

Introduction to the Four Gospels (Class 1)

Goal: We need to be better readers of Scripture. There's a lot we are missing and, hopefully, you will see how much can be gained in your devotional life and in your understanding of who Jesus IS by learning to read Scripture well.

"We need both analytical and meditative approaches to Scripture if we wish to be fully responsive to God's transforming work in our lives through his Word."

– Klaus Issler, *In Search of a Confident Faith*, p.182

There were some pretty BIG changes between the OT and the NT:

- OT written in Hebrew; NT written in Greek!
- When the OT ends, Jerusalem is under the control of the Persians; when the NT begins, Jerusalem is under the control of the Romans!
- There are new Jewish groups called Pharisees and Sadducees in the NT that aren't in the OT.

So, we need to understand what happened from about 450 BC to 30 AD to properly understand the gospels.

TIMELINE

Babylonian PERIOD (605 BC – 539 BC)

- 586 BC – Solomon's Temple was destroyed; deportation of numerous prominent Jewish families to Babylon (II Kings 25:8-12)

Persian PERIOD (539 BC – 332 BC)

- 537 BC – Jews allowed to return to Israel by King Cyrus
 - Begin to rebuild the Temple under Zerubbabel (i.e. "Second Temple")
- Malachi – Last* book of the Old Testament (OT); written around 450 BC

Greek (Hellenistic) PERIOD (332 BC – 142 BC)

- 332 BC – Judah conquered by Alexander the Great
- 323 BC – Alexander dies.
 - Empire is fought over by his generals (Ptolemy and Seleuces)
- Introduction of Greek culture to Israel including Greek gods/religion, political admin., arts, literature, philosophy, etc.

- o **Most importantly, the introduction of the Greek language**

Ptolemaic Period (323 BC – 198 BC)

- Jews are free to worship in Israel
- c. 250 BC – The Septuagint (LXX) translation begins in Alexandria, Egypt.

Seleucid Period (198 BC – 142 BC)

- 175 BC to 163 BC – Reign of Antiochus IV
 - o Bitter religious persecution (attempted to obliterate Judaism)
 - 165 BC – Antiochus IV convinced to lift the ban on Jewish worship at the Temple; dies shortly afterwards
 - Temple is purified for worship
 - Temple Rededicated (Hanukkah) - "Feast of Dedication"; John 10:22
 - 142 BC – Political freedom achieved under Simon (son of Mattathias) through the Maccabean Rebellion

HASMONEAN/MACCABEAN PERIOD (142 BC – 63 BC)

- Period of independent Jewish rule
 - o Last period of Jewish independence until 1948 AD
- Early Hasmonians are heroes and by the end they are fighting each other in civil war
- As they sought to expand their empire, they brought in the Romans as allies in order to have some political and military support against the Seleucids.
- The Romans took advantage of the civil war that weakened the Jewish nation to conquer Israel.

ROMAN PERIOD (63 BC – ...)

- 63 BC – Jerusalem and surrounding area conquered by General Pompey
- 27 BC - 14 AD – Augustus (Octavian) is emperor of the Roman Empire (called Caesar Augustus in Luke 2:1)
- 14 – 37 AD – Tiberius (Luke 3:1; Mark 12:16)
- 37 – 41 AD – Caligula
- 41 – 54 AD – Claudius (Acts 11:28; 18:2)
- 54 – 68 AD – Nero (Acts 25:12)
- 69 – 79 AD – Vespasian
- 79 – 81 AD – Titus
- 81 – 96 AD – Domitian (exiled John to island of Patmos)
- **Herod the Great (37 BC – 4 BC)**
 - 37 BC – Herod the Great was elected "King of the Jews" by the Roman Senate
 - 19 BC – Herod renovates and expand the Temple; main Temple completed in 1.5 years. Remaining buildings were completed in 63 AD. (still under construction in John 2:19)
 - This is "King Herod" mentioned in Matthew chp. 2.
 - 4 BC – Died and his kingdom was split up among his sons: Herod Archelaus (Judea, Samaria, & Idumea), Herod Antipas (Galilee & Perea), and Phillip (Iturea & Trachonitus)
 - *This means Jesus had to be born before 4 BC.*

What is the difference between "the gospel" and "the gospels"?

"The gospel" = the "good news" (*euaggelion* in Greek). The proclamation of what God has done through the death and resurrection of Jesus; not what Jesus said and did, but what God did through Jesus.

