

Knowing Jesus through the Gospels

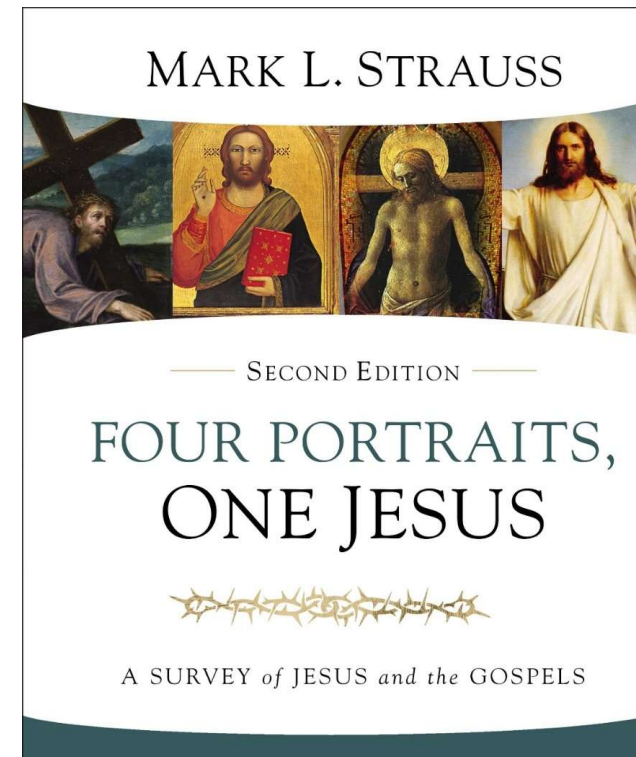
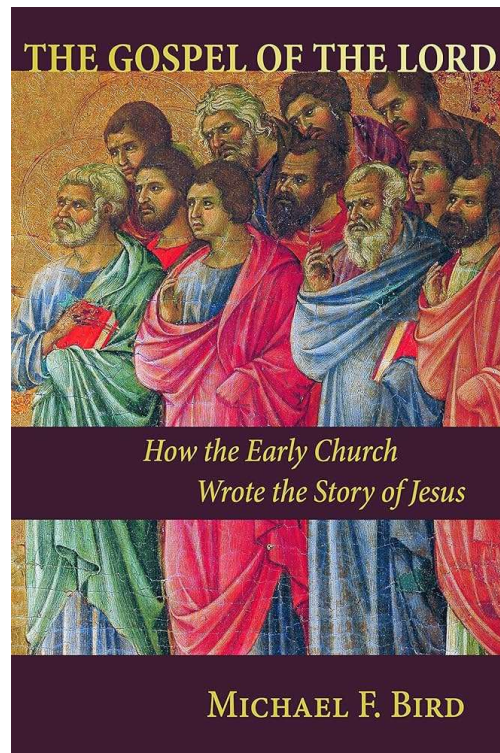
Week 1: Introduction

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Eastside Church of Christ

When you hear “Gospel of Matthew,” what comes to mind?

What about Mark or Luke or John?



The overall purpose of this class is to strengthen your faith



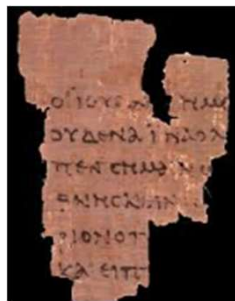
Matthew



Mark



Luke



John

**Knowing about Jesus through
the four portraits in the Gospels**



**Knowing Jesus personally
and deeply**

Here is the current outline for this series

Week 1. Introduction

Week 2. Mark

Week 3. Matthew

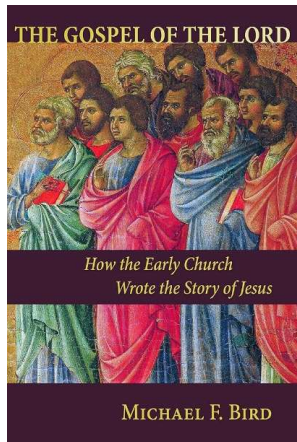
Week 4. Luke

Week 5. John

Week 6. Key themes and comparisons

Week 7. Conclusions

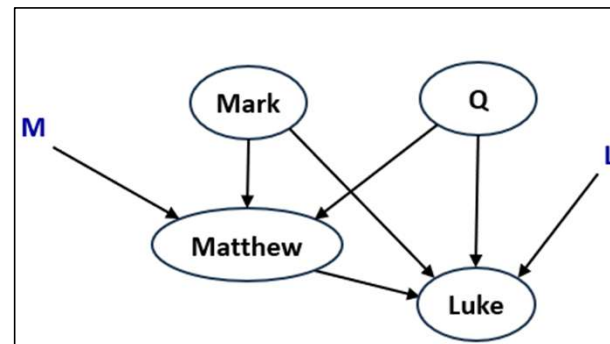
This evening, I will present an overview of the four gospels



