

LESSON 49 - THE FOUR GOSPELS

Why Are The Four Gospels Different and Are They Reliable?

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Why are the four gospels different? It's because they're four distinct eyewitness accounts. Each author wrote in their own words to a specific audience with a specific intent. Each author gave their unique perspective and the details, teachings, and events they remembered and thought most important. They all have the same major theme: the Gospel, the good news about who Jesus was and what He did to save the world. However, they vary in their emphasis on minor themes like His genealogy, Jewish Messiahship, divine nature, fulfillment of prophecy, teachings, parables, and ministry. Are the four gospels reliable? Yes! They are unique witness accounts so we should expect them to be different. Police detectives questioning witnesses say differences in their secondary details is good as long as their primary details match. The corroboration of the primary details lends to their integrity, and differences in secondary details lends to the reliability of the witnesses. When secondary details agree perfectly there's likely witness collusion. So it's good that these gospel accounts haven't been manipulated - either by destroying three to keep one, merging all of them into a single document, or by removing the discrepancies so that they match. This makes them *more* reliable. It's *other* religions people *should* be concerned about. Those that had all contradicting and less-flattering accounts collected and destroyed. Those that do all they can to keep their founder looking better than the historical person. Those who use their writings/beliefs to justify military expansion, the slaughter of millions, and authoritarian, totalitarian power and control, rather than just being God-fearing people concerned with spiritual truth. The four gospel accounts, with their dissimilarities, have been preserved nearly 2,000 years. The numerous extant ancient manuscripts show us their reliability. This lesson provides a summary and comparison of the gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

1. The Gospel According To Matthew was written by the Apostle Matthew (Levi), one of Jesus's 12 apostles. It was likely written in the AD 70s but could've been as early as AD 50-60. He was a despised Jewish tax collector before following Jesus. He wrote to mostly Jewish readers, focusing on offering irrefutable proof that Jesus was the long awaited Jewish Messiah. His book is well written, like a novel, summarizing Jesus' entire ministry. He frequently quotes the Hebrew Scriptures ("Old Testament"), making it a good transition book between the Old and New Testaments. He uses the term "Son of David" rather than "Son of God," to emphasize Jesus's Messiahship and connection to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and King David. His book also emphasizes Jesus's teachings about the Kingdom of Heaven more so than the others.

2. The Gospel According To Mark was written by John Mark, the son of a Jewish widow whose home near the temple was a meeting place for Jesus and His followers. It was written between AD 50-65. He was a young boy during Jesus's ministry but later became an apprentice to the Apostle Peter during his ministry

travels. His account reflects both his own and Peter's perspectives. He wrote primarily to Gentiles (non-Jews) living in Rome. His book is fast-paced and almost rushed (perhaps due to local persecution) with an abrupt ending that provokes the reader to ask, "what do *I* believe about Jesus?" His book begins announcing Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, but also focuses on Jesus's humanity being the "Son of Man" - Jesus's favorite epithet for Himself. While Jesus's entire ministry was 3.5 years long, 40% percent of Mark's book focuses on the suffering/sacrifice of Jesus during His final week leading up to His crucifixion/resurrection.

3. The Gospel According To Luke was written by Luke, a Gentile medical doctor and companion of the Apostle Paul, who he met during his ministry journeys. It was written between AD 59-63, to another Gentile named Theophilus, who was a new believer wanting to learn more about Jesus. It's written like a novel about Jesus's entire life, ministry, and teachings. Luke leaves certain things out of this book in order to include them in his second book: the Acts of the Apostles, the fifth book in the New Testament. He investigated everything carefully by personally interviewing the eyewitnesses. He was familiar with either the written or verbally taught accounts by Matthew and Mark because he draws from them, but his is a more educated and scholarly approach to also elaborating more about the specific details of events. He gives more information about Jesus's birth and many of His parables. He also includes his own personal perspective in the incidents he includes, with a greater emphasis on Jesus's relations to the non-Jewish world and the poor.

4. The Gospel According To John was written by the Apostle John, 'the beloved.' He was one of the 12 apostles, and one of Jesus's inner circle of three, along with his brother James and Peter. He was a young man, likely in his late teens or early twenties. Some think it was written between AD 80-95 but others believe it's as early as the 50s and no later than 70 because it describes a *future* destruction of the Jewish temple, which actually did happen in AD 70. It's written to Gentile followers of Jesus knowledgeable of the Greek philosophy of their day, such as the belief that salvation comes from special knowledge and Jesus being divine but not human. He states the intent of his book in John 20:31, "*But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*" His book offers deep philosophy as well as simplicity using the images of "light" and "life" to describe God's activity in the world. He records a list of 9 miracles Jesus did that he sees as proof that He is the eternal Son of God. He also includes a few of Jesus's sermons not included in the other gospel accounts.

An example of how each account emphasized different things is Jesus's genealogy. Matthew, wanting to prove to Jews Jesus is the Jewish Messiah and King of Israel, shows His relation to Abraham and King David through His adopted father Joseph. Luke, the Gentile less concerned with Jesus's Jewishness, shows Jesus's relation to all humanity, using the lineage on His mother's side going back to Adam and Eve. He also makes a point to mention people like Rahab the Gentile prostitute that was saved by God. Mark, rushing and focusing primarily on Jesus's last week, leaves out Jesus's genealogy entirely. John, speaking to Greeks and focusing on proving Jesus's divinity, leaves out His human lineage but begins by stating that Jesus is the eternal Logos (Word) of God that became a human. These aren't contradictory—they're complementary.

Let's pray. LORD God, thank You for using these four reliable witnesses to share the good news with us and for preserving these writings so that we can have confidence in what we believe. In Jesus' name. Amen.