*"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are following a different **gospel** – not that there really is another **gospel**, but there are some who are disturbing you and wanting to distort the **gospel** of Christ." (Gal. 1:6-7)*

*Now I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, the **gospel** that I preached to you, that you received and on which you stand, and by which you are being saved... (I Cor. 15:1-2)*

"The gospels" = Four biographical narratives about the earthly life of Jesus. They are ancient biographies, which differ from modern biographies in the following ways:

- Don't tell a complete chronological history
- Select certain sayings, scenes, and accomplishments that emphasize the virtuous character of the person.
- Flexibility with time and order of events, but there's still an expectation of fact and accuracy.

The ancient Greek biographer Plutarch says biography was writing aimed at disclosing a man's inner self. The ancient biographer's task was to capture the gesture, which laid bare the soul:

It is not histories I am writing, but lives; and in the most glorious deeds there is not always an indication of virtue or vice, indeed a small thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of a character than battles where thousands die...Accordingly, just as painters get the likenesses in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, wherein the character shows itself, but make very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these to portray the life of each, leaving to others the description of their great contests. (Plutarch, "The Life of Alexander")

In describing his approach to writing the biography of Caesar Augustus, the Roman author Suetonius states:

Having given as it were a summary of his life, I shall now take up its various phases one by one, not in chronological order, but by classes, to make the account clearer and more intelligible.

Exact dictation of speeches was also not expected in ancient biography or history. Thucydides explains this in his "History of the Peloponnesian War":

With reference to the speeches in this history, some were delivered before the war began, others while it was going on; some I heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one's memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said.

These are not to be considered errors in the text! "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy" (1978) states:

[H]istory must be treated as history, poetry as poetry, hyperbole and metaphor as hyperbole and metaphor, generalization and

approximation as what they are, and so forth. Differences between literary conventions in Bible times and in ours must also be observed: since, for instance, non-chronological narration and imprecise citation were conventional and acceptable and violated no expectations in those days, we must not regard these things as faults when we find them in Bible writers. When total precision of a particular kind was not expected nor aimed at, it is no error not to have achieved it. Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focused truth at which its authors aimed.

We will need to keep this in mind when we read ALL four gospel accounts, as this will explain some things we see. Specifically, what has been called "The Synoptic Problem".

The gospels are:

- Historic (reference places, times, festivals, rulers)
- Narrative (not a collection of sayings, they are a flowing story)
- Theological (they have an agenda/purpose, they are selective)

Why write gospels at all?

The gospel accounts are written between about 65 and 95 AD, but Jesus was crucified and the Christian movement began around 30 AD.

Reasons written gospels weren't needed before 65 AD:

- Predominantly an oral culture
- 10 percent literacy rate in Palestine in the 1st century
- Apostles and other eyewitnesses are still alive to provide authoritative teaching (Luke 1:65; 7:17; 24:9, 35; Acts 4:20; 9:35; 10:39; 13:30-31; 19:17; 26:26; I Cor. 15:6)

What changed?

- In 64 AD, Emperor Nero blamed Christians for the Great Fire of Rome starting a long period of persecution.
- This persecution included the martyring of Peter and Paul
- James the son of Alphaeus and James the brother of Jesus are other notable apostles and church leaders martyred around this time.
- Once the eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry are gone, it becomes very difficult to correct wrong variations in the oral traditions about Jesus.

After the eyewitnesses are gone these texts are used to:

- Evangelize
- Encourage the persecuted
- Teach new believers
- Worship

Why four gospels and not just one?

John 21:25 says there's more than enough material to write about what Jesus said and did.

Each of the four gospels gives us a different and unique perspective on Jesus' ministry depending on what that particular author wanted to communicate about Him.

How were the gospels written?

Actual event >>> eyewitness testimony >>> (oral tradition) >>> written gospels

- First gospel written was probably Mark
- Matthew and Luke were written later using Mark as a source.
 - about 90% of Mark is in Matthew
 - about 50% of Mark is in Luke
 - Matthew and Luke have about 235 verses in common, which are NOT in Mark. Scholars think these came from oral traditions of Jesus' sayings, referred to as "**Q** material".
 - The Lord's Prayer
 - The wise and foolish builders
 - Parable of the lost sheep
 - Love your enemies
 - The Golden Rule
 - Parable of the talents
- Matthew and Luke also have some material that is completely unique to their gospel:
 - **M** material = birth narrative, the parables in Matthew 10.
 - **L** material = birth narrative, prodigal son, Good Samaritan.
- For these reasons, these three gospels are grouped together and called the synoptic gospels.

