

A Brief History of the Gospels

Welcome to our first lesson! Before we dive into the scriptures this week it is important for us to have an understanding of the gospels we will be studying. The accounts of Jesus' life were recorded by his closest followers and two of his disciples, as each one was written, or recorded, the author had specific intentions for writing down the story of Jesus. Each author had a specific audience to whom he was addressing, as well as a specific purpose. The key to understanding each gospel is in recognizing both the audience and intent of the writer, as well as the timing and cultural context of its writing.

It is important to keep in mind that the three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) all would have been written, read, and passed around communities that either knew Jesus of Nazareth, or at least knew of him. Jesus, at the height of his ministry had thousands following him, and many enemies as well. It would have been very difficult for gospel accounts to be passed off as true if they were not.

Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew was written by the disciple Matthew (also known as Levi the Tax Collector) around 60-65 A.D. His audience was comprised primarily of Jews. It is not known for which community Matthew wrote this gospel but it is likely that it was written for a community in Judea, possibly even Jerusalem. If that is the case, he would have been writing about events that, while they happened 30 some years in the past, would have been in the memory of his audience. He was writing to people who were already familiar with many of the miracles and teachings of Jesus during his ministry, as well as the events surrounding his death and crucifixion.

It is believed that this gospel was written to encourage believing Jews, while also to help believing Jews share the gospel with non-believing Jews in their community. Through the gospel Matthew records Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom of God and God's salvation plan through fulfillment of messianic prophesy. Matthew's aim is to convince non-believing Jews that Jesus of Nazareth is the long awaited Messiah of God and eternal King as foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures. In reading the Gospel of Matthew we will discover many Old Testament references to how Jesus is the fulfillment of messianic prophecy. Matthew's gospel contains 53 direct quotes from the Old Testament and 76 other Jewish references; and he frequently employs messianic language, for example, titles like "Son of David" in identifying Jesus. Matthews' gospel is not a chronological account of the life and ministry of Jesus. Its intention is to present evidence that Jesus is the Messiah of God. We can only understand Jesus (as Matthew presents him) by understanding what

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came before Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. As Christians we will understand the Old Testament more fully by understanding how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament.

Mark

The Gospel of Mark was likely the first gospel recorded between 55 and 65 AD. It was written by John Mark, not one of the twelve disciples, but likely a disciple and companion of Peter. According to the early church father Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. A.D.180) Mark served as Peter's interpreter and likely wrote the Gospel after Peter's death in Rome. This is also the John Mark who accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey as recorded in the *Acts of the Apostles*. Mark's audience was likely the Christians in Rome, both Jew and gentile. Mark's purpose was to present the person, work and teachings of Jesus. The Gospel identifies Jesus more through his actions than his words. The key to understanding Mark's Gospel is to consider who Jesus' works and teachings reveal him to be.

Luke

The Gospel of Luke is the only Gospel to be written by a gentile, and Luke is the only gentile to have written part of the New Testament, having also written *Acts of the Apostles*. Luke was a close friend and companion of Paul. He traveled with Paul on missionary journeys throughout Asia Minor and Greece. This gospel was likely written around 60 A.D. His main audience was gentile. Luke's language reveals him to be well educated and a physician. Both the *Gospel of Luke* and the *Acts of the Apostles* are written to "Theophilus" which means "One who loves God". Luke aims to present an accurate account of the life of Jesus and to present him as the Messiah – singularly both human and divine at once. He tells us in the opening verses of his gospel that he has "*carefully investigated everything from the beginning*" (Luke 1:3) for the purpose of recording and "orderly account", a chronological account of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus so that "*you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught*" (v4). Luke's purpose is not to reveal or teach anything new, but to confirm the certainty of things already believed. He presents clear, researched testimony to confirm what is already known about Jesus.

John

John's Gospel was written by John the apostle, son of Zebedee, brother of James, called a "Son of Thunder" by Jesus and known as "the beloved disciple". The Gospel of John was likely the last written around 85-90 A.D, after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple and before John's exile to the island of Patmos. John was the last surviving of the Jesus' twelve disciples and apostles. His audience was comprised of new Christians and searching non-Christians, both Jew and gentile, living in Judea and Asia Minor. John was known to have lived and ministered in and around Ephesus in modern-day Turkey.

