

# INTRODUCTION TO THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JESUS THE MESSIAH

## Authors of the Gospels<sup>1</sup>

### Matthew

Matthew was one of the original twelve disciples called and trained by Jesus and thus an eyewitness to the events of which he writes. He was a tax collector for the Romans, and his orderly record reflects the mind of an accountant. Matthew groups the Gospel materials thematically. Writing to a Jewish audience, he begins with a genealogy demonstrating that Jesus is the legal descendant of both Abraham and David. Matthew relies heavily on the Old Testament, depicting Jesus as the long-awaited Messianic king envisioned by the prophets. His key phrase is, “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet.”

### Mark

Tradition tells us that Mark the son of Mary wrote this Gospel (Acts 12:25). Mark was not one of the Twelve, but was a cousin of Barnabas, the apostle Paul’s companion on his first missionary journey (Acts 13:2). He may have been the young man who fled naked at Jesus’ arrest (Mark 14:51-52). Mark had wide knowledge of Jesus’ life through the disciple Peter, with whom he ministered (1 Peter 5:13). He begins his Gospel with Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist. He is believed to have written for a Roman audience, and portrays Jesus as a man of supernatural power who demonstrated His divine nature through miracles. Mark has given us a capsule of Jesus’ life focused on what Jesus did rather than on what He said. His fast moving account represents Jesus’ work and ministry in vivid snapshots introduced by the key word “straightaway” or “immediately.”

### Luke

Most scholars accept that Luke (the “beloved physician” of Colossians 4:14) was the author of this book. Luke is thought to have been Greek, and wrote his account for a Gentile audience. He was a companion of the apostle Paul on his various missionary journeys, and would have cared for Paul’s physical needs on these journeys. Luke’s account is notable for its logical and orderly presentation. He begins his Gospel by

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<sup>1</sup>Dawson, David L., Dawson, D.R., and Pattillo, Matthew. *The Life of Christ: A Visual Survey* (Greenville, TX: Great Commission Publishing, 2002), 2-3.

representing John the Baptist as the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy of a forerunner to the Messiah. Jesus is Himself portrayed as the prophesied Messiah of the Jews and the universal Savior of the world. Luke focuses on the humanity of Jesus, a loving and caring teacher who reached out to the poor, weak, and outcast of society. Luke alone among the Gospel writers includes a dedication, where he explains that he has personally examined every detail of Jesus' life so that Theophilus, the book's recipient, can be absolutely certain of the truth about Him.

## John

John was one of the original twelve disciples trained by Jesus. He was a fisherman and a brother to the disciple James. John describes himself in his Gospel as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Where the other Gospels walk the reader through events in the life of Jesus, John's Gospel takes as a starting point Christ with God before the world began and develops a more theological and evangelistic presentation of His life and mission. His expressed purpose is "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). John deals more comprehensively with what Jesus *said* than with what He *did*, and tries to guide the reader to the logical conclusion that Jesus was God incarnate — the God who became flesh and dwelt among us.

## New Testament History<sup>2</sup>

The New Testament writers lived at a time when the art of historical literature was beginning to flower. The historians of Greece and Rome have left us interesting accounts of their cultures.

But New Testament history is more than a cultural report. It is a record of God's \_\_\_\_\_<sup>3</sup> with mankind through the life of a man from Nazareth named Jesus.

**A. The Gospels.** The Gospels have no exact parallels in ancient literature. None of the usual literary categories fit them.

They are not heroic narratives. The heroic narrative is a single unified story—i.e., there is one plot. The structure of a gospel is more fragmented. Its elements may be rearranged or even omitted without damaging the movement of the narrative.

<sup>2</sup>Packer, J., Tenney, M.C., & White, W. (1997, ©1995). *Nelson's illustrated manners and customs of the Bible* (354-358). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

<sup>3</sup>interaction

In this respect, the Gospels more closely parallel the structure of a chronicle, such as we saw in the histories of the Old Testament. Certainly the gospel genre parallels the *concept of history* found in these documents. Yet the Old Testament chronicles focus on the story of the nation (kingdom), whereas the Gospels focus on an individual or *protagonist* (main character).

