

Four Gospels, One Jesus: A (Very!) Brief Introduction to Reading the Gospels

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Each of the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—draw their own, inspired portrait of the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Each of these four Gospels provide insight into who the Son of God was, what he did, and why that matters. Through God’s wisdom, he has given us four Gospels rather than a single one. It’s our job to figure out *why*.

All you have to do to see how different the Gospels are from one another is to look at their opening scenes. Matthew begins to make the case of Jesus as Promised Messiah and Inheritor of God’s promises to Israel by genealogically linking him to David and to Abraham, and showing that his flight to Egypt from an Israelite Herod-Pharaoh makes him a Moses figure as well. Mark leaps immediately into Jesus’ ministry with a mature Christ being spoken of by John the Baptist: the story happens as do so many of Mark’s stories “immediately.” Luke parallels the births, lives, and deaths of Jesus and John the Baptist before shifting to a global focus by introducing Tiberius Caesar. John, instead, introduces Jesus as the pre-incarnate Word of God, the God of Genesis, the Creator who would enlighten the world by becoming flesh.

These portrayals of Jesus are different from one another, providing unique perspectives, different viewpoints, and sometimes even different episodes, but they are telling a unified story of the same Jesus. Thus, Matthew’s beginning is closely tied to his focus on Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. Mark’s beginning fits his interest with Jesus as the suffering Son of God. Luke’s introduction of Caesar will soon show that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not, and that the Kingdom will conquer *all* the kingdoms of other nations. John’s theological introduction of Jesus as Word is inseparable from his desire to show him to be the Eternal Son of God. Dealing with these unified but distinct pictures of Jesus is one of the most important tools that we have in studying God’s Word. Mark Strauss calls this reading the Gospels “vertically”: “If each author has a unique story to tell, and if the Holy Spirit inspired four Gospels instead of one, then we should respect the integrity of each story. It is important to read the Gospels on their own terms, following the progress of each narrative from introduction, to conflict, to climax, to resolution” (*Four Portraits: One Jesus*, 32–33).

But reading the Gospels vertically is not the only way we should read the Gospels. We have to balance reading the Gospels as their own stories with their own portraits, written to their own communities through God’s inspiration, while *also* recognizing that God’s inspiration has given us a canon with *four* Gospels. Thus, it’s clear that God also wants us to read these texts alongside of each other: reading “horizontally.” By comparing each of the Gospels’ differing presentations of the same event or parable we can better understand what happened *and* what each different presentation wants us to grasp. In other words, the Gospels were written in a specific place and with a specific purpose, but they were also written for us to present a timeless message that serves the Universal Church.

But in the short amount of time we have, I don't want to spend all of it on describing each of the Gospels. To paraphrase and adapt the opening four verses of Luke's Gospel to our own situation, I begin with, "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a summary and guide to the Gospels which have been handed down to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account to you, most excellent readers, that you might have an introduction to those things you're about to be taught." Godly and studied men are going to be presenting to all of you discussions and summaries of the Gospels and Paul's Letters specifically, but Colby asked me to do something different: an introduction to how to read the Gospels. For that we need to identify according to which *genre* the Gospels are written, and then how we should read them!

Mark's Gospel begins, "The beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." From the first sentence of the first verse, God's inspired writer tells us exactly what he's writing: a gospel! But what is a gospel, exactly? How should we read it? We have probably all heard that "gospel" means "good news," and that is absolutely correct! The gospels are all the good news but they're also written within a specific genre. And, just like today, genres set the rules for what we can expect from a book and how we should read it. But whereas most of us today have a simple time discerning the genre of a movie or book from key phrases or "genre markers" like "Once upon a time..." or "In a galaxy far away..." or "Knock Knock!", we tend to be less aware of what genres and genre-markers existed in the 1st century!

