

## The Times of the Gospels

Why Gospels and why four?

The term gospel to describe this style of writing probably stems from the start of Mark's gospel, ***“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ...” Mk1:1***. The term then came to be applied to a writing recording the life of Jesus. The four gospels we have in the Bible are probably not the only collections of writing of this form. Luke writes, ***“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 ....” Lke1:1,2*** However these were probably shorter accounts of specific occurrences or teachings which gave way to longer writings, fell into disuse and were lost. Later writings purporting to be gospels were rejected for one or more of several reasons and are completely lost or known by name only, or have been recently re-discovered. Amongst these writings we should mention, The Gospel of Thomas (a collection of 114 “sayings of Jesus”), The Gospel of Peter, the Proto-gospel of James (which deals with the birth and life of Mary the mother of Jesus and with aspects of Jesus' birth), The Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Truth (both of which are religious treatises not relating to the life of Jesus) and the Gospel of Mary. None of these were quoted extensively – and most not at all – by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century church leaders.

At the Council of Carthage in 397AD several criteria were used to establish the canon of the New Testament. The major ones were (and still are).

- Was it written by an apostle or by someone closely associated with an apostle (e.g. Luke, Mark)?
- Is it truthful?
- Is it faithful to previously accepted scripture?
- Were they accepted and used by the early church?

The other sense in which we might ask, “Why four?” is that of need. There would seem to be at least three very important reasons for God choosing to have four gospels rather than one. Firstly, the immediate need for the good news to circulate would be easier to accomplish from four originals. Secondly, the four corroborate each other and do not lead to the challenge that “We only have a single record, how can we trust it?” Thirdly, the different gospels were written from different standpoints and for different audiences and give us different insights into Jesus' life and ministry.

So what are the standpoints, audiences and insights of each gospel? Matthew wrote as a Jew to predominantly Jews. His major concerns are with Jesus as king and Messiah and with the fulfilment of the Old Testament. The gospel may be considered as the amplification and explanation of the message delivered both by John the Baptist (Matt3:2) and Jesus himself, ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”*** (Matt4:17).

Mark wrote his gospel, probably in Rome, to explain the meaning to Gentiles, which is why so few technical Old Testament ideas are used and why Jewish words and customs are explained. Mark also wished to encourage those undergoing persecution and to defend the faith against the charges of sedition which were raised against it. The message of the gospel may be summed up in the words of ***Mark10:45, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”***

Luke writes his gospel as more a piece of history or a biography than the other three gospel writers. He is concerned to show the path of suffering and death which Jesus followed, the universality of the gospel and the need for salvation, summed up in ***Lke19:10 “The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.”***

John writes a much more theological gospel than the others. He does use the term Son of Man, but much more often the terms Son of God or simply the Son. John writes more of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem, rather than the wider Judean ministry included in the other gospels. John also presents much more explicitly the role of the Holy Spirit in the continuing ministry of Jesus and his church. John is concerned to present Jesus as God, ***“No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.”*** (Jn1:18).

#### Content of Matthew

1:1-4:16 Jesus' ancestry, birth, relationship with John the Baptist, and preparation for ministry  
4:17-16:20 Public ministry in Galilee; discourses, responses and miracles  
16:21-18:25 Private ministry to the disciples  
19:1-25:46 Ministry in Judea and Jerusalem  
26:1-28:20 Jesus' death, burial and resurrection

#### Content of Mark

1:1-8:26 Preaching the kingdom of God: foundations, signs, parables, powers  
8:27-10:52 The cost of the kingdom of God: to Jesus, to his followers  
8:28-16:20 Bringing in the kingdom of God: warnings, dawning, coronation and vindication

#### Content of Luke

1:1-4 Introduction  
1:5-2:52 Jesus' birth and childhood  
3:1-4:13 Jesus and John the Baptist  
4:14-9:50 Jesus' work in Galilee  
9:51-19:10 Jesus' journey to Jerusalem  
19:11-21:38 Jesus' teaching in Jerusalem  
22:1-24:53 Jesus' death and resurrection