The biographies of the Old Testament (e.g., that of Elijah) bear some similarities to the Gospels. But they lack the extended discourses and the parabolic devices so prominent in the Gospels. Also, the Old Testament biographies are intertwined into the overall structure of the “history of the kingdom.” The Gospels cannot be called biography since they lack the detailed reconstruction of the life of the subject. Indeed, vast stretches of Jesus’ life story are missing—elements that would be indispensable in a biography. Certainly the Gospels are not tragedy. Although the main character faces much tragedy and ultimately dies, these accounts do not conform to the structure of tragedy. Jesus is not overcome by uncontrollable fate; He is in complete control of every moment and circumstance. He voluntarily goes to His death, and not as a defeated hero. His death is His victory. It is not the result of a tragic moral decision on His part, but it is the climactic step of His consciously chosen way to triumph and glorification. In tragic literature, the hero is admired because he accepts a defeat pressed upon him in spite of his undeserving character. How different from the plot set forth in the Gospels!

Certainly the Gospels are more than theological treatises. To be sure, each Gospel presents a slightly different portrait of Jesus. But the Gospels lack that systematic discussion of a given theme or themes, which typifies the theological treatise.

Neither are the Gospels essays, since the essay lacks the ever-present narrative thread so prominent in the Gospels. The Gospels bear some similarity to the classical history, except that their speeches do not follow the stylistic patterns of Greek rhetoric. Like the history of the book of Acts, the Gospels are religious history or religious biography. The distinctive literary quality of Jesus’ discourses shows that they originated with a single highly creative personality.<sup>4</sup>

**1. Jesus as a Literary Character.** As a literary character, Jesus is unique. In a heroic narrative, the main character is merely exemplary. What he does and what happens to him is held up as a pattern for all people. In the Gospels, however, Jesus is depicted as more than a human example. He is God incarnate who forgives sin, promises salvation to all who believe in Him, and performs miracles—literary themes foreign to heroic narrative.

In mythological narrative tales, the divine or semi-divine protagonist is a literary fiction—i.e., not an actual real-life character. Jesus is clearly a different kind of

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<sup>4</sup>Ryken, Leland. *The Literature of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 291–314.

protagonist. He is an actual historical figure immersed in real life. Since this depiction was published very close to the time of His ministry, it would have been folly for the gospel writers to try to present fiction as fact, and there is no solid reason to think they did so. The Gospels show us Jesus as He was.

As a literary figure, Jesus is an anti-hero. He is neither a political king nor a military victor, but a suffering servant and a dying (but victorious) Messiah.

**2. Literary Features of the Gospels.** What then are the literary characteristics of a gospel? A gospel is a collection of stories that are unique in the great amount of action they set forth. Their purpose is to publish the facts and meaning of Jesus' life as well as to praise Him. There are many forms used in the gospel. First, there is narrative, extending in complexity from a simple, bare outline of events to an extended presentation of details surrounding events (e.g., Matt. 27). Dialogue appears with the same wide degree of complexity (e.g., Matt. 13:10–17). The gospel also frequently employs discourses or speeches (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 or the Olivet discourse in Matthew 24).

The final prominent device is the *parable*. A *parable* may be a story illustrating a single point, in which the details have no meaning (Matt. 13:33), or a story illustrating a major point and perhaps other minor points, in which the details are meaningful (e.g., Matt. 13:36–43).<sup>5</sup>

Miracle stories are also prominent in the Gospels. As literary devices, they demand to be taken at face value. The authors fully intend the reader to understand that Jesus performed miracles. To read them otherwise is to ignore the author's intent and is not responsible literary criticism. All four Gospels depict Jesus as a literary genius. He is shown to be a master of all the devices of Old Testament poetry: parallelism (Matt. 3:13), metaphor (Matt. 15:14), simile (Matt. 13:47), paradox (Matt. 11:30), and hyperbole (Matt. 19:24). His teaching reflects the style and standpoint of both the prophets and the Old Testament wisdom literature. He stands authoritatively in the midst of His disciples, instructing them in the wise ways of living.