Gospel of John

- SO different from the first three
- Probably written independent of the Synoptics
- Probably written around 95 AD.
- Written from a reflective perspective, looking back on what happened in Jesus' life AND commenting on what it means.

Reading the Gospels

When we read the gospels, or any other book of the Bible, one of the most important things we want to look for, along with historical context, word meanings, historical setting, and so on, is author's intent.

Within any genre of literature there are various rules/guidelines about how to structure the material to communicate your meaning and purpose to the reader. We learned all these rules in high school and college literature classes.

There's one type of literature we encounter almost daily for which we know the rules, and that's popular music. In fact, these rules are especially relevant to the gospels because both are meant to be heard out loud.

General structure:

- Verse 1, chorus, verse 2, chorus, etc.

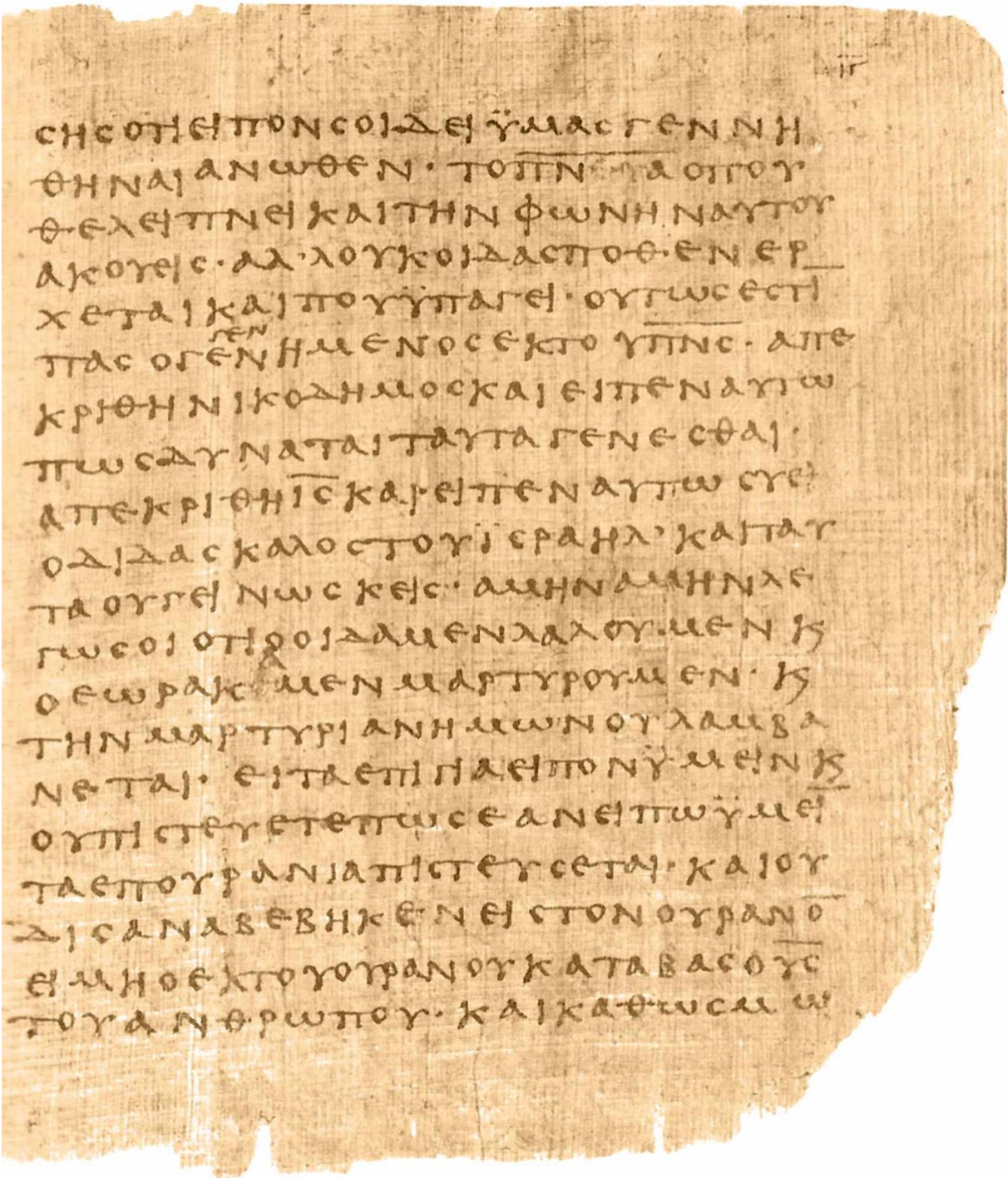
Where do you find the MAIN point? In the chorus.