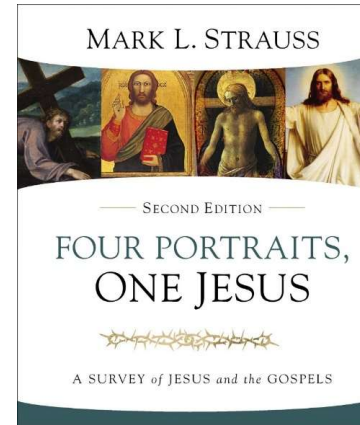
Genre and history



The "other" Gospels



Synoptic problem



High level comparison

The Gospels are ancient biographies (“*bioi*”), but with a distinct theological purpose

Classical scholars (e.g., Richard Burridge, a leading authority) have shown that the Gospels match the structure of Greco-Roman *bioi*, which were:

- Focused on a significant person
- Highlighted defining actions and teachings
- Less concerned with strict chronology
- Aimed to reveal character and significance

Examples of ancient *bioi*:

- Plutarch’s *Lives*
- Xenophon’s *Agesilaus*
- Suetonius’ *Lives of the Caesars*

Ancient biographies differ from modern ones

Modern biographies:

- Aim for complete life coverage
- Emphasize psychological development
- Require precise chronology

Ancient biographies (*bioi*):

- Selected episodes, not exhaustive
- Arranged for meaning, not timeline
- Focused on the subject's identity and moral example
- Often ended with the subject's death (as climactic point)

The ancient world was largely an oral culture and not a written one, so the Gospels grew out of a living oral tradition

| Feature | Evidence |
|---|--|
| Culture of memory | Rabbinic training, Jewish oral tradition |
| Early traditions | 1 Cor 15:3-5 creed; Luke 1:1-2 prologue |
| Classic markers of oral pedagogy | Parables, aphorisms (pithy sayings), parallelism, chiasm, repetition, wordplay, striking imagery |
| Reliability | Eyewitness presence, community checks, apostolic oversight |

The Gospels stand on a solid oral foundation. Before anything was written, the story of Jesus was faithfully remembered, preached, and taught in the early church.

Oral cultures emphasized accuracy more than modern people assume

Anthropological studies of oral societies show they can preserve large blocks of material with astonishing fidelity because:

- They use memory aids
- Traditions are repeated communally
- There are sanctions for altering them
- Elders correct deviations

In Jewish culture, memorization was even more rigorous.

So early Christians were not improvising — they were preserving.

Oral cultures are not like the “telephone game.”

The preservation of the Jesus tradition is supported by:

- **The disciples' role as committed learners in a culture that valued memorization and oral instruction**
- **The repetitive nature of Jesus' teaching**
- **The early church's controls on transmission**
- **The uniformity of Gospel traditions despite geographic spread**
- **The same core teachings appear in multiple, independent sources**
- **The relatively early writing of the Gospels (within living memory)**

There are a number of reasons the oral tradition was finally written down

- 1. The eyewitnesses were aging or dying**
- 2. The church was expanding rapidly, so distant churches needed stable, authoritative accounts of Jesus' life and teaching**
- 3. Persecution increased, so written Gospels provided durability and consistency if leaders were arrested or killed**
- 4. To preserve authoritative teaching against distortion and heresies that were arising**

The earliest known fixed Christian canon was proposed by the heretic Marcion (~AD 140 – 160)

His basic view:

- The God of the OT was not the same as the loving Father revealed by Jesus.

His canon was very small

- An edited version of **Luke**
- **10 letters of Paul** (excluding 1 Tim, 2 Tim, Titus)
- He rejected:
 - the entire **Old Testament**
 - **Matthew, Mark, John, Acts**
 - **1–2 Timothy, Titus**
 - **Hebrews, James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude, Revelation**

Why he matters:

- Marcion forced the church to reaffirm the Old Testament.
- His challenge helped push the church to clarify the NT canon.

Let's briefly discuss the early church's criteria for a book to be part of the Biblical canon

1. Apostolic Authority

- The books must be written by an apostle or a close associate of an apostle.

2. Orthodoxy (the right teaching)

- The book must agree with the core teachings already accepted by the church.
- Consistency with the teaching of Jesus, the Old Testament, and the “rule of faith” (early summary of Christian belief).

3. Catholicity (widespread use)

- Must be widely used across many churches, not just in one region.
- Read in worship gatherings, teaching and preaching.

4. Antiquity (early origin)

- The book must be written in the apostolic age (1st century).
- Later writings (2nd century and beyond) were rejected.

The church did not *create* the canon—it recognized the books that were already widely used, trusted, and apostolic.

Most New Testament books were widely accepted by the 2nd century

A formal list matching our 27 books appears in Athanasius' Easter Letter (367 AD)

Councils of Hippo (393 AD) and Carthage (397 AD) confirmed what was already broadly recognized

1. The Muratorian Fragment (~170–200 AD)

Earliest surviving canon list (fragmentary)

Includes:

- 4 Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John)
- Acts
- 13 letters of Paul
- Jude
- 1–2 John (possibly 3 John unclear)
- Revelation

Excludes or omits:

- Hebrews
- James
- 1–2 Peter

Also includes (but disputed):

- Apocalypse of Peter
- Wisdom of Solomon

The church did not *create* the canon—it recognized the books that were already widely used, trusted, and apostolic.

