

*Source Material for this Bible Study / Commentary: David Alan Black, *Why Four Gospels*; FF Bruce, *New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*; Kenneth G. Hanna, *From Gospel to Glory*; Arthur W. Pink *Why Four Gospels*; *Other sources as referenced*

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Lesson Intro: The Gospel of Jesus Christ

The words “Follow Me” as spoken by Jesus as an imperative was cited in eight unique events through the gospels, focusing on seven themes. Each of these themes is relatable to His followers as a means towards spiritual growth and maturity. The goal of this study series is not only to understand the principles behind each of these “Follow Me” themes, but also to gain a firm understanding regarding the testimonies about Jesus Christ – a firm understanding of the four Gospels – by following Jesus’ command to “Follow Me.”

Before we get into each of the “Follow Me” themes, we should first set the foundation for our understanding regarding the testimonies concerning Jesus. Namely, our understanding about the four Gospels and how they came into being.

Timeline – The Four Gospels

There are many debates among the scholars regarding the author, dates and the order of the four gospels, particularly the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke). The two predominant views are what is known as a Matthean Priority (Gospel of Matthew was the first gospel written) and the Markan Priority (Gospel of Mark was the first gospel written). There are proposals also for a Lukan Priority, but that theory does not have much support. This study will not address the merits or weaknesses of these debates but will assume a Matthean Priority – without dismissing the merits for a Markan Priority. Using this assumption, the timeline for the order of the gospels and the basis for its writing can be summarized as follows (Dates are approximate)

- **AD 33 – New Testament Church Begins (Acts 2-4)** – The Pentecost event launched the New Testament Christian church when the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles and the 120 in the upper room. At this point – and into the immediate near future, the source and authority of anything that was taught about Christ resides with the Twelve Apostles alone.
- **AD 33-34 – Jerusalem Church Grows (Acts 5-8)** – As the church grows and the message spreads (Acts 6:7), the apostles recognized the need to unify and consolidate their teaching about Jesus. At this point, the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) was regarded as the church’s main source of Scripture. Hence, the goal was to demonstrate how that Scripture relates to Jesus in the manner that Jesus had taught them (cf. Luke 24:27).
 - Main audience in the church and church community were Jews and Jewish converts. It became clear that the main apologetic task was to show the Jewish authorities how Jesus matches what was prophesied from the Hebrew Bible.
 - Christian tradition informs us that the Apostle Matthew was commissioned by the apostles to document this account. His work was to be the Christian manifesto of the Jerusalem church to be used for evangelism and disciple making (cf Matt 28:19-20).

*His work would later be canonized as the **Gospel of Matthew**.*

- **AD 34-42 – The Word Spreads beyond Jerusalem (Acts 8-11)** – The stoning death of Stephen led many believers to scatter away from Jerusalem, preaching the Word (Acts 8:4). Many scattered to the Northern Gentile city of Antioch, while others – such as the Apostle Philip – were called into missionary journeys in Samaria. The dispersion of Christians away from Jerusalem and the isolation from the apostles (Acts 8:1) underscores the need for reliable teaching concerning Jesus Christ. The Gospel of Matthew was the document of the Christian faith used by those who took the message out of Jerusalem into Samaria and outer regions.
- **AD 42 – Persecution by Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12)** – Since the start of the church in Jerusalem, most of the apostles stayed around Jerusalem to help support the ministry in that church. This changed when Herod Agrippa I had the Apostle James killed to appease the Jews in his effort to maintain peace (Acts 12:1-3). After this incident, many of the apostles evidently left on their own missionary journey, taking with them the Gospel of Matthew as their source material.

The **Gospel of Matthew** is believed to have been completed and published (recognized) at this time (approx. AD 45-55)

- **AD 42-56 – Message to the Gentiles (Acts 13-20)** – When the church first launched, the apostles and their disciples' mission focus were primarily on the Jews and God-fearing pagans. During this expansion period before the persecution of AD42, three key events led to the expansion into the Gentile nation:
 - Martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7) that led many believers into Gentile territory
 - Conversion / Calling of Paul (Acts 9) to become God's instrument to the Gentiles
 - Reception of a Gentile and his family into the church by Peter and with the approval of the Jerusalem church (Acts 10-11)

Paul was God's instrument to take the Gospel message to the Gentiles. During Paul's three missionary journeys (AD 48-57), he has planted many Gentile churches and ministered to many Gentile converts. His main source material appears to be the Gospel of Matthew, as he seems to reference it in 1 Thessalonians 4-5.

- **AD 56-58 – The Need for a Gentile Companion to Matthew (Acts 21-26)** – Throughout Paul's missionary journeys to the Gentiles, his ministry was constantly bombarded by Judaizers who would insist on salvation in adherence to the Jewish traditions (which was already addressed by the ecumenical council of Acts 15). Though Paul himself was able to apologetically defend the message to the Gentiles, he recognized that his Gentile converts are left vulnerable (cf Galatians).

