In doing so, Mark demonstrates the humanity of Jesus: -

- Anger and deep distress (3:5)
- Compassion (6:34)
- He is troubled (14:33)

Readership

Gentiles – he often takes the time to explain Jewish history and traditions, for example, 'Defiled' hands (7:3-4), Corban (7:11), John the Baptist (11:32)

It is probable that it would have been a Roman readership.

Luke

Author - Doctor Luke (Col 4:14): -

- He was a travelling companion of Paul (2 Tim 4:11)
- Most likely that Luke set out to write two accounts – the gospel being Part 1
- He dedicated his work to Theophilus (literally ‘God-lover’)

Date

Possibly late 60’s/early 70’s. Although the last event recorded in Pt 2 is dated around AD62

Main Themes

Luke was not an eye witness of the life of Jesus, but he researched thoroughly (1:3)
It is likely that he travelled, visited and spoke to those who had been around Jesus.

Of all the 4 accounts, Luke is the one that concentrates most on those **poor and marginalised** – the widows, the children, the foreigners, tax collectors...Only Luke records the story of Zacchaeus, only Luke records the parables of the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Luke’s account can be summarised in four journeys: -

- **Heaven to Bethlehem** (1:5-2:38)
Luke records more of the early life of Jesus than any of the other gospel writers
- **Bethlehem to Galilee** (2:39-9:50)
Luke records many of the stories Mark does about Jesus ministry around Galilee as he made Capernaum his base
- **Galilee to Jerusalem** (9:51-24:49)
Luke is the only gospel writer to include what have been called the **‘Travel Narrative’**
- **Jerusalem to Heaven** (24:50-53 and Acts)
Apart from Matthew, Luke is the only other writer to write of Jesus’ ascension
There is a strong emphasis on the work of the Spirit (1:15, 35; 3:22; 4:18-19; 10:21)

One of the major themes of Luke’s account is that of **Salvation**: -

- John the Baptist (1:76-79; 3:6)
- Birth – announcement of the birth of the Saviour (2:11)
- Simeon (2:29-32)
- Parables (15)
- Zacchaeus (19:10)
- Death (23:35-43)

And Luke is also concerned to demonstrate that **the good news of Jesus changes lives** – he has a greater emphasis on the individual than the other gospel writers (e.g. Zacchaeus (19))

Readership

To strengthen the faith of the Gentile believers (1:4) but as the period of his writing was one of big change for the Church, he wanted to demonstrate to the Jews that God was being both faithful to the Jews while being consistent in his message to those outside of the Jewish nation – there was room for both, but more than that it was God’s will for all to be included in his Kingdom

John

Author - John – the brother of James

- Unnamed and refers to himself as the “disciple whom Jesus loved” (13:23; 19:25-27)
More a statement of wonder that he was loved by Jesus than about status
- Similarities in language between the letters of John and this gospel

Date

Originally thought to have been the last of the gospels, written as late as perhaps 100AD
Archaeological evidence since points to an earlier date, some even thinking around the same time as the others as there again is no mention of the destruction of Jerusalem

Main Themes

John tells us why he wrote his account (20:31). In truth, John’s gospel is an early Gospel tract, written to help people believe in Jesus, and by selecting the accounts he does, John leaves us having to make decision about who we believe Jesus is

Unlike the other writers John selects key stories and teachings and unpacks them further. Chapters 13-17 record the words Jesus spoke to his small group of followers on the night he was betrayed known as the **‘Upper Room Discourse’**

John declares up front who Jesus is: -

- **The Lamb of God** (1:29, 36)
- **The Messiah** (1:41, 45)
- **The Son of God** (1:34, 49)
- **God himself** (1:1-3)

There were many miracles performed by Jesus and known of by John (20:30). But John chose to record just 7 (the perfect number for Jews): -

- Water into Wine (2:1-11)
- Healing an Official’s son (4:43-54)
- Healing a cripple (5:1-15)
- Feeding the 5000 (6:1-15) [NB the only miracle that appears in all 4 accounts]
- Walking on water (6:16-21)
- Healing the man born blind (9:1-41)
- Raising Lazarus (11:1-44)

He also recorded just 7 accounts of Jesus teaching: -

- Nicodemus (3:1-21)
- Woman at the Well (4:1-42)
- Relationship with his Father (5:19-47)
- Jesus – the Bread of Life (6:22-70)
- Feast of Tabernacles (7:1-52)
- True relationship with God (8:12-59)
- Jesus – the Good Shepherd (10:1-42)

The famous 7 “I Am” sayings of Jesus: -

- Bread of Life (6:35)
- Light of the World (8:12)
- Gate (10:7)
- Good Shepherd (10:11)
- Resurrection and Life (11:25)
- The Way, the Truth and the Life (14:6)
- True Vine (15:1)

[The 8th saying was absolute – “I Am” 8:58)

One of the most famous stories from John’s gospel is also not found in earlier manuscripts (7:53-8:11)

Almost universally accepted as an account of a true event in the life of Jesus, none of the Greek Manuscripts have it in. It seems to be accepted as a later addition, but not so far as we can tell, by John himself.

Readership

Probably written to Gentiles (as like Mark he explains Jewish terms and customs as he goes along – 4:9)

The Synoptic Problem

John is clearly very different in the way he writes his account. However, how do we reconcile the first three accounts – Matthew, Mark & Luke: -

1. Some stories are consistent in all three
2. Some appear in two of the three
3. Others appear in only one of the three

It is generally accepted that Mark was the first account and that both Matthew and Luke used this as informing their own writings.

It is also suggested by some that there were other accounts in circulation – one in particular known as ‘Q’ that acted as a source for all three of the writers hence the similarities in some of the stories. It would be easy to explain away differences – but having them so similar seems to indicate they have been ‘cut and pasted’ from the same source. Whether that is ‘Q’ or whether that was Mark itself, the debate will continue.