**a. Matthew.** Each of the Gospels is a unique literary production, although it is evident that the first three are related. Most scholars think that Matthew and Luke wrote with Mark open before them. Matthew is distinguished by its apologetic thrust. The writer wishes to convince his readers that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. Thus, he points out how He fulfilled specific Old Testament prophecies (cf. 1:23; 2:6, 15, 18, 23; 3:3; 4:15–16; 8:17; 12:18–21; 13:35; 21:5 26:56). In every case except

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<sup>5</sup>Critics tend to call the first form parable and the second allegory, but the distinction is logical (or literary) and not in keeping with the New Testament use of the word parable. Here parable embraces the wider definition.

Matthew 2:6, he prefaces the Old Testament quote with a formula specifying that the Scripture is fulfilled. These quotes appear to be fresh translations of the Old Testament passages, while the other Old Testament citations in the Gospel are taken from the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament). This Gospel has a pronounced Old Testament flavor: its emphasis on God's kingdom (Matt. 13), Christ the Messiah (texts given above), the new age (Matt. 24–25), and righteousness (Matt. 23) recall Old Testament prophecy and apocalyptic. Wisdom themes occur frequently both in the depiction of Christ's stance among His disciples and in the themes He uses. This is especially true of the contrast between the wise and the foolish (Matt. 25).

There are also many characteristics distinctive to this Gospel. It places a unique emphasis on the role of the Gentiles in the new Kingdom (e.g., Matt. 8:10–12; 10:18). It is the only Gospel that mentions the church (Matt. 16:18; 18:17). Matthew groups the sayings of Jesus together into five blocks of discourses, each ending with the formula, "When Jesus had finished. ..." (Matt. 5:1–7:29; 10:5–11:1; 13:1–53; 18:1–19:1; 24:4–26:1).

The book divides the ministry of Jesus into three large sections. First, there is the preparation for His public ministry closed by the phrase "from that time" (4:17). The second division focuses on the opening of His ministry. Then comes the closing phrase "from that time forth" (16:21), followed by emphasis on His private instruction of the Twelve and His death on the cross.

The book is consciously and artfully constructed as a literary work, with a blend of all the elements of the gospel literary genre.

**b. Mark.** The Gospel of Mark is distinguished by several aspects of its language. It uses more Latin words than any other Gospel. In some cases, it even explains a Greek word with a Latin word (Mark 12:42; 15:16). It also has a pronounced Aramaic flavor. The Greek of this book is rough, marked by broken sentence structure (e.g., 2:10; 11:32), the colloquial intermingling of Greek tenses, parenthetical remarks (e.g., 3:30; 7:19), and slang expressions. Some scholars believe this indicates that Mark wrote down the material as Peter (who was Jewish and knew Aramaic better than Greek) spoke it for a Roman audience.

This Gospel moves more rapidly than the other Gospels. Yet Mark is not skimpy with details. In fact, when the three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) all report an event, Mark usually gives more details than the others do. Rather, Mark wrote a book of action, focusing on the *deeds* of the main character (Jesus) rather than His words. These events pass before the reader in rapid succession, emphasized by Mark's use of the word *immediately* (more than 40 times).

Mark also depicts Jesus as a teacher and a real human being. The reader sees His compassion (e.g., 1:41; 6:34), His indignation (e.g., 3:5), and His distress and sorrow (e.g., 14:33–34). This Gospel focuses on the training of the Twelve, sometimes painting a

poorer picture of them than is found in the other Gospels (e.g., 5:31; 9:10 10:13–14). Structurally, about 40 percent of the book is given to Christ's passion (i.e., 10:32 ff.). Jesus is clearly pictured as the Son of God from the very beginning (1:1).

**c. Luke.** Only the Gospel of Luke seeks to bind the stories of Jesus to the secular world. The language of this Gospel is quite literary, somewhat comparable to that of classical Greek. The language of the birth and infancy passages is noticeably different from that of the prologue and rest of the book. These early narratives have a Semitic flavor. They also relate events otherwise not known.

This writer emphasizes the response of the crowds to Jesus. They were amazed at Him (e.g., 5:26; 7:16–17). Yet there is no mention of His compassion for the crowds. There is only mention of His compassion for individuals. Luke focuses especially on the poor, the rich and their wealth (e.g., 12:13–21; 13:11–17), and women. He portrays Jesus as the champion of society's outcasts. Luke also focuses on certain concepts: love, joy, praise, peace, and so on.