#### Content of John

1:1-1:18 Prologue: Word and Light: pre-existence, witness, entry into world, incarnation.  
1:19-2:11 Introductory events: witness of John the Baptist, calling of first disciples, revelatory sign.  
2:12-4:54 Jerusalem, Samaria and Galilee: temple cleansed, new birth, John the Baptist, miracles  
5:1-47 Healing and teaching in Jerusalem: lame man; the Father and the Son  
6:1-71 Galilee: feeding the crowds, walking on water, bread of life, disciples' reactions  
7:1-8:59 Feast of Tabernacles: teaching, the woman caught in adultery, the Light of the World  
9:1-10:42 Healing and teaching: man born blind, Jesus the shepherd, Feast of Dedication  
11:1-57 Death and raising of Lazarus; accomplishment and effects  
12:1-50 Public ministry in Jerusalem: Mary's anointing, Bethany, triumphal entry, withdrawal.  
13:1-17:26 Ministry to the disciples: feet-washing, assurances and commands, teaching and prayer  
18:1-21:25 Final days: betrayal, trial, crucifixion, burial, resurrection and appearances.

#### The Gospel Times

The birth of Jesus probably took place in 5BC (this date can be estimated by the death of Herod in 4BC and by the information about Augustus Caesar and Quirinius, the governor of Syria) and his death in about 33AD (dated by the officials at the time and the occurrences of the Passover). The time frame of the gospels is only therefore about 35-40 years. At this time Judea was attached to Syria as part of the Roman Empire.

At this time, Herod the Great was king of Judea, having defeated the Hasmonean king Antigonus following his (Herod's) appointment by Rome. Antigonus was executed by the Romans after a three year war finished by bitter fighting in the streets of Jerusalem right up to the inner courtyard of the

Temple. Herod's reign was mixed, but it is fair to say that he showed no mercy in dealing with those he considered threats. He had his rival for the throne, Aristobulus drowned at a party to prevent him meeting Antony in Egypt. He executed his wife, Mariamne, and her mother, Alexandra, and his brother-in-law, Kostobar (married to Salome and the father of Berenice). Other members of his family were executed at different times as well as other notable Jews. Within this context, Herod's killing of the young children in Bethlehem sits comfortably even if it is not recorded other than in Matthew's gospel.

In contrast to his violent acts, Herod's reign was economically mixed for Judea. He carried out a number of building projects – fortresses, the harbour at Caesarea, building of new cities – and, perhaps best known, the rebuilding of the Temple on a much grander scale. All of this brought employment, but also heavy taxation which was resented by the Jews. In religious terms Herod identified as a Jew, but it would seem that his family had converted and many did not therefore trust this description. Herod's restoration of the Temple and his minting of coins without human heads for use in Jewish areas could garner some support from the Jews, but his rebuilding of Samaria and his support for pagans in the area counterbalanced this. Herod's personal life including the family executions, huge parties and nine wives also brought his faith into question.

Herod died in 4BC after an excruciatingly painful internal disease which had once driven him to attempt suicide. Following his death there were riots in many cities including Jerusalem as the pent up anger was released. Herod was succeeded by three of his sons as specified in his will and ratified by Augustus. Herod Archelaus was appointed as ethnarch of Judea, Samaria and Idumea (Edom). It was this appointment that caused Joseph to go to Nazareth in Galilee (Matt2:22). Archelaus was judged incompetent and removed from office to be replaced by a Roman prefect. This was the position later held by Pontius Pilate. Herod Antipas was made tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea, and Philip became tetrarch of territories north and east of the Jordan. Herod Antipas was the ruler who interrogated Jesus before his crucifixion (Luke23:6-12). He was also responsible for the arrest and execution of John the Baptist (Matt14, Mk6, Lke3).

