

the  
Synoptic  
gospels

The

gospel

Synoptic s

How the four gospels were chosen from dozens of versions of Jesus' story.

Characteristics of each Gospel.

The

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The New Testament, published in Christian Bibles used around the world, contains 27 manuscripts or texts.

The most prominent of these are the four gospels known as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These texts are so familiar, that it is easy to assume that four -- and only four -- gospels ever existed.

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This is not the case, and the story of how the four gospels became chosen as part of the **canon**, or accepted literature of the church, offers a fascinating glimpse into the world of the early Christians.

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As the number of Christian communities grew, so did the number and types of gospels. During the 2nd century, writing gospels became practically a "cottage industry," for the audience and the appetite for the literature seemed unlimited.

The

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Early Christian communities produced many gospels. One was the **Gospel of Mary Magdalene**, in which Mary is regarded as a disciple, a leader of a Christian group. Another early Christian text known as the **Gospel of Truth**, reflects on the teachings of Jesus, but does not talk about his death and resurrection; and the **Gospel of Thomas** contains only sayings attributed to Jesus.

# The

# gospel

# Synoptic s

That order extended to the texts that Christians used in their worship. In about the year 180 CE, **Irenaeus** suggested that the proper number of gospels was four. He invoked a curious logic: there are **four corners to the earth**, there are **four winds**, there are **four beasts of the apocalypse**.

# The

# gospel

## Synoptic

Irenaeus himself did not have the authority to simply impose this limitation to four gospels. But it seems that many church officials were sympathetic to his perceived need to reign in diversity. It is easy to stereotype the arbitrary quality of the decision-making process: "a bunch of cigar smoking Christian big shots got together, and they decided who was going in and who was going out. It was a wrap, they closed up, and taken everything else was on the cutting room floor and the janitors took away what didn't get in the Canon."



