

The Four Gospels

The *Catechism* (CCC 125) quotes the document *Dei Verbum 18 (Divine Revelation)* from the Second Vatican Council when it says that “The Gospels are the heart of all the Scriptures ‘because they are our principal source for the life and teaching of the Incarnate Word, our Savior.’” More than any other books of the Bible we must become very familiar with these four Gospels. Thanks to the three-year cycle of Sunday Mass readings, along with the daily Mass readings throughout the year, we have a good start in knowing the life and teachings of Jesus. In the coming study of the Gospel of Luke we will give ourselves a better chance of understanding more completely what this Gospel has to offer us. Before we do this, however, it is good to have a little background for the four Gospels and to understand their relationship.

From the earliest days of the Church, She has always recognized four and only four canonical Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The four Gospels are similar in some respects but are really quite different in other aspects, since they are written by different human authors to different audiences for different purposes.

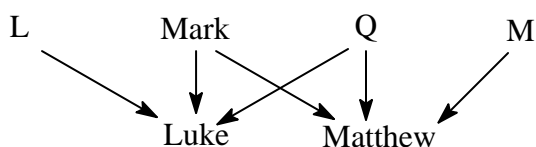
There are various theories about the relationship of the Gospels. Most biblical scholars believe Mark was the first Gospel written. An early Christian writer, Papias in 135, calls Mark “Peter’s interpreter.” Mark was a cousin of Barnabas and accompanied Paul and Barnabas on some of their journeys. He later founded the Church in Alexandria. He probably wrote his Gospel in the 50’s or 60’s in Rome with Peter’s help. It relates many miracles of Jesus but has less of his extensive teachings. It is the shortest Gospel.

Matthew, a tax collector and apostle, wrote his Gospel perhaps in the 70’s in Antioch for a mixed Gentile and Jewish audience. Early Christian writings mention an early Gospel by Matthew written in Aramaic or Hebrew, but we no longer have this version. We only have his Gospel written in Greek, the original language of all the books in the New Testament. Matthew took some of his material from Mark and probably had a second source that included sayings by Jesus. This second source has been called the “Q” source (“quelle” in German for “source”). Matthew quotes the Old Testament extensively to prove that Jesus is the Messiah and his Gospel includes the five great discourses of Jesus.

Luke, as we know from our study of Acts of the Apostles, was a companion of Paul and wrote both his Gospel and Acts perhaps in the 80’s, though some believe it was as early as the 60’s. He wrote for a Gentile audience, was highly educated, was a physician from Antioch, and wrote excellent Greek. He used Mark and perhaps the “Q” source for some material. Many familiar stories are unique in Luke: the “Infancy Narrative,” the “Prodigal Son,” the “Good Samaritan,” “Lazarus and the Rich Man,” and the “Road to Emmaus.”

John, an apostle very close to Jesus along with Peter and James, probably wrote his Gospel in the 90’s from Ephesus. John’s Gospel is much different than the other three. It has many longer teachings and prayers of Jesus and is more theological in its approach. The “Wedding at Cana,” the “Bread of Life” discourse, and the “Raising of Lazarus” are unique to John.

Mark, Matthew, and Luke have been called the synoptic (“same eye”) Gospels because many of the stories and words of Jesus are similar in these three Gospels. A “two-source theory” has been developed to explain this relationship and can be summarized by the following diagram.



Mark and the “Q” source were major sources for both Matthew and Luke. Luke also had some “L” sources unique to him, and Matthew had some “M” sources that he alone knew about. We do not have the “Q” source as a separate document, but those parts of Luke and Matthew that are similar to each other, but which do not come from Mark, are considered to be possibly from this source. This is a way to explain the relationship of these three Gospels. This “two-source theory” can be accepted but certainly is not a necessary doctrine of faith.

Let us begin with Luke’s Gospel. We will be skipping Luke 1-2 for awhile and take them as a unit with Matthew 1-2 near Christmas because these are the “Infancy Narratives” and we will study them together.

For next week, read Luke 3 and 4.