The gospels have similar structures and tools we can look for and use to determine what the author is trying to say to the readers.

WHY are these structures and tools necessary for the gospel writers?

- Mainly because of the limitations of writing and grammar in the 1st century.
- Ancient written languages had no punctuation, paragraphs, spaces, numerals, or quotation marks.

Here's an example of an Ancient Greek manuscript of the gospels:



Notice all the things we listed above are missing. Notice what else is missing?
Chapters and verses.

Here is what the manuscript sheet above would say, if it were in English:

AZEDTHATISAIDTOYOUYOU MUST ALL BE BORN FROM ABOVE THE WIND
BLOWS WHEREVER IT WILL AND YOU HEAR THE SOUND IT MAKES BUT DO
NOT KNOW WHERE IT COMES FROM AND WHERE IT IS GOING SO IT IS WITH
THE VERY ONE WHO IS BORN OF THE SPIRIT NICODEMUS REPLIED HOW CAN
THESE THINGS BE JESUS ANSWERED ARE YOU THE TEACHER OF ISRAEL AND
YET YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND THESE THINGS I TELL YOU THE SOLEMN TR
UTH WE SPEAK ABOUT WHAT WE KNOW AND TESTIFY ABOUT WHAT WE H
AVE SEEN BUT YOU PEOPLE DO NOT ACCEPT PUR TESTIMONY IF I HAVE TOL
D YOU PEOPLE ABOUT EARTHLY THINGS AND YOU DO NOT BELIEVE HOW WI
LL YOU BELIEVE IF I TELL YOU ABOUT HEAVENLY THINGS NO ONE HAS ASC
ENDED INTO HEAVEN EXCEPT THE ONE WHO DESCENDED FROM HEAVEN
THE SON OF MAN JUST AS MOSES LIFTED UP THE SERP

Because of these limitations, ancient writers used various literary tools to group materials, emphasize themes, and direct your attention to important things in the narrative. We want to consider the way each author structures their narratives and what kinds of signals they've inserted to show us, instead of tell us, what they want.

Literary Techniques used in the Gospels

1. Repetition

This technique is more important for listeners but is still valuable to readers. Look for progression in the meaning and context.

Examples:

"Then what was said through (the prophet/Jeremiah/Isaiah/the Lord) was fulfilled." (10-12x in Matthew)

Jesus' prediction of his death. (Three times in Mark 8-10)

"If you love me, you will obey my commandments" (6x in John 14-15)

2. Inclusio (Pattern: A-B-C-D-E-A')

This is a repetition of similar or related statements at the beginning and ending of a block of text that serves as thematic bookends of the text indicating what the middle is all about.

Examples:

Matthew 1:23 and 28:20	Theme: God with us → I am with you
Matthew 5:17 and 7:12	Theme: Fulfillment of the Law & Prophets
Mark 1:1 and 15:39	Theme: Son of God (Jesus' Identity)
Luke 1:1 and 24:44	Theme: Things Fulfilled (among us)
John 1:12 and 20:31	Theme: Believe → Eternal Life

3. Sandwiches (Pattern: A-B-A')

Here the author begins a story/narrative, which is then interrupted by a second story before returning to the original story. This technique uses the second story to interpret the first, and the first story to interpret the second. This technique is mainly used in the book of Mark.

Examples:

Mark 3:20-35	A: Jesus' <u>family</u> comes to restrain him
	B: "A house divided against itself cannot stand"
	A': Jesus' family arrives; Jesus describes his " <u>true family</u> "
Mark 5:21-43	A: Jairus asks Jesus to heal his daughter
	B: Bleeding woman touches Jesus' robe (" <u>12</u> years")
	A': Jesus raises Jairus' daughter to life (" <u>12</u> years")
Mark 11:12-21	A: Fig tree has no <u>fruit</u> ; Jesus curses it.
	B: Jesus kicks the money-changers out of the temple.
	A': The fig tree is <u>dead</u> .

