

THE FOUR GOSPELS

The four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—tell us about the life of Jesus. Yet they are not true biographies. They say little about Jesus’ family background and youth, and nothing about His physical appearance. They concentrate almost totally on the three years of Jesus’ ministry, but even here they do not give enough information to reconstruct a complete history of those years. Rather, attention is focused on the Person of Jesus and His teachings, and all four Gospels climax with Jesus’ death and resurrection, and the events associated with them.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the “Synoptic Gospels.” The term “Synoptic” means they view the life of Jesus from a common perspective. After introducing Jesus in different ways depending on their purpose, they record the ministry of John the Baptist, the baptism and temptation of Jesus, His ministries in Galilee and in Judea, His final week in Jerusalem, His death and resurrection. In the Synoptic record Jesus characteristically refers to Himself as the Son of Man, and He proclaims the kingdom of God.

Despite the similarities in the Synoptic accounts, these Gospels vary in what material they include and in the arrangement of specific events. Furthermore, each Gospel was written to emphasize certain aspects of Jesus’ Person and work. Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is the true Messiah and the object of Old Testament prophecy and expectation. Mark’s fast-moving account was written to appeal to Roman Christians, and Luke’s Gospel is addressed to a cultured Gentile and stresses Jesus’ concern for all kinds of people.

The Gospel of John differs from the Synoptics in a number of ways. It tells more about Jesus’ early ministry in Judea. John also records long thematic discourses by Jesus instead of the shorter sayings typical of the Synoptic accounts. In John, Jesus refers to Himself as God’s Son and speaks of salvation as eternal life. More than the Synoptics, John includes theological reflection on the meaning of Jesus’ life and death.

Why Four Gospels?

Gospel	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Audience	Jews	Romans	Hellenists	Greek World
Portrait of Jesus	Jesus is the Messiah/King who fulfills Old Testament prophecy and expectations	Jesus is the authoritative Son of God	Jesus is the perfect Son of Man who came to save and minister to all people through the power of the Holy Spirit and prayer	Jesus is the fully divine Son of God in whom we should believe to receive eternal life (the “I AM” of God)
Key Verses	Matthew 1:1; 16:16; 20:28	Mark 1:1; 8:27; 10:45; 15:34	Luke 19:10	John 20:31
Key Words	Fulfilled	Immediately	Son of Man	Believe; Eternal Life