His gospel is vastly different than the synoptic gospels. 90% of the information presented in his gospel is not included in the other three. Unlike the other gospels, John is not recording a life, he is writing about finding eternal life. In John 20:30-31 he states, "*Jesus did many other*

miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." His purpose is to prove beyond a doubt that Jesus is the Son of God and that all who believe in him will have eternal life. Each episode John records should be regarded in the light of witnesses providing testimony or evidence of who and what Jesus is. The key to understanding this gospel is viewing the evidence, coming to belief, and then receiving eternal life. Approaching each reading from John's gospel with this order in mind will illuminate the purpose behind its inclusion in the gospel.

Ancestry of Jesus According to Matthew

In preparation for our first homework assignment we will spend some time reviewing the genealogies of Jesus recorded in Matthew, Luke and John.



Read Matthew 1:1-17

Bear in mind Matthew's audience is made up of believing and non-believing Jews. He is trying to convince the Jews, who likely knew of or even encountered Jesus of Nazareth, *this* Jesus is the Messiah. Remember what I said above, we can only understand Jesus by understanding what came before him. Just as Jesus fulfills the Old Testament prophecies, we as Christians better understand the Old Testament through Jesus' fulfillment of the Old Testament. In this passage Matthew focuses on who is included in Jesus' ancestry. A person's ancestry was proof of that person's inclusion as one of God's chosen people. In the case of Jesus, according to Matthew it proved more: Matthew's genealogy shows us that Jesus was a descendant of Abraham, the father of all Jews and that he is a direct descendant of David, fulfilling Old Testament prophecies about Messiah's lineage. These two facts, carefully preserved in this genealogy tell us that Jesus is a **Jew** of the **direct line of David**, making him eligible for the throne of David, a requirement of the prophecies of messiah. This is the first of many prophecies recorded by Matthew to show that Jesus is the true Messiah.

In Matt 1:2-3: After Abraham, listed are Isaac, Jacob and Judah, with Jacob's other sons mentioned indirectly as Judah's brothers. This is the line of the **Patriarchs**, and the beginnings of the **nation of Israel** and the **Abrahamic Covenant**. Genesis 12:1-3 promise of Abraham's descendants blessing the world. Being a son of Abraham also links Jesus to the founding father of the nation of Israel. According to the New American Commentary:

"Son of Abraham" traces Jesus' lineage back to the founding father of the nation of Israel, thus ensuring his Jewish pedigree from the earliest stage of his people's history. But echoes are probably also to be heard here of God's promises to Abraham that his offspring would

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bless all the peoples of the earth (Gen 12:1-3). "Son of Abraham" also carried messianic overtones as well in at least some intertestamental Jewish circles (e.g., *T. Levi* 8:15).

Matt 1: 6-7 Mention David and Solomon, the first **kings** of Israel calling to mind Israel's golden age and hinting at the glory to come with the messianic king. It also points to the **Davidic Covenant**. 2 Samuel 7:11b-16 Promises that only a son of David has the lineage to be the Messiah.

Matt 1:16 The ancestry ends with **Joseph, the husband of Mary**, a direct descendant of David and Abraham. It is also interesting to note: "[T]he grammar of v. 16 makes clear that Joseph was not the human father of Jesus because the pronoun "whom" is feminine and therefore can refer only to Mary as a human parent of the Christ child."¹ Joseph is in this same line, but he is not the father of Jesus. "Joseph, a descendant of Solomon, was Jesus' *legal* father, so Jesus' right to the throne was traced through Joseph."²

Two major proposals concern the divergence of names in the two genealogies: (1) Luke presents Mary's genealogy, while Matthew relates Joseph's; (2) Luke has Jesus' actual human ancestry through Joseph, while Matthew gives his legal ancestry by which he was the legitimate successor to the throne of David.³

By the end of this genealogy, Matthew has achieved his goal. By looking back into Jewish history, traceable in the Old Testament, in particular the Books of Moses (or the Torah), Matthew has shown Jesus of Nazareth to be of the royal line of David, and going all the way back to the Patriarchs. He is the fulfillment of both the Abrahamic and the Davidic Covenants. From our place in history we have the benefit of also seeing him as the New Covenant, but that is jumping ahead of ourselves. Let us now turn our attention to the beginning of Luke's Gospel and his genealogy of Jesus' family line.