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2. Irenaeus (~180 AD)

(Not a formal list, but very important)

Affirms:

- Exactly four Gospels (no more, no less)
- Most of the NT books

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3. Origen (~250 AD)

First to clearly categorize books.

Recognized (widely accepted):

- 4 Gospels
- Acts
- Paul's letters
- 1 Peter
- 1 John
- Revelation

Disputed:

- Hebrews
- James
- 2 Peter
- 2-3 John
- Jude

The church did not *create* the canon—it recognized the books that were already widely used, trusted, and apostolic.

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Councils of Hippo (393 AD) and Carthage (397 AD) confirmed what was already broadly recognized

4. Eusebius (~325 AD)

Provides the clearest early classification.

Accepted:

- 4 Gospels
- Acts
- Paul's letters
- 1 Peter
- 1 John

Disputed:

- James
- Jude
- 2 Peter
- 2-3 John

Rejected:

- Gospel of Thomas
- Gospel of Peter
- Other apocryphal writings

The church did not *create* the canon—it recognized the books that were already widely used, trusted, and apostolic.

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Athanasius (367 AD)

Canonical books (matched our 27 books of the NT)

Books to be read by new believers, but not part of the canon

- Wisdom of Solomon
- Sirach
- Esther
- Judith
- Tobit
- **Didache**
- Shepherd of Hermas

Apocryphal writings to be rejected

Athanasius warns against books invented by heretics and says they should not be placed alongside Scripture.

Let's look at some of the other "Gospels"

What other "Gospels" are you familiar with?



Gospel of Thomas



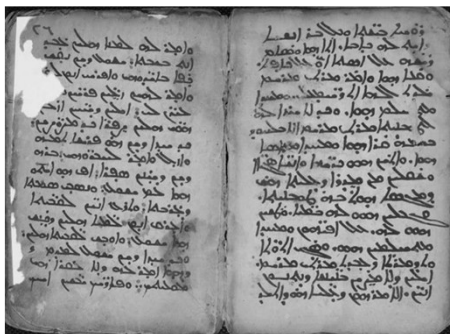
Gospel of Peter



Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)



Gospel of Judas



Infancy Gospel of Thomas



Protoevangelium of James



Gospel of Truth

The Gospel of Thomas

Date: ~140–180 AD (some argue earlier)

Type: Sayings gospel (114 sayings of Jesus, no narrative)

Themes:

- Secret knowledge (gnosis)
- Self-discovery → salvation
- Kingdom is internal, not historical

Why rejected:

- Lacks historical narrative (no cross/resurrection)
- Gnostic tendencies (salvation through special/secret knowledge)
- Likely too late to be apostolic



The Gospel of Peter

Date: ~150–200 AD

Type: Passion narrative

Themes:

- **Dramatic resurrection (talking cross, giant angels)**
- **Downplays Jesus' suffering (docetic tendencies)**

Why rejected:

- **Unhistorical embellishments**
- **Suggests Jesus didn't truly suffer physically**
- **Not tied to reliable apostolic tradition**



The Gospel of Mary (Mary Magdalene)

Date: ~150–200 AD

Type: Dialogue/vision account

Themes:

- Mary as privileged recipient of revelation
- Inner spiritual ascent
- Conflict with Peter

Why rejected:

- Gnostic worldview
- Elevates private revelation over apostolic witness
- Late composition



The Gospel of Judas

Date: ~150–180 AD

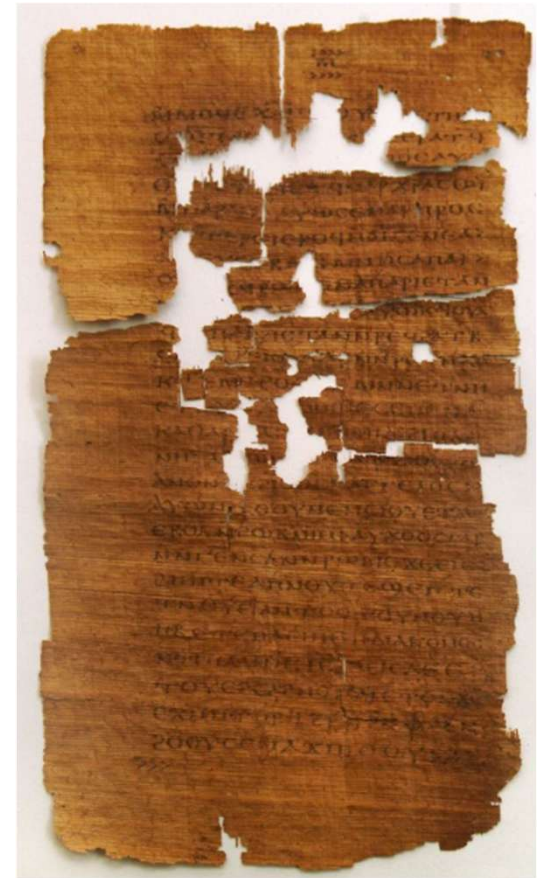
Type: Dialogue gospel

Themes:

- **Judas as the “hero” who understands Jesus**
- **Strong dualism (spirit vs material world)**

Why rejected:

- **Reverses core Gospel message**
- **Gnostic theology**
- **Contradicts earliest apostolic teaching**



Infancy Gospel of Thomas

Date: ~150–200 AD

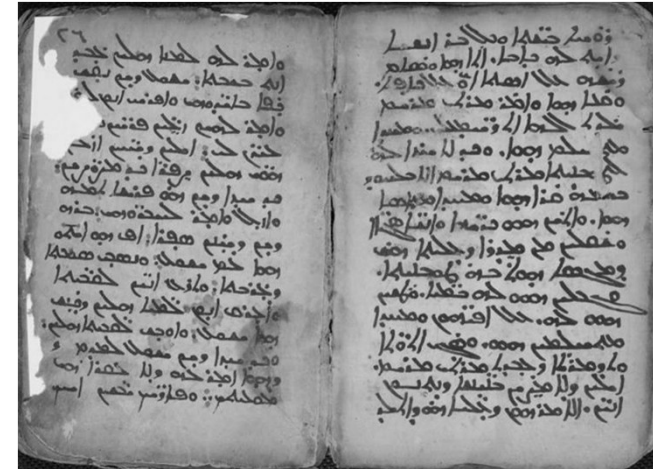
Type: Childhood stories of Jesus

Themes:

- Miraculous child Jesus (sometimes harsh or capricious)
- Entertaining, legendary stories

Why rejected:

- Legendary, not historical
- Portrayal of Jesus inconsistent with canonical Gospels
- No apostolic grounding



Protoevangelium of James

Date: ~150 AD

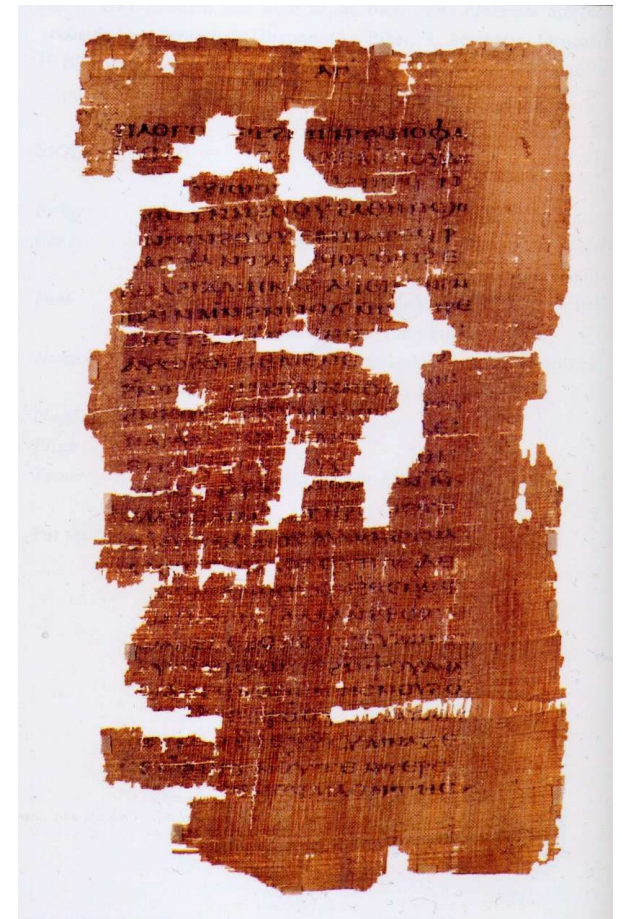
Type: Birth/childhood of Mary and Jesus

Themes:

- **Mary's early life and perpetual virginity**
- **Elaborates nativity story**

Why rejected (as Scripture):

- **Late and legendary expansions**
- **Not written by James**
- **Some influence on tradition, but not canonical**



Gospel of Truth

Date: ~140–180 AD

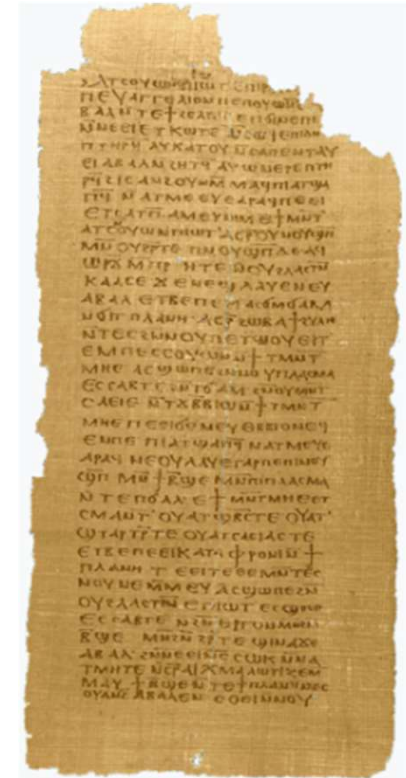
Type: Theological meditation (not narrative)

Themes:

- Salvation through knowledge
- Mystical interpretation of Jesus

Why rejected:

- Clearly Gnostic
- Not a historical account of Jesus
- Detached from apostolic teaching