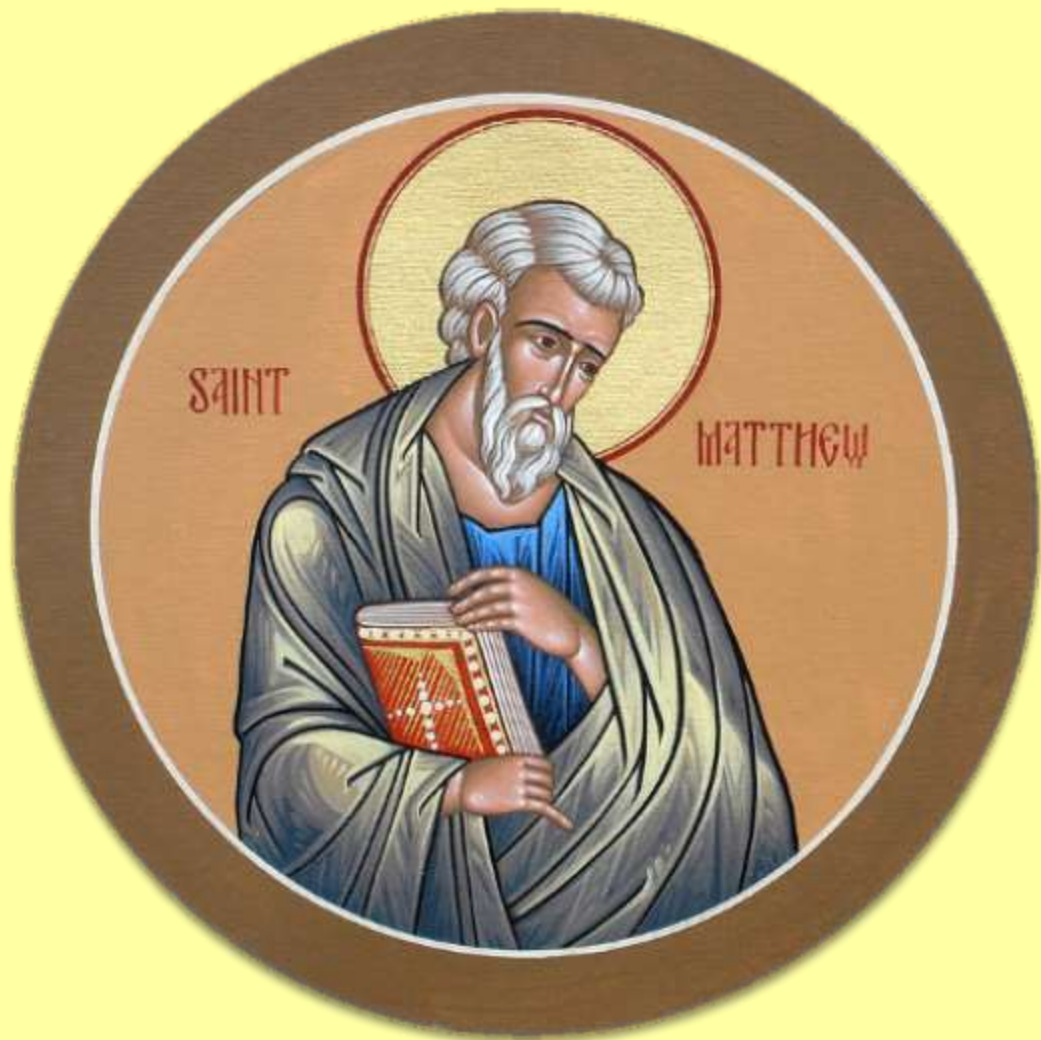
# The

# gospel

## Synoptic

The four Gospels reflect diversity, yet they all share one key element: **each tells the story of passion of Jesus, his suffering and his death.** That story is intimately connected to the **ritual** that is the centerpiece of Christian worship, the celebration of the Eucharist, the Last Supper. **Story and ritual** are deeply connected. As Koester has observed, the ritual cannot live without the story. And, in the worship of the emerging church, the story was sustained and deepened by the ritual.

# Examining the 4 gospels



SAINT

MATTHEW

# Examining 4 gospels

## Matthew

## g the

Though the book does not bear his name, early Christian tradition is unanimous in affirming that Matthew was the inspired author of the first Gospel account.

# Examining 4 gospels

## Matthew

## g the

*Matthew Levi* was a Jew who had been called from his position as a **tax collector** to become an apostle of Jesus Christ (Matthew 9:9). There are indications within the book that the author was very familiar with finances. There are more references to money in this account than in the other three Gospel records. The selection of Matthew was a courageous move on the Lord's part, for **tax collectors were a despised class**

# Examining 4 gospels

## Matthew

## g the

*The purpose of the Gospel of Matthew is twofold:*

**First**, it is an **apologetic**, i.e., a defense of the proposition that Jesus is the promised Messiah of Old Testament prophecy. It was penned especially to convince the Jews of this fact.

# Examining 4 gospels

## Matthew

## g the

It is no surprise, therefore, that this divine writer relied so heavily on Old Testament Scripture to establish his case. Matthew has about **fifty direct quotations from the Old Testament**; in addition there are some **seventy-five allusions to Old Testament events**. This would constitute powerful evidence to the Hebrew people, who viewed the Old Testament as a revelation from God.

# Examining 4 gospels

## Matthew

## g the

It also would be important to the Jews to learn that the Messiah was about to initiate his reign, and so Matthew called attention to that kingdom in more than thirty-five passages. He likewise identified Jesus as the promised “son of David” (nine times).



# Examining 4 gospels

**Matthew**

g the

**Second**, the book was doubtless intended as a **message of encouragement to Jewish Christians**. While it is true that the Jews had crucified their own Messiah, there was still hope for the seed of Abraham. Whereas the physical nation would have to pay a horrible price for its rebellion, i.e., the destruction of Jerusalem, nevertheless a new Israel was in the making—the church (cf. 21:43; Romans 2:28, 29)—and every Hebrew who obeyed Christ could be a part of that fresh system (Galatians 3:26-29).

# Examining 4 gospels

## Matthew

## g the

While Matthew carefully discusses the miraculous works of Christ (he lists **twenty miracles**—three of which are peculiar to his book), he gives a predominate interest to the Master's words. He records a number of the Savior's major speeches (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount in chapters five through seven and the Olivet Discourse in chapter twenty-four).

# Examining 4 gospels

## Matthew

## g the

Even though Matthew's thrust is decidedly **Jewish**, he is also aware of the fact that the Gentiles have an appointed place in the kingdom of God. Accordingly, he attempts to condition Hebrew thinking with this concept. He alludes to those who will come from afar to sit with the patriarchs in the kingdom of heaven (8:11), and he plainly declares that the Gentiles have hope in the name of Christ (12:21). And Matthew's account of the Great Commission is universal in its scope (28:18ff).



SAINT

MARK

# Examining 4 gospels

## Mark

## g the

*Mark* was the son of a woman named **Mary** (Acts 12:12) and the cousin of the evangelist Barnabas (Colossians 4:10). Apparently, Mark had a close relationship with **Peter** (1 Peter 5:13), and there is considerable evidence that he wrote his Gospel account under the influence of that apostle.

# Examining 4 gospels

## Mark

## g the

The Gospel of Mark is remarkably different from that of Matthew. A survey of the information in this book reveals that **it is for a non-Jewish audience**. The writer has to explain Hebrew traditions (7:2-4) and Palestinean conditions (11:13).

# Examining 4 gospels

## Mark

## g the

The **Latinisms** within the book indicate that he was writing for **Roman readers**. This, of course, explains why Mark does not appeal to the Old Testament as profusely (only nineteen times) as did Matthew.

# Examining 4 gospels

## Mark

## g the

His narrative was likely written to encourage Christians in Rome who were feeling the effects of **tribulation** for the cause of Christ. He mentions persecution as the cost of discipleship at a point where both Matthew and Luke, in parallel contexts, refrained from using that term (10:30).



# Examining 4 gospels

## Mark

## g the

Whereas Matthew emphasized the words of the Lord, Mark, while recording only one major sermon (13:3-37), underscores Christ's deeds. He characterizes **Jesus as a servant who came to do the Father's will—and, servant-like, he did so with great urgency.**

Mark uses the servant's word, euthus ("immediately"), fourteen times in describing the activities of the Savior.

# Examining 4 gospels

## Mark

## g the

Mark is a strong advocate of the fact that Jesus is the Son of God. To that end, he records the testimony of God (1:11; 9:7), the Lord himself (13:32; 14:61, 62), the demons (3:11; 5:7), and the Roman centurion involved in the crucifixion (15:39).

Approximately forty percent of this shortest gospel account is devoted to the Lord's final journey to Jerusalem and the events that culminated with his death (10:32ff).

SAINT

LUKE  
THE EVANGELIST



# Examining 4 gospels

## Luke

*Luke* is the solitary Gentile writer of the Bible, yet his dual books of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts constitute about one-fourth of the New Testament.

# Examining 4 gospels

## Luke

## g the

By training he was a **physician** (Colossians 4:14). He **joined Paul on the apostle's second missionary campaign** (Acts 16:10) and was with him periodically during the tireless preacher's ministry (note the "we" sections in Acts).

# Examining the 4 gospels

## Luke

## g the

As with the Gospel of Mark, it is clear that Luke is writing for non-Hebrew recipients. He explains, for example, that Capernaum is “a city of Galilee” (4:31), that the country of the Gerasenes is “over against Galilee” (8:26), and that the town of Emmaus is seven miles from Jerusalem (24:13)—circumstances quite familiar already to Palestineans.

# Examining 4 gospels

## Luke

## g the

Though the book is addressed to “most excellent Theophilus,” with the purpose of confirming the faith of this Gentile in the matters wherein he had been taught (1:3, 4), it is apparent that the intended audience was much wider. This is a treatise designed to reach the **Greeks** with the message of Jesus Christ.

# Examining 4 gospels

## Luke

## g the

The Greeks were preoccupied with a consideration of man. It is not without purpose, therefore, that Luke focuses upon Christ as the perfect example of humanity.



# Examining 4 gospels

## Luke

## g the

Luke's goal in underscoring the human aspects of the Lord is revealed by the following factors:

1. He gives the most complete record of the Savior's birth and childhood (chapters one and two).
2. The inspired historian traces Christ's lineage all the way back to Adam, demonstrating Jesus' solidarity with mankind.
3. He emphasizes many human traits of the Master, e.g., his weeping over Jerusalem (19:41) and his sweating great drops of blood (22:44).
4. Luke gives prominence to the prayers of Christ (a factor not unexpected in a consideration of the Lord's humanity). Of the fifteen prayers of Jesus that are recorded in the four Gospel accounts, eleven are found in Luke's narrative.

# Examining 4 gospels

## Luke

## g the

Luke provides first-rate testimony for the genuineness of Jesus' miracles. A scientist by profession, he had thoroughly investigated the claims of Christ's supernatural works (he mentions twenty of them, six of which are unique to him), and he treats them as historical reality.

# Examining 4 gospels

## Luke

## g the

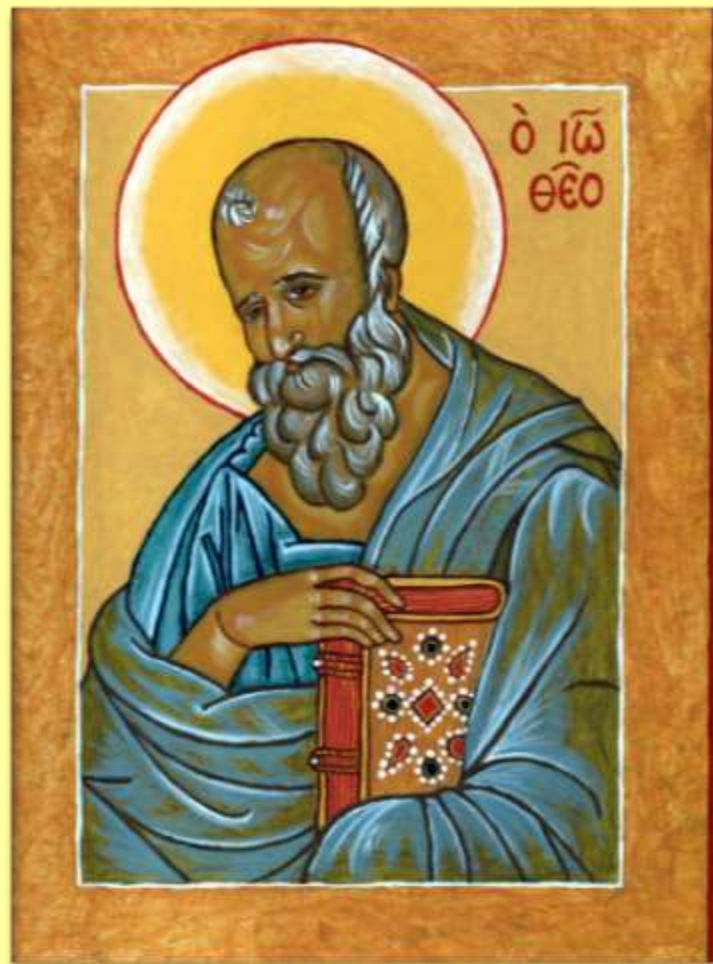
Moreover, the evidence for the Lord's virgin birth must have been overwhelming for a doctor to acknowledge it and argue the case as strongly as Luke did (1:26-38).

# Examining 4 gospels

## Luke

## g the

Luke's message is truly international in its thrust. He mentions that the angel who heralded Jesus' birth brought "good tidings . . . to all the people" (2:10). He records the words of Simeon, who declared that the Messiah would be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (2:32). He alone mentions God's interest in Gentiles during the Old Testament era—the cases of the widow of Zarephath and Naaman (4:25-27).



# Examining 4 gospels

## John

*John*, the son of Zebedee and brother of James (Mark 1:19), was the author of the fourth Gospel. John was a part of that inner circle of disciples (Mark 5:37; 9:2; 14:33). Of all the apostles, he was closest to the Lord (John 13:23; 19:26, 27).

# Examining 4 gospels

## John

## g the

This inspired record is in a class by itself. It is designed to appeal to all ethnic groups. Its basic purpose is to offer the evidence of certain signs which prove that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, which facts lead to eternal life (20:30, 31).

# Examining 4 gospels

## John

## g the

In presenting his case for the divine nature of Jesus, John is very selective in the material he includes. For example, the entire scope of Christ's preaching ministry covers approximately **three and one half years** (as determined by the Passovers listed in the book [2:13; 5:1; 6:4; 13:1]), yet John deals with only slightly more than thirty days of that entire time. Of the twenty-one chapters, containing 722 verses, about thirty-six percent of the material (seven chapters of 257 verses) involves only a twenty-four hour period.



# Examining 4 gospels

**John**

g the

Surely the abbreviated selectivity of one who was so close to his Lord is evidence of the fact that the Holy Spirit was guiding the production of the fourth Gospel.

# Examining 4 gospels

## John

## g the

*No New Testament book is stronger in arguing the case for the deity of Christ. Three examples of this theme will suffice:*

1. John begins his document: “In the beginning was the Word [an allusion to Christ (see v. 14)], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1).
2. Near the middle of the book, the apostle has these words of Jesus: “I and the Father are one” (10:30)—the neuter gender numeral suggests an identity of nature.

# Examining 4 gospels

## John

## g the

Finally, as the book concludes, the confession of “scientific” Thomas is recorded. After examining the wounds of the resurrected Lord, the once-doubting apostle confessed: “My Lord and my God!” (20:28)

# Examining 4 gospels

## John

## g the

John's record is characterized by a series of both **word signs and work signs**. The word signs are the famous "I am" declarations.

Jesus affirmed: "I am the bread of life" (6:35), "the light of the world" (8:12), "the door" (10:7), "the good shepherd" (10:14), "the resurrection and the life" (11:25), "the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6), and "the true vine" (15:1). In addition, the use of the absolute "I am" in 8:58, affirms his timeless existence prior to the birth of Abraham.

# Examining 4 gospels

## John

## g the

Additionally, note these *work signs* recorded by the apostle:

1. Jesus demonstrated his power over time by instantly changing water into wine (2:1-11).
2. He showed his control of space by healing the nobleman's son from a distance of several miles away (4:46-54).
3. The Lord's authority over infirmity was evinced by the cure of the man at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-18).

# Examining 4 gospels

## John

## g the

4. Christ was the master of matter in multiplication of the loaves and fish (6:1-14).
5. The Savior controlled the law of gravity by walking upon Galilee's turbulent waves (6:16-21).
6. He reversed the effect of congenital blindness by restoring the vision of a sightless man (9:1-41).

# Examining 4 gospels

## John

## g the

7. And when Jesus called Lazarus from his tomb, he gave a preview of his power over death, to fully be revealed on the last day (11:1-44).

8. John's Gospel concludes with the apostle's eyewitness record of the resurrection events (20:1-29) and the miracle of the fish-laden net (21:5, 6).

# Examining 4 gospels

**John**

g the

Truly, the signs of this book establish the divinity of Jesus. Indeed, the Gospel narratives testify in eloquent concert.



# DO THE FOUR GOSPELS CLASH?

Of course the Gospel documents display some differences, even when describing the same events. Actually, this is an evidence of literary independence; it demonstrates a lack of collusion. This circumstance most certainly does not demand historical unreliability.