Read Luke 1: 1-4

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were **eyewitnesses and servants of the word**.*

The single Greek article before "eyewitness and servants" indicates that Luke was referring to a single group, not two groups. The eyewitnesses to "the things that have been fulfilled" (v1) are the servants of the word. Who are the eyewitnesses and servants? The Twelve and others, including the Seventy-two (of Luke 10), in close proximity and relationship to Jesus.

¹ New American Commentary (NAC)

² Bible Knowledge Commentary (BKC)

³ NAC

*Therefore, since I myself have **carefully investigated everything** from the **beginning**, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,*

Carefully. The adverb modifies the participle "having investigated" rather than the verb "write", telling the reader that his investigations have been thorough and accurate.

Investigated Luke diligently and deliberately investigated the veracity of the narratives and eyewitness accounts which tell of "the things fulfilled" in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Everything. He tells us his careful investigation included all the things fulfilled. He left out nothing that was corroborated by witnesses and included nothing that wasn't substantiated by witnesses.

From the beginning. The adverb *anōthen* goes with "have investigated" and can be translated either (1) "for some time past," indicating the length or duration of his research, or (2) "from the beginning," which would designate the extent of Luke's research. Luke likely is designating the *extent* of his research. He was recounting everything he investigated from start to finish, the starting point being the conception of John the Baptist, not the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

... so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Luke's goal was that the faith of Christians would be strengthened and encouraged by reading the accounts contained in his gospel. He presents Jesus' life and death as fulfillment of the prophets. And that God himself affirms the example and teaching set forth by Jesus through miraculous signs and healings.

Genealogy of Jesus According to Luke



Read Luke 3:23-38

Luke traces Jesus' line through Joseph's family, as did Matthew establishing Jesus' right by lineage to the throne of David. And Luke also takes the family line back to Abraham, establishing the fact that Jesus is a "true son of Abraham", a member of the nation of Israel. Luke takes us further back in the family line: "...the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of **Adam**, the son of **God**" (Luke 3:38). Luke takes us to the creation of mankind. In creating mankind God established not a Jewish world, but a universal creation, neither Jew nor Gentile. All of mankind descends from Adam.

Mention of Adam also is a reminder that the entire world is under the same devastating curse brought on by Adam and Eve's original sin. They succumbed to temptation, making the choice to disobey God, the consequence of which placed them and all of creation outside the will of

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God. All of creation, all of mankind, awaits the redeemer who will restore it to its rightful place as children of God. Jesus comes as the second Adam to restore our relationship to God. Jesus comes as a redeemer not just to the Jewish nation, the Children of Abraham, but also as a redeemer to *all* the sons and daughters of Adam who are in need of restoration. By linking Jesus as a direct descendant of Adam, Luke is pointing out that Jesus is the fulfillment of all God's creation and the offer of salvation is open to all mankind.⁴

A Different Genealogy



Read John 1: 1-14

John's Gospel starts very differently than the synoptic gospels. His "genealogy" is outside of time, space, and matter. Where Matthew's genealogy goes back to Abraham, and Luke's to Adam, John's goes back to **creation**. John links the incarnation of Jesus to the Word that was present and the beginning of time: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.* (John 1:1-2) John tells us that Jesus was present at the creation of the world, and in fact not only was he present, he existed with God and is God. The beginning of John's genealogy is the beginning of everything. God is the beginning.

John 1:1 *In the beginning was the Word* This first verse in John's gospel provides three basic affirmations that are foundational to Christian theology, the first affirmation being that the Word (the Logos, the Incarnation) existed **before** creation began. There was no time before God and no time before the Word. Nothing preceded God and the Word.