Luke usually tells us the time and place of the events narrated (e.g., Luke 2:1). He supplies more details about Christ's human life than do the other Gospels. He alone gives Jesus the title *Savior* (2:11). He emphasizes the mission of Christ, especially noticing His kingship and kingdom. He also traces the parallel between the prophetic pattern and Jesus' ministry.

**d. John.** The fourth Gospel is written in a very simple style. It uses common words, brief statements, picturesque language, and frequent repetition. The effect is simple but profound. The language is quite distinctive in its diction and its theological concepts (e.g., such key words as *witness, believe, life, love, abide or remain, truth or true, Jew, world, feast, and light*).

The structure of this Gospel is artistically balanced between an almost poetic prologue (John 1:1–18) and epilogue (chap. 21). Seven of Jesus' miracles are especially emphasized and called "signs" (2:1–12; 4:46–51; 5:1–16; 6:1–14, 15–21; 9:1–41 11:17–46). However, other miracles are mentioned (2:23; 6:2 20:30). John shows that Jesus used the miracles as opportunities to teach spiritual lessons (cf. John 9, esp. v. 41).

John highlights the "I am" sayings of Jesus (e.g., 8:12). He places a unique emphasis on the Jewish feasts and festivals that Jesus attended. He demonstrates that Jesus was greater than the Law (cf. 1:17), the temple (cf. 2:19–21), the *shekinah* glory (cf. 1:14), and the entire ritualistic system (cf. 7:37–39). Here we see Jesus primarily addressing individuals rather than crowds. Some of the main characters associated with Jesus' life are pictured more fully here than elsewhere—e.g., John the Baptist and Judas Iscariot. There is special emphasis on the deity of Christ. John is unique in highlighting His preexistence and in calling Him the *logos* ("Word"). At the same time, John clearly sets forth Jesus' dependence on the Father and His full humanity (chap. 17).

**B. The Book of Acts.** Comparisons of the book of Acts with extra-biblical literature has produced interesting results. Students of classical Greek have concluded that Luke is a church historian in the tradition of Thucydides and Polybius. This is best seen in the speeches that are recorded in Acts. The Greek historians composed the speeches they reported, but gave careful attention to what the speaker really said. But in writing the book of Acts, Luke probably took shorthand notes of the speeches that he heard, and of others' memories of what they had heard. For example, Paul's address to the Ephesian elders gathered to him at Miletus (Acts 20:17–38) reflects distinctively Pauline concepts, while the speeches attributed to Peter (Acts 2:14–40; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 10:34–43) reflect neither Pauline nor Lukan concepts, but do reflect the language and concepts of 1 Peter. All the speeches in Acts reflect the same general pattern, a pattern that probably follows the structure of early Christian preaching.

But we should not jump to the conclusion that Luke was a simple chronicler who merely recorded the events that occurred. The book's *rhetoric* (i.e., the way words are used), *diction* (the words that are used), structure, and theology are marked by his unique hand. Like all historians, Luke sets forth an interpretation of history.

The overall structure of the book is geared to show how the gospel spread from Jerusalem to "the uttermost parts of the world" (i.e., Rome, the capital of the empire) and how its center shifted from Judaic Christians to Gentile Christians. Many things not relevant to this theme are omitted. Especially noticeable in this regard is the way in which the ministry of the apostles is recorded. The only one of the original 12 who is pictured to any degree is Peter, and he is soon eclipsed by the appearance of Paul.

On the other hand, there is clear evidence that this book is not only a theological creation. Luke's distinctive Greek style marks most of the book. It is among the most sophisticated Greek writing in the New Testament. This is especially true in Luke's "we" passages, where he reports as an eyewitness of the events recounted (cf. Acts 11:28; 16:10–17; 20:5–21:18; 27:1–28:16). Some of the other sections are couched in the same cultural style. Perhaps Luke composed them on the basis of interviews with other eyewitnesses.