Through his missionary journeys, he recognized that the Gospel of Matthew – which he used faithfully as his source evangelical material – was insufficient as an apologetic tool for his Gentile converts. There was a need to produce a version of the Gospel of Matthew that would meet the spiritual needs of the Gentile world – a modified version that must be acceptable to Peter and the main pillars of the Jerusalem church (cf Acts 10-11).

Church Tradition informs that Paul appointed Luke for this task – to write this Gentile companion to the Gospel of Matthew – during his two-year imprisonment in Caesarea (Acts 24). Being in Caesarea allowed Luke sufficient time to check the details in Matthew's account and to interview others who had known Jesus personally. Luke had carefully followed the main structure of Matthew and generally adhered to the order of its various sections and anecdotes, while also adding various extra parables and witnessed accounts from Jesus' Galilean ministry that is relevant and relatable to the Gentiles.

- **AD 58-60 – The Completion of a Gentile Companion to Matthew (Acts 27-28)** – Church tradition informs that Luke completed this work in time to accompany Paul on his journey to Rome.

*His work would later be canonized as the **Gospel of Luke***

Even though this work was completed before the journey to Rome, it would not be published just yet because it lacked credibility given that neither Paul nor Luke were eyewitnesses to the accounts in Matthew. The work needed to be validated and endorsed in the same manner as the events from Acts 10-11 and Acts 15. It needed Peter's endorsement. Note: Luke's work volume II – later known as the Book of Acts – was believed to have begun / completed during this period of time when Luke was with Paul in Caesarea and in Rome.

- **AD 60-67 – Validating and Bridging The Gospels of Matthew and Luke (Acts 28)** – The book of Acts concludes with Paul being imprisoned in Rome, living in a rented house under house arrest (28:30) and guarded by a Roman soldier (28:16). This would be his living arrangement for the next two years (28:30). By this time, the Gospel of Matthew had been in circulation for some twenty years throughout the Christian world within the Roman Empire. This gospel was issued from the Jerusalem community, many of whom had known Jesus personally and could corroborate the accounts in that work. Paul needed Luke's work to be validated and accepted by the same community.

History would show that Peter visited Paul in Rome at the time of Paul's captivity. It is inferred through historical accounts that Paul asked Peter to validate Luke's work during this visit, making sure that Luke had not erred in any area, and to give it, effectively, the Acts 10-11 treatment / endorsement.

Peter's visit to Rome was not without an evangelical purpose. Peter had planned a series of speeches and lectures in Rome – effectively a speaking tour – where he will talk about the life of Jesus to the Roman audience.

- It was custom in those days for public men to have their speeches recorded by shorthand writers. Mark – who had become Peter’s devoted assistant (1 Pet 5:12-13) – arranged for shorthand Greek writers to take down Peter’s words just as he uttered them.
- In support of Luke’s work, on the appointed events, Peter would speak to the Roman audience, armed with both Matthew and Luke’s work side by side, and would talk about the life of Christ using both scrolls concurrently. Peter shared the life of Christ in five parts:
 - Beginning of Ministry (Mark 1:2-3:19 = Matthew 3:1-5:1 = Luke 3:1-6:19)
 - Early Galilean Ministry (Mark 3:20-6:13 = Matthew 5:2-13:58 = Luke 6:20-9:6)
 - Later Galilean Ministry (Mark 6:14-10:1 = Matthew 14:1-18:35 = Luke 9:7-50)
 - Post-Galilean Ministry (Mark 10:2-13:37 = Matthew 19:1-25:46 = Luke 9:51-21:38)
 - Passion Narrative (Mark 14:1-16:8 = Matthew 26:1-28:20 = Luke 22:1-24:53)

Many who had listened to Peter’s speech would request copies of the speeches from Mark. Church tradition relates that Peter was shown transcripts of his speeches and that he “exerted no pressure either to forbid it or to promote it” (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 6:14:7). Tradition also informs that Peter had no intention – or had not planned to have his speeches ever becoming its own Gospel.

*Transcript of his speeches ultimately would be canonized as the **Gospel of Mark**.*

Note, however, that Peter’s speeches ended with Mark 16:8. The final twelve verses of the gospel were likely added by Mark after the martyrdom of Peter (AD 64 in Rome), when Mark opted to publish the speeches in memory of Peter as a complete work while in the church in Alexandria in AD67-69. This explains why copies of the manuscripts were found with and without the final twelve verses.