Now let's look at the canonical Gospels: The Gospel of Mark

Date: ~AD 60–70

Type: Narrative gospel (fast-paced, action-oriented)

Themes:

- **Jesus as the Suffering Servant (Mark 10:45)**
- **Urgency (“immediately”)**
- **Discipleship = taking up the cross**
- **The “Messianic Secret”**

Distinctives:

- **Shortest Gospel (16 chapters)**
- **Vivid, eyewitness-like detail**
- **Emphasis on actions more than long teachings**



Why accepted:

- **Closely tied to Peter's preaching (early church testimony)**
- **Early date and widespread use**
- **Consistent with apostolic teaching**

The Gospel of Matthew

Date: ~AD 70–85

Type: Narrative + teaching gospel (structured)

Themes:

- **Jesus as the Messiah and King**
- **Fulfillment of the Old Testament (“This was to fulfill...”)**
- **The Kingdom of Heaven**
- **Jesus as the New Moses**

Distinctives:

- **Five major teaching discourses**
- **Strong Jewish context (genealogy, law, prophecy)**
- **Includes key teachings such as the Sermon on the Mount**



Why accepted:

- **Strong early association with the apostle Matthew**
- **Deep continuity with the OT**
- **Widely used in teaching and worship**
- **Early date**

The Gospel of Luke

Date: ~AD 70–85

Type: Narrative gospel (historical, orderly account)

Themes:

- **Jesus as Savior for all people**
- **Concern for outsiders (poor, women, sinners, Gentiles)**
- **Emphasis on the Holy Spirit and prayer**
- **Joy and reversal (the humble lifted up)**

Distinctives:

- **Most detailed birth narratives**
- **Many unique parables (Good Samaritan, Prodigal Son)**
- **Part 1 of a two-volume work (Luke–Acts)**



Why accepted:

- **Strong early association with the apostle Paul**
- **Orthodox teaching**
- **Widespread use in the early church**
- **Early date**

The Gospel of John

Date: ~AD 80–95

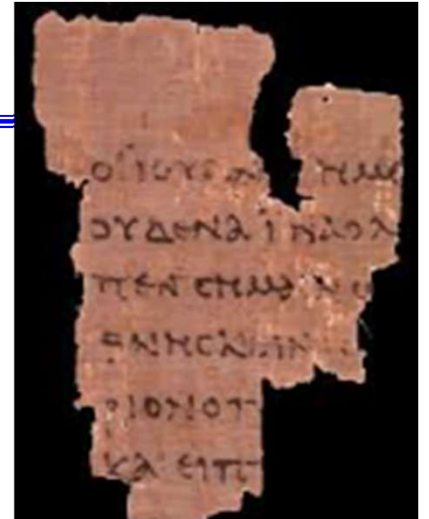
Type: Theological narrative (focused on identity and belief)

Themes:

- Jesus as the Son of God
- Belief → eternal life (John 20:31)
- Light vs. darkness
- Intimate relationship with the Father

Distinctives:

- “I am” statements
- Seven signs
- Long discourses (esp. John 13–17)
- More reflective and theological style



Why accepted:

- Strong early testimony linking it to the apostle John
- Clear theological purpose rooted in eyewitness tradition
- Widely received across the early church