Other sections are written in a rougher style marked by "Semiticisms" (i.e., reflections of Hebrew or Aramaic diction). These sections could reflect the use of Semitic written sources.<sup>6</sup>

Commentators disagree about the literary genre to which the book of Acts belongs. It certainly lacks the characteristics of the biography, heroic narrative, or epic. (There is no central political figure.) It has many similarities with the Old Testament presentations of the kingdom (Samuel–Kings and Chronicles). But these Old Testament chronicles report the history of the kingdom from different theological perspectives, which strongly influence the choice and framing of particular events. Therefore, they

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<sup>6</sup>Guthrie, Donald. *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1970).

are not just neutral records of what happened in a given period. Like Acts, they contain summarized speeches. But the speeches of Acts are far more frequent and extended than the speeches of these Old Testament histories. Speeches play a most significant role in the structure of the book of Acts—e.g., Peter’s sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:14–39), Paul’s speech on Mars Hill (Acts 17:16–31), and his address to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:18–35).

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Luke relates only the details that are relevant to his central thesis (unlike the Greek historians). The end result is high literature. The structure of the work as a whole and of the individual subdivisions presents an excellent balance of simplicity and clarity. Luke introduces each main character and describes his life only insofar as he contributes to the main theme. Minor themes are unobtrusively introduced, treated, and set aside. Thus, Luke combines the individual units into a harmonious whole. In many cases, each unit forms a completed story with a beginning, middle, and end (e.g., Acts 1–2).

By analyzing Paul’s speech on Mars Hill (Acts 17) from a literary perspective, Ryken further supports the thesis that Luke wrote as a historian.<sup>7</sup> He notes that the address follows the rules of Greek and Latin oratory. Verses 22–29 constitute the introduction (*exordium*) and are formulated according to the known rules of classical oratory. Verses 30–31 introduce the main thesis of Paul’s address (*propositio*). But before he could proceed to a defense of this thesis, he was interrupted. Ryken observes that Paul’s other speeches and epistles are quite similar in style.

## The Synoptic Gospels<sup>8</sup>

The term (literally meaning “\_\_\_\_\_”) applied to Matthew, Mark, and Luke because they see the ministry of Jesus from generally the same point of view, which is quite different from John’s Gospel.

The similarities among these three Gospels include their use of a common outline: introduction; ministry of John the Baptist and the baptism and temptation of Jesus; Jesus’ greater Galilean ministry; his journey and ministry through Samaria, Perea, and rural Judea; and the Passion week, death, and resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem. The books also record the same emphasis in the teaching of Jesus—the presence, nature, and implementation of the kingdom of God. Furthermore, these three Gospels relate much

<sup>7</sup>Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible*, 327–331.

<sup>8</sup>Elwell, W.A., & Comfort, P.W. (2001). *Tyndale Bible dictionary*. Tyndale reference library (1230). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

<sup>9</sup>same view



of the same material, usually in the same order, and often with similar or identical words.

In addition to similarities, there are also striking differences among Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These fall into the same general categories as do the similarities—outline, material, organization, and wording. Matthew and Luke also have considerable common material not found in Mark, which, except for the healing of the centurion's slave, is composed exclusively of the words and teachings of Jesus. Each Gospel also contains accounts and teachings that are unique. The result is a rich diversity within the synoptic unity, each of which provides portrayals of Jesus from a variety of viewpoints. Matthew emphasizes Jesus' Jewishness and the continuity of his person and work with the message of the OT. Mark's fast-moving account presents Jesus as a man of action, the Son of Man who was a servant among men. Luke, in exquisite Greek literary style, seems to address cultured Gentiles and shows Jesus as a friend of disadvantaged groups.

Attempts to account for both the similarities and differences within these Gospels constitute the "synoptic problem." Solutions have been sought in many ways. As early as the second century, Tatian combined the four accounts into one; additional "harmonies" of the Gospel accounts have been continually produced. Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, scholars have attempted to account for the similarities and differences by examining the stages through which the Gospel material is assumed to have passed before coming into its present form. Form criticism attempts to identify the influences from the period of oral transmission; source or literary criticism considers the alleged written documents from which the Evangelists drew information; redaction (or editorial) criticism seeks to determine the nature or purposes and personalities of the final editor-authors upon the accounts of the activities and teachings of Jesus. Other suggestions have called attention to the adaptation of material for a specific audience, the similarities between the synoptic accounts of Jesus' teachings and the parallel accounts of the Jewish rabbis in the Talmud, and more. No completely satisfactory solution to the synoptic problem is at hand. The fact remains that the Scriptures present Jesus in various perspectives; the conscientious reader must seek the divine purpose of both the similarities and the differences of these proclamations of "the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1).