- **AD 85-95 – Affirming the Person and Identity of Christ** – Towards the end of the first century, the other three gospels would have already been known, with copies of them being circulated throughout the region. Collectively, they were the manifesto for the teachings about the Christian faith. The ministry challenge is no longer – or not so much – about Jews vs Gentile conversions, but about heretical teachings in the church. More specifically, the rise of gnostic teaching, which became more prominent after the turn of the century (cf John’s epistles). These heretical teachings basically challenge the deity and humanity of Christ, which created a crisis of faith among the believers. For this purpose, Apostle John found it necessary to effectively defend the deity and humanity of Christ (cf John 1:1 / John 20:31).

*His work, intentionally different from the synoptic gospels approach, would later be canonized as the **Gospel of John**.*

Summary

Writings from Various early church fathers (Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius) support the sequence that the Gospel of Matthew was the first Gospel, written sometime during the early church growth years in Jerusalem targeting the Jewish Christians / Jewish community, and published sometime around AD 45-55. The Gospel of Luke was believed to be the second Gospel, written sometime between AD59-61 in Caesarea, but not published until a short time later. Its target audience was the Gentile community. The Gospel of Mark was the third Gospel, compiled by Mark from the speeches of Peter in Rome to a Roman audience around AD62, but published sometime after the martyrdom of Peter, around AD 65.

This sequence was generally accepted by churches throughout history until the *Enlightenment Movement* of the 18th Century, where traditional orthodox beliefs based on historical evidence were challenged and revisited. There was, however, no dispute that the Gospel of John was the last gospel entry in the canon, though the authorship as assigned to the apostle was questioned. The *Enlightenment Movement* not only sowed confusion, but also doubts regarding the authenticity of some of the gospel contents while simultaneously questioned why other heretical works were not considered as gospel. It effectively ignores the historical rationale for the Spirit guided development of the testimony about Jesus Christ – that the original twelve apostles were the sole authoritative and inspired eyewitnesses of the words and deeds of Jesus Christ, and each of the four gospels came into existence in response to the needs of the church for accurate teaching at different moments during the lifetime of the original twelve apostles.

Reflecting On the Word of God

Each of the four Gospels has a specific target audience and written for a specific purpose.

- Matthew – to the Jewish audience to proclaim that Jesus is the Messianic King (Matt 16:16)
 - Mark – to a Roman audience to proclaim Jesus as a Servant, a Ransom for Sin (Mark 10:45)
 - Luke – to a Gentile audience to proclaim Jesus as the Son of Man, Savior of all nations (Luke 19:10)
 - John – to the world audience to proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God who gives Eternal Life to all who believes (John 20:31)
1. Imagine being a Jew in those days (i.e.. have a fairly good knowledge of the Old Testament and practices the Law of Moses somewhat religiously). How does your current understanding for why Matthew was written help you better understand how Matthew was written?
 2. Imagine being a Roman citizen in those days (i.e.. don't know anything about Jesus, Jewish traditions, Jewish religion, etc..). The Roman citizens in those days were intrigued by Jesus and the stories about the life of Jesus, enough so that many walked away from Peter's speech thinking like the Roman Centurion cited in Mark 15:39, and yearning for copies of the speech. Ponder on this historical fact and try to imagine why this is so.
 3. Imagine being a Gentile in those days (i.e.. viewed as second class citizens by the Jews, undeserving, unclean, unworthy of God). Review the additional parables and testimonies that Luke added between Chapter 9 and 19 that does not exist in Matthew. Why do you think Luke inserted those stories weaved between Matthew's narratives?
 4. Imagine being in one of the seven churches cited in Revelation 2-3 in the first Century (i.e.. where members engage in constant arguments over theology, heresy, and leadership issues while also having to face persecution). The Gospel of John was often thought to have been written after Revelation (where John simply have to write down what he sees (Rev 1:19)). After returning from Patmos (where he wrote Revelation), settling in Ephesus and seeing what he sees, what do you think his goal might be for the Gospel of John?

Reflecting on the World

The Enlightenment Movement of the 18th Century created a lot of chaos and caused many to doubt their faith in the Gospels, if not the whole Bible. Whether intentional or incidental, it gave credibility to heretical works from the first century that were already rejected by the church fathers of the first few centuries.

1. What are some of the heretical works (i.e.. other "gospels") that our world promotes today and possibly argue should be considered as canon?
2. Why were heretical works that were previously rejected reconsidered for debate again today? What was in these works that caused today's philosophers and theologians to reconsider them?
3. Why should (or should not) the church consider the teachings from these heretical gospels?

Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

To follow Jesus necessarily requires us to know what was said about Jesus from the Gospels. In our spiritual journey, it may seem easier, quicker, or "more interesting" to read devotionals or commentaries than to simply read the Gospels.

1. When was the last time you sat and read through each of the four Gospels? .
2. How many times have you read each of the four Gospels? What Bible version do you read them in? What is your prefer Bible translation version?
3. If you were to advise a new believer, which of the four Gospels would you recommend for them to read first? Why?