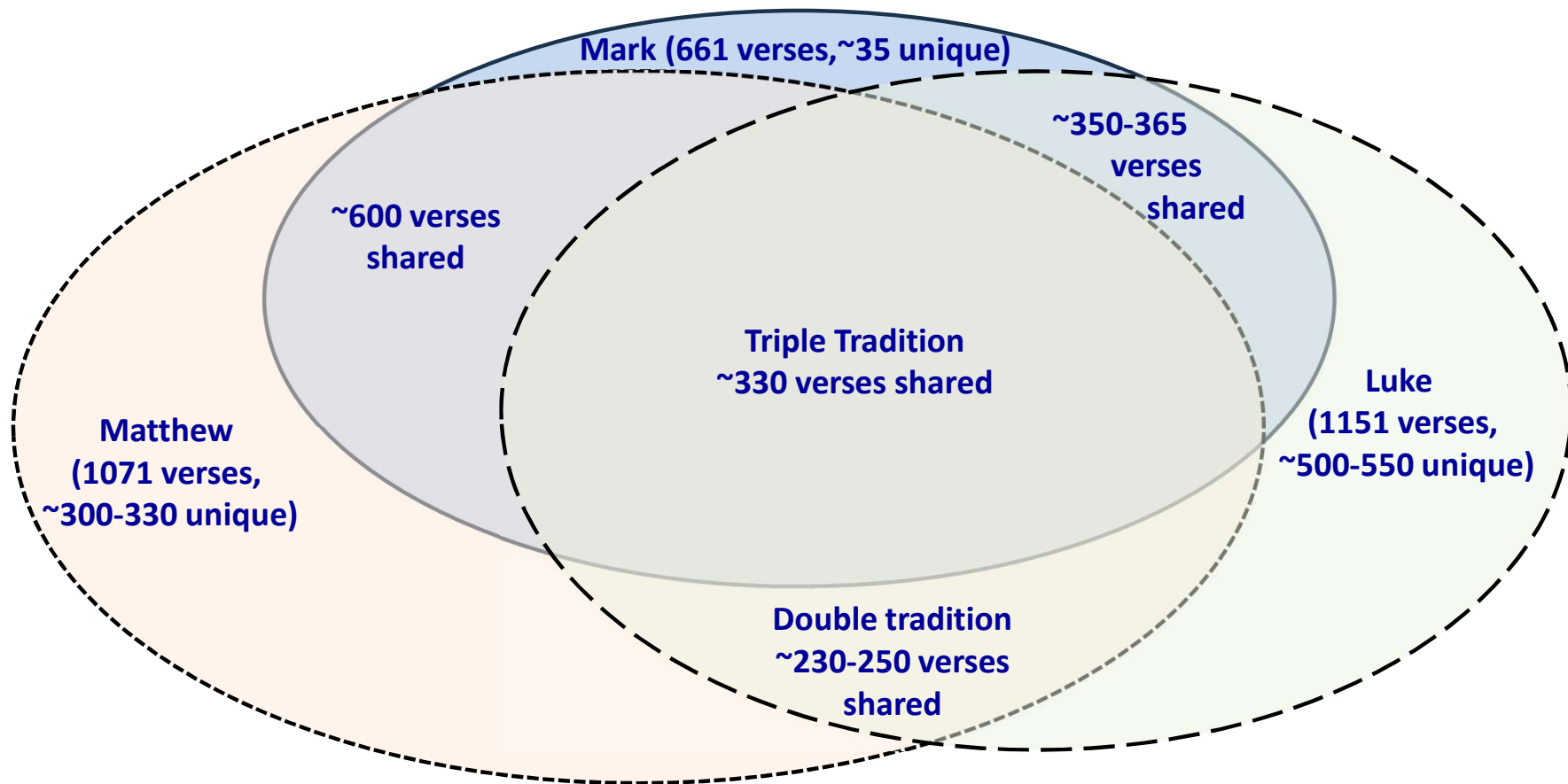
I would like to briefly discuss the “synoptic problem”

The synoptic problem asks, “Why are Matthew, Mark, and Luke (the so-called ‘synoptic gospels’) so similar in content, structure, and wording — yet also different in important ways?”

- They often agree verbatim in Greek.**
- They share the same stories, sometimes in the same order.**
- But each also contains unique material.**

A literary relationship between the Gospels is likely because oral tradition does not account for the strong verbal and structural correspondences that we find in the Gospels.

The synoptic gospels have a lot of shared material



Let's look at some passages that seem to show a literary dependence

| Matthew 19:13-14 | Mark 10:13-14 | Luke 18:15-16 |
|--|--|--|
| <p>¹³ Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, ¹⁴ but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."</p> | <p>¹³ And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God."</p> | <p>¹⁵ Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. ¹⁶ But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God."</p> |

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Could be explained by writing down an oral tradition, but the Greek is identical in places

Parenthetical statements appear in multiple Gospels

Mark 13:14

¹⁴ “But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be (let the reader understand), ...

Matt 14:15

¹⁵ “So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand) ...

Mark 5:7-9

⁷ And crying out with a loud voice, he said, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” ⁸ For he was saying to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” ⁹ And Jesus asked him,

Luke 8:28-29

²⁸ When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell down before him and said with a loud voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.” ²⁹ For he had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. ...
³⁰ Jesus then asked him,

There is only one parenthetical statement that appears in all three Gospels

| Mark 15:22 | Matt 27:33 | Luke 23:33 |
|--|--|---|
| <p>²² And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull).</p> | <p>³³ And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull),</p> | <p>³³ And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him ...</p> |

There are OT quotes that agree with each other but not the Septuagint or the Masoretic text

Isa 40:3 (MT,DSS)

A voice cries in the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for **our God**.

Isa 40:3 (LXX)

The voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight the paths of **our God**”

Mark 1:3

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make **his** paths straight.’”

Matt 3:3

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make **his** paths straight.’”

Luke 3:4

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make **his** paths straight.’”

There are several major theories to address the synoptic problem

1. Augustinian Hypothesis (Traditional)

- Order: Matthew → Mark → Luke
- Mark is seen as an abridgment of Matthew
- Held widely until the 18th century

2. Griesbach Hypothesis (Two-Gospel Hypothesis)

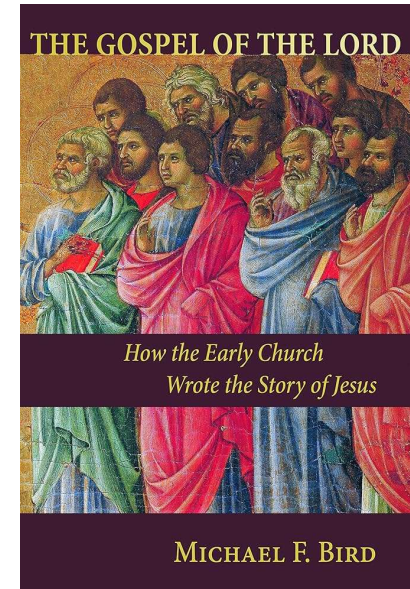
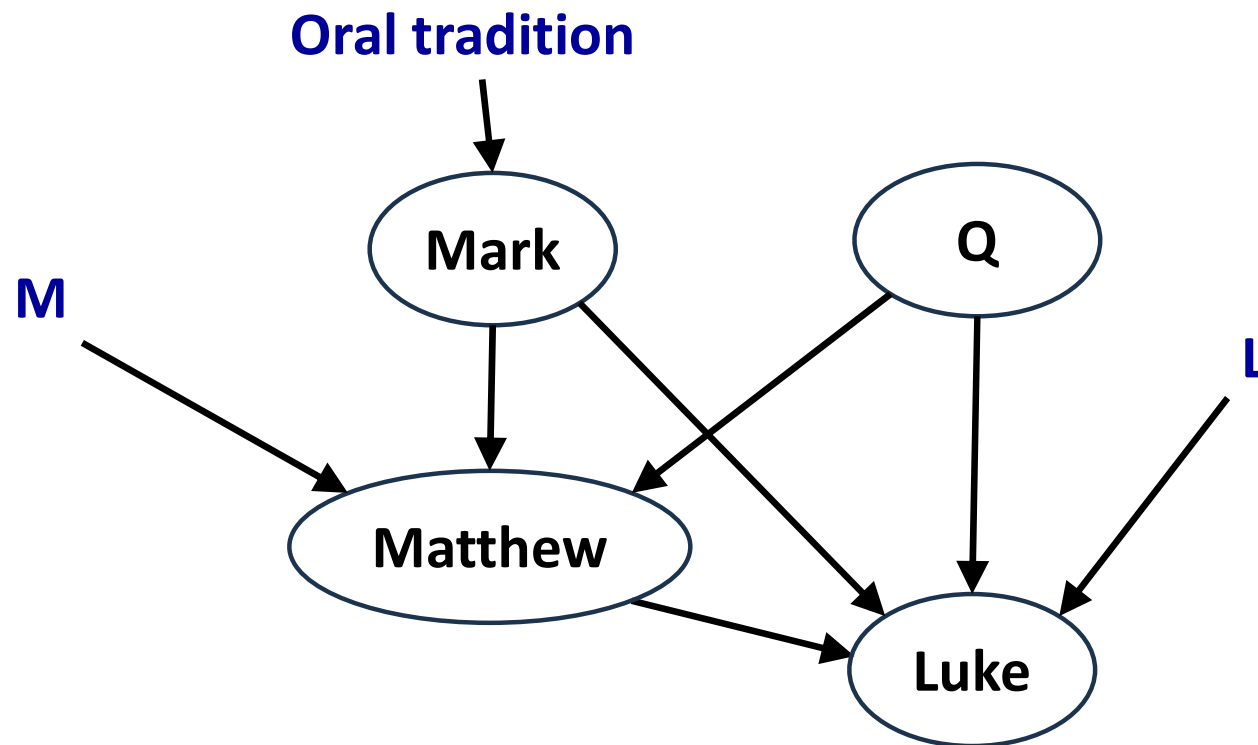
- Order: Matthew → Luke → Mark
- Mark conflates Matthew and Luke

3. A common oral tradition, but all were independent

4. Two-source (four-source) Hypothesis (most widely accepted today)

- Mark written first (Markan priority)
- Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source
- Both also drew from a hypothetical sayings source called “Q”
- Explains shared material not in Mark (such as the Lord’s Prayer)

Here is a visual representation of a modified two-source (four-source) hypothesis (from *The Gospel of the Lord ...* by Bird)



I'll discuss this more when I discuss the Gospel of Mark

When reading any book of the Bible, you should always ask the following questions





Who is the author?

When was it written?

Who was it written to?


**What is the book's
main purpose?**

Let's look at the book of Mark


- Who is the author?** (most likely)  **John Mark**
- When was it written?** (most likely)  **AD 60-70**
- Who was it written to?**  **Gentile Christians in Rome**
- What is the book's main purpose?** 
 - To present Jesus as the Son of God (1:1) and the suffering servant (10:45)
 - To emphasize discipleship through suffering

Let's look at the book of Matthew

Who is the author? ^(most likely)  **Matthew (Levi) - tax collector, apostle**

When was it written? ^(most likely)  **AD 70 – 85**


Who was it written to?  **Jewish Christians, likely in Syria**

What is the book's main purpose? 


- **To present Jesus as the promised Messiah and fulfillment of the Old Testament**
- **To portray Jesus as the new Moses and authoritative teacher of the Kingdom**
- **To instruct the church in discipleship and righteousness**

Let's look at the book of Luke

Who is the author?  ^(most likely) **Luke, a physician and companion of Paul**

When was it written?  ^(most likely) **AD 60 – 80**

Who was it written to?  **Theophilus, a Gentile Christian audience**

What is the book's main purpose? 


