

The New Testament starts with the three Gospel books of *Matthew*, *Mark* and *Luke*. These three are known as the Synoptic Gospels. Gospel means “Good News”, and Synoptic refers to the fact that all three give an account of the same general events from the same point of view. The fourth book, *John*, is distinctly different from the three Synoptic Gospels, and includes much information not in the other three Gospels.

The four gospel books differ in what stories they include and how the stories are told. None of the four Gospels are meant to be a complete, detailed life of Jesus. Rather, as John wrote, “Jesus truly did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God; and that by believing you might have life through his name.”<sup>1</sup> “And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which, if they should all be written, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written.”<sup>2</sup>

Together, the four Gospels comprise the vast majority of the direct information we have about the life and teachings of Jesus.

As will be detailed later, much of the material in *Matthew* and *Mark* is in *Luke*. This *Three Gospels Series* assumes that you will have seen the *Luke Series* first. We intentionally do not duplicate the material in this series that is in the *Luke Series*.

None of the original manuscripts of any of the four Gospels still exist. In fact, our earliest existing manuscripts are probably copies of copies. However, scholars have reason to believe that the standard Greek texts we use are faithful to the original manuscripts.

None of the Gospels are written in strict chronological order. They are all a collection of stories of the life of Jesus which are arranged in a loose chronological order, with many of the stories seemingly placed in different orders. This lack of chronological order is discordant to many modern people, but strict chronology was not necessarily part of the literary convention of that time. The authors placed the stories in an order to maximize the impact of the authors’ messages.

There have been many attempts at placing the events of the life of Jesus in chronological order. Each of the Synoptic Gospels had different audiences and themes that they emphasized. The

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<sup>1</sup> John 20:30-31

<sup>2</sup> John 21:25

details of each story told in the Synoptic Gospels often vary from author to author. Also, the stories included vary significantly among the authors. Both the inclusion of details and the choice of stories help the author craft the messages he intended, were influenced by the stories known by the author, and the personal backgrounds of each author. The writers wrote from a distance in time of many decades after the life of Jesus.

All of the authors of the Gospels were inspired by the Holy Spirit as they wrote their messages. With the benefit of our hindsight, we see the brilliance of the Spirit in meeting the needs of the original audiences as well as audiences over the following two millennia.

Because of modern dating systems and terminology, many people believe Jesus must have been born in 0 AD and he must have died in 33 AD. However, a birth date of about 5-3 BC is more likely, along with a death date of about 30 BC. The time period covered in the four Gospels is primarily the life of Jesus.

Many people perceive that Jesus spent his entire life within the borders of Israel, with most of his ministry taking place near the Sea of Galilee, with only one or two trips to Jerusalem. However, Jesus spent a substantial amount of time outside of the borders of Israel. Some of these episodes will explain why he did so.