Pontius Pilate became the fifth Judean prefect, later procurator, in 26AD and ruled until 36 or 37AD. He had a mixed relationship with the Jews. He appointed Caiaphas as High Priest for the whole of his rule and must have co-operated with the priests in building his aqueduct. Josephus' account of Jesus death suggests Pilate was working closely with the Jewish authorities. Pilate offended the Jews by bringing imperial standards into Jerusalem, probably by night. A crowd surrounded Pilate's house in Caesarea for five days, Pilate invited them to an arena and then faced them with soldiers with drawn swords. The crowd would not back down and Pilate removed the standards. It is also recorded that Pilate brought golden shields into Jerusalem and placed them on Herod's palace. Herod's sons asked him to remove them, but Pilate refused and then tried to bluff the sons when they threatened to petition the emperor. The petition went ahead and the emperor reprimanded Pilate and ordered him to remove the shields. Josephus also records an incident when a mob was beaten with clubs by Roman troops at Pilate's order. In Luke, Jesus is told about ***“the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.” (Lke13:1)***, Pilate is recorded in the Bible as ordering the death of Jesus (Matt27:11ff, Mk11, Lke23, Jn18:28ff).

Annas was the first High Priest appointed by Quirinius in 6AD when Judea came under direct Roman rule. He served until 15AD but maintained influence through his five sons and his sons-in-law, one of whom was Caiaphas. High Priests were appointed under Jewish law for life (Nu35:25,28), but the Roman prefects did not follow Jewish law. This may however explain why Luke names two, Annas and Caiaphas (Lke3:2). Annas is implicated in the plot to kill Lazarus (Jn12:10). John also records that Jesus was brought first before Annas before being interrogated by Caiaphas (Jn18:19-23).

Caiaphas was High Priest from about 14 or 18-46AD. He was the son-in-law of Annas by marriage to Annas' daughter (Jn18:13). There is some evidence to suggest that Caiaphas sympathised with the Sadducees and a suggestion that he is the rich man in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. He is also implicated in the plot to kill the real Lazarus (Jn12:10). Caiaphas is the High Priest who is largely responsible for Jesus' interrogation and for involving the Roman authorities in the trial and execution of Jesus (Jn18:24,28). Caiaphas' opposition to the followers of Jesus continues into the Acts of the Apostles.

Two opposing politico-religious groups existed in Judea during this time. The Pharisees and Sadducees. These two groups had several issues of contention between them. Firstly, they tended to come from different strata of society with the Pharisees being laymen and scribes, whereas the Sadducees were centred around the high priesthood. Secondly the Pharisees were very keen to protect the specific Jewish identity, whilst the Sadducees were much more open to the Greek influence on society. The fundamental differences between the two were, however, religious. The Pharisees accepted both the written Torah (first five books of the Bible) and the teachings of the prophets and the oral traditions of the Jewish people. They adapted the Torah for new circumstances, interpreting it according to reason and conscience. The Sadducees accepted only the written law and viewed it as the only source of revelation. The Sadducees based their religious duties around the Temple and its sacrifices, while the Pharisees emphasised prayer and study of the Law and developed and supported the synagogues. Both groups opposed Jesus, but ostensibly for different reasons.

The scribes (teachers of the law) were a separate group which may well have included Pharisees (and possibly Sadducees). They studied the Law and resolved disputes and drew up contracts. Most villages or small towns would have at least one scribe. Both scribes, emphasised in Mark and Pharisees, emphasised in Matthew, would have been able to question Jesus about his interpretation of the Law and both are seen as significant opposition in Galilee, sometimes singly, at other times making common cause. Jesus' authority is contrasted with that of the scribes (Matt7:29, Mk1:22).

The Zealots were a political group who opposed, often violently, the Roman occupation. They were founded in 6AD to oppose the tax reforms of Quirinius. They were committed to overthrowing the Romans and to cleansing the Jewish people of Roman collaborators. They became a significant group during the first Jewish-Roman War in 66-73AD. One of the disciples, Simon, is described as a Zealot (Lke6:15).

The Essenes, although not mentioned in the Bible, were a religious sect who were smaller in number than the Pharisees or Sadducees. They numbered a few thousand, spread throughout Judea according to some and in a community near the Dead Sea according to others. They were pious, believed in community property and living, were charitable and studious and their priests were celibate. They are best known today for their supposed library which we know as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Some have speculated that John the Baptist (and maybe Jesus himself) spent time with them.