"...and the Word was with God..." The second affirmation is the **relationship** between God and the Word. The Word neither precedes God, nor is it subordinate to God. The New American Commentary tells us, "in Greek this statement is written *pros ton theon* (appearing in both vs 1 & 2) which is translated: "toward God" or "in the company of God". "[T]his expression should not be read merely as connoting that the Word was in the presence of God but rather that there existed a kind of interactive reciprocity between the Word and God." What this means is that there is an interactive and equal relationship between both the Word and God. They both share in the work of creation together: working, relating, communicating, and moving together in unity. The Word has been in relationship with God continuously from the beginning of time and will continue to be in relationship with God until the end of time, and at no time will the Word not be in relationship with God. When Christ entered into human history, it was not the beginning of

⁴ BKC

his existence, nor was it the beginning of his relationship with God. Christ and God have always been in loving communion with each other.

The third and final affirmation has to do with the nature of the Word. "...and the Word was God." The Word participates in the entity called God. Both God and The Word are **deity**, they both are divine. That Word, (the Logos, the Incarnation) is truly deity. From the outset John is making it clear that Jesus is the Incarnation, the Word, and that he is divine and in unity with God. The Incarnation is not wholly separate and wholly distinct from God, they are not two Gods, they are one divine entity in communion together.



Read John 1:10-13

When the Word entered human history as the incarnation, John tells us that mankind did not recognize him. The second half of v10 presents a tragic theme that runs through John's gospel, one that we will watch for throughout this study. This is the tragedy brought about by fallen humanity – an inability for mankind to recognize its own creator, and not only failing to recognize the creator, but the very fact that mankind is a creation of a creator! And still further, failing to recognize him when he walked among us. Our fallen position has blinded us in our relationship with our creator and redeemer. "*Did not recognize*" would be better translated as "did not know". Recognition is too passive for the relationship demanded by the creator of his creation. He calls us to know him personally, to believe not only who he is but why he came and for what reason. And not just to have knowledge of these things, but to believe them, accept them as true on a personal and individual level.

John tells us that when the Incarnation came to his own people, his own land (Israel), he was not only unrecognized, he was rejected. They "*did not receive him*" (v.11). In rejecting Jesus Israel is rejecting the Revelation sent by God to his people to restore Israel to himself (Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6). In rejecting Jesus Israel refuses to obey the commands of God. John views this rejection of Jesus not merely as a failure to recognize the Messiah when he came, but as a deliberate decision to reject the Messiah. This is a theme we will follow closely throughout our study and we will develop it more fully as we progress through our study. Make no mistake, the rejection of the Messiah was foretold in the books of the prophets and by Jesus himself. This rejection was weaved into God's salvation plan from the beginning.

The rejection of the messiah was not universal. He was not rejected by all, in fact Jesus had a wide following and many would come to faith and belief in his true identity as the Son of God. To those who did believe that Jesus was (and is) the Messiah of God "*He gave the right to become children of God.*" This means that through faith and believing that Jesus is the Son of God, Jesus restored the faithful to full relationship with God as had existed before the fall of Adam and Eve. Jesus restores the faithful to an eternal relationship with God the Father. "*Born of God*" alludes to the fact that this restored relationship is carried out by God, not by human efforts. God initiates and fulfills this restoration through Jesus (and the work of the Holy Spirit).

We will finish our lesson with verse fourteen:

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

When the incarnation entered human history he didn't just take on the appearance of man, he *became* a man. He took on a fleshly human body, lived a human life, experiencing all that a human life entails of joy, frustration, happiness, anger, childhood, adolescence, manhood, friends, family, community, all the things that are part of our human existence, Jesus the divine Son of God experienced in his earthly life.

He lived, he dwelled among us. The word "*dwelling*" is translated from the Greek word *eskēnōsen*, from the root, *skēnē* meaning "tabernacle"⁵. Much like God was present in the tabernacle during the desert wanderings, and was present among the Israelites dwelling among them as the pillar of fire and the pillar of clouds visibly present moving in time and space, so the Word made his dwelling among us taking on human form in all its limitations and setting aside (temporarily) his divinity, to live and exist *with us* for a lifetime (albeit shortened) in the time-line of history.