To cut to the chase, Matthew, Mark, and John are all versions of the ancient genre of "Biography," which is *somewhat* similar to our own modern version (Luke is the odd man out, being written according to Hellenistic Historiography, but it follows *similar* rules!). This style of writing is well-attested by both Greek writers (like Plutarch) and Jewish writers (like Philo). Greek and Jewish biographies both told the stories of famous individuals by focusing on their successes and teachings, whether that individual was Greek philosopher and miracle worker like Apollonius of Tyana or a Jewish lawgiver Moses. When the first Christians heard the gospels—and when the first Christian librarians later shelved the scrolls on which they were written—they probably would have considered them to be a version of these sorts of biographies.

There are a lot of similarities to how we read history and how the ancients read biography. But there are a few important differences, as well. In light of this, we should read the Gospels according to three main modes: as history, as literature, and as the inspired Word of God. We'll briefly look at them in that order.

Perhaps the first way that we are trained to read the Gospels is as history and for good reason, because they are historical! As Luke says in his introduction (1.1–4) he consulted other sources and traditions, both written and oral, to help him compile their works just like other historians did. They're also historical in that they're set in a specific historic context: that of the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds of the 1st century. The language, ideas, concepts, and specific modes of communication are from that period not our own. There's distance between us and the

original readers and we would be wise to remember that although the Scriptures were written for us, they were not written *to* us. 1st Century Roman Palestine was a tumultuous period! The better we can grasp what cares, concerns, and contexts Jesus addresses, the better we can understand his words and his desires for us. But the Gospels are also historical in a different sense—they mean to convey accurate historical information about Jesus and the other people included in the Gospel narratives. Luke and the other Gospel writers are telling us *what really happened* and at every instance of us being able to “check” their historicity, they are in line with their ancient standards for truth telling. This has enormous implications for us as Christians: our faith is not based just on the mysterious sayings of a 1st century Jewish philosopher or sage, but instead on the historical person and the historical events of the death, burial, and resurrection of the Son of God. This is crucial because Christianity rises and falls on the historicity of the Resurrection and the Gospels’ ability to accurately portray that resurrection! As Paul says, “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is in vain as is your faith” (1 Cor 15.14).

But even though the Gospels are historical, they are not historical in the *modern* sense. What I mean by that is that the Gospels (like all ancient historiography and biography) are not *most* interested in strict, modern *historicity*, but instead have a different historical accuracy: they desired to portray an accurate depiction of their subject. Now, let me be clear: I’m *not* saying that the gospels aren’t history or aren’t historical or are inaccurate (may it never be!); that’s why we started with how they are historical! What I’m saying is that their *primary* purpose was to be completely true in telling the story of Jesus and less so with preserving a secular historical record. In other words, not only are the Gospels history, they’re also *literature*. They’re not disconnected, discombobulated, random stories and sayings about Jesus thrown into a hat and dumped into a book. They’re episodes that have been carefully selected from events in Jesus’ life and crafted in a certain, specific, inspired way. John speaks about this selection process and authorial intent this way, “Now, Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20.30–31). In other words, John—through the Spirit—selected specific events from Jesus life, miracles that he did, and sayings that he uttered; he *selected* those which best served his purpose. The other Gospel writers did the same! If we are careful to read the Gospels not just as history but also as literature, it will help us pay attention to things like characters, themes, outlines, and recurring symbols, just like we know to do when reading other works of literature! The difference of course is that the Bible is not just any work of literature, it’s *the best*.

But there is one last way that we need to make sure that we read the Gospels. Because if we read them as the most accurate history ever recorded and the best literature ever crafted, but do not allow them to change our lives then we will have failed to grasp their true purpose. And that is because even though the Gospel writers were writing good stories and good history, they were also writing *theology*. In other words, these are also the Inspired words of God! As a friend of mine once wrote, the gospels “are telling the story of Jesus to those who have committed

themselves already to follow him, to renew commitment to Jesus' authority, to determine how believers will live their lives, and to promote Jesus' example as the pattern for imitation. In short, they seek to make a contribution to how communities of believers would live out their Christian commitment" (David DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 119–20). They are meant to change the lives of their hearers and readers. The gospels are meant to make us more like Jesus by revealing him to us. As John says, the "Word became flesh and dwelt among us," but—through John's Gospel, the flesh is conveyed to us in *words*. Let us listen to them.