- **To give an orderly, researched account of Jesus' life**
- **To show that Jesus brings salvation for all people**
- **To highlight the role of the Holy Spirit, prayer, and joy in God's plan**

Let's look at the book of John

Who is the author? ^(most likely)  John the son of Zebedee, the “beloved disciple”

When was it written? ^(most likely)  AD 80 – 95

Who was it written to?  Believers (and seekers) in Asia Minor

What is the book's main purpose? 

- Stated purpose: “that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31)
- To present Jesus with a strong emphasis on his divine identity

Here is a comparison of the Synoptic Gospels in terms of miracles

| Category | Matthew (1,071 verses) | Mark (678 verses) | Luke (1,151 verses) | John (879 verses) |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| % of Mark | ~90% of Mark's verses | — (baseline) | ~55-60% of Mark's verses | NA |
| Healings | ~10 | ~11-13 | ~13-15 | ~3 |
| Nature Miracles | ~6 (e.g., calming storm, feeding) | ~4-6 | ~4-5 | ~3-4 |
| Exorcisms | ~3 | ~4-7 | ~4-7 | 0 |

Here is a comparison of the Gospels

| Category | Matthew (1,071 verses) | Mark (678 verses) | Luke (1,151 verses) | John (879 verses) |
|------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Parables | ~23 total (11 unique) | ~8 total (2 unique) | ~24 total (18 unique) | NA |
| Long Discourses | 5 major (Sermon on the Mount, Mission Discourse, Parables, Church Life, Olivet Discourse) | Very few; mostly short teachings | Several extended sections (Sermon on the Plain, Travel Narrative, Olivet Discourse) | Several major discourses (e.g., Bread of Life, Good Shepherd, Light of the World, Upper Room Discourse). |
| Unique Material | Birth narrative, Sermon on the Mount, Great Commission | Two-stage healing of blind man, healing of deaf-mute, young man fleeing naked | Infancy narrative, Good Samaritan, Prodigal Son, Rich Man & Lazarus, Emmaus Road | Lots! Water to wine, Nicodemus, Samaritan woman, raising of Lazarus, washing disciples' feet, many 'I am' sayings, etc. |

Differences between the Gospels

| Category | Mark | Matthew | Luke | John |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Length | Shortest (16 ch.) | 28 ch. | 24 ch. (most verses) | 21 ch. |
| Beginning | Baptism of Jesus | Genealogy & birth | Infancy narratives | Eternal Word |
| Style | Fast-paced, urgent | Structured, teaching | Historical, orderly | Theological, signs, “I am” sayings |
| Teaching | Few parables, short | Long discourses | Many parables | Long dialogues and discourses |
| Disciples | Often fail & misunderstand | More positive | Mixed portrayal | Small circle, intimate scenes |
| Messianic Secret | Strong emphasis | Less prominent | Less prominent | Absent |
| Jesus’ Portrait | Powerful yet human | New Moses, fulfillment | Universal Savior | Eternal Word/Son, reveals the Father |
| Passion | Proportionally longest | Strong focus | Strong focus | Strong focus |
| Resurrection | Abrupt (16:8) | Great Commission | Emmaus & Ascension | Multiple appearances |

Let's compare how the Gospels portray Jesus

| Mark - Suffering servant & Son of God | Matthew - New Moses & fulfillment of the Law | Luke - Universal savior & friend of the outcast | John – Eternal Word and revealer of the Father |
|---|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rooted in Isaiah's Servant Songs (Isa 42; 53)• Key verse: Mark 10:45 ("to serve... give his life as a ransom")• Passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34)• Identity revealed at the cross (15:39)• Discipleship = taking up the cross (8:34) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emphasis on fulfillment: "This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet" (over a dozen times)• Five major teaching discourses (paralleling the Torah)• Sermon on the Mount: Jesus as authoritative Law-giver• Strong Jewish flavor: genealogy through Abraham & David | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unique parables of compassion: Good Samaritan (10:25–37), Prodigal Son (15:11–32)• Focus on the poor, women, Gentiles, sinners• Emphasis on the Holy Spirit and prayer• Jesus as Savior for all nations (2:30–32)• Genealogy through Adam and God | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• High Christology: "in the beginning was the Word..."• Key verse: John 20:31 ("so that you may believe and have life")• Extended dialogues and discourses• Seven "signs"• Seven "I am" sayings• Emphasis on love and unity (13–17) |

These are the four portraits of Jesus that I will be discussing

| Mark | Matthew | Luke | John |
|--|---------------------------|--|--|
| The Gospel of the suffering Son of God | The Gospel of the Messiah | The Gospel of the Savior of all people | The Gospel of the eternal Son who reveals the Father |
| Most dramatic | Most structured | Most thematic | Most theological |

Which of these portraits has been most meaningful to you personally?

Application for today: Learn to listen to each Gospel on its own terms.

Homework

Read Mark (~90 minutes or 20–25 minutes per day for 4 days)

- Look for reactions to Jesus (amazed, afraid, confused, hostile, etc.)
- Notice words like “suddenly,” “immediately,” “at once” (εὐθύς (euthys))
- Notice disciples’ misunderstandings
- Notice verses where Jesus explains his purpose/mission

Questions you have or would like me to address?

- About Mark?
- About any of the Gospels?