John concludes by saying "*We have seen his glory*", the 'we' referring to the eyewitnesses who saw and heard all that Jesus did and taught, and testifying to his miracles, teachings, death and resurrection. Certainly The Twelve and the many followers who dogged his footsteps throughout his three year ministry were among those who were those eyewitnesses. The glory they beheld was the presence and power of God residing in the Incarnation of Christ seen in the signs and miracles of Jesus, revealing his true divine nature at the transfiguration, and culminating in his own resurrection and ascendance to heaven.

"[T]he glory of the One and Only", Jesus is the one and only Son of God. He is the one and only Messiah, he is the one and only means of restoration with God, there is no other way. The only way to be restored fully as a child of God is through faith in the One God sent to restore us. God provided no other means to be reunited with him except through his One and Only Son.

The phrase "One and Only" also carries a powerful and poignant undercurrent found in a pattern in the gospels. The phrase "is translated from the Greek word *monogenēs*⁶ which means both "only begotten"; and "only, or sole son (or daughter)." It "indicates that as the Son of God He was the sole representative of the Being and character of the One who sent Him"⁷. Jesus is the only son of God and as the only son he shares in the nature of the father as well as represents the authority of his father.

⁵ Strong's Talking Greek and Hebrew Dictionary

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

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This same Greek word, *monogenēs*, is used nine times in the New Testament in referring to the only child of an individual. For example, it is used to describe:

- The "one and only son" of the widow of Nain who Jesus resurrected (Luke 7:12).
- The "one and only daughter" of Jairus whom Jesus also raised from the dead (Luke 8:42).
- The "one and only son" of the man whose son was demon possessed (Luke 9:48).
- Isaac about to be sacrificed by his father (Hebrews 11:17).

In each case it is used not so much because the child is begotten by a father and mother, as much as, it is the fact that in each instance the only child is about to be lost⁸. John foreshadows the tragedy of God's One and Only Son who will be placed on the cross.

That Son was sent by the Father "*full of grace and truth*". Jesus came to us with grace⁹ – with loving kindness and gracious mercy, an undeserved favor or partiality because of **God's love towards his creation** – and truth, the Truth we need and long for that brings us back to God, Truth that illuminates the way to our salvation and to eternity with God.

This phrase, *charis kai alētheia*, is used only twice in the New Testament, here and in verse 17. It is closely linked to the Septuagint's¹⁰ use of "*eleos kai alētheia*" which translates the Hebrew expression *hesed we'emet*, and in English "love and faithfulness" from Exodus 34:6 where in God reveals his glory to Moses: "And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness...'. It is believed that John, with the Septuagint translation in mind, describes the glory of The Word in the same terms.¹¹ John's "*grace and truth*" echoes the Lord's "*love and faithfulness*" when taken back to the original languages of the 1st century. The love and faithfulness of God's glory proclaimed by the Lord to Moses is revealed and seen in the Son and witnessed by John (and the 'we' of the beginning of v.14). Central to the glory of God are his grace and truth. – *hesed* and *emet* in the Hebrew of the Old Testament, *charis* and *alētheia* in the Greek of the New Testament. Jesus came to us *full* of grace and truth, not just with a measure of grace and truth, a small portion, but full of grace and truth, replete with grace and truth, abounding in grace and truth, overflowing with grace and truth so that all mankind can find salvation through him. His grace and truth know no limits; it is for all who will accept it freely given because as God it is his very nature to be gracious and truth.

⁸ TNTC

⁹ Grace or "Charis" (Greek) means loving-kindness or gracious mercy, undeserved favor given because of love, God's love towards his creation,—Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary

¹⁰ The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures in wide use in the 1st century.

¹¹ TNTC

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Summary:

In the light of each of these genealogies, who do the gospel writers say Jesus is?

- Matthew:
- Luke:
- John: