

Introduction to the Gospels

BIBLE BASICS

Not so distinctly different

St. Augustine's profound statement, "The New Testament is in the Old Testament concealed; the Old Testament is in the New Testament revealed," captures the intricate relationship between these two foundational texts of Christianity. The New Testament (NT) and the Old Testament (OT) are not separate entities but are deeply interconnected, each shedding light on the other.

The New Testament (NT) contains approximately 250 direct quotes from the Old Testament (OT) and over 1000 references to it. This illustrates the extent to which the NT authors drew upon and built upon the religious, historical, and cultural foundations established in the OT. Without a comprehensive understanding of the OT, it is challenging to grasp the full significance and depth of the NT.

One key example of this connection can be found in Jeremiah 31:31, where the prophet foretells the coming of a "new covenant" between God and His people. "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah." -Jeremiah 31:31 This prophecy finds its fulfillment in the NT, particularly in the teachings and ministry of Jesus Christ. The "new covenant" represents a transformative relationship between God and humanity, characterized by forgiveness, grace, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The NT was written in Koine Greek, the common language of the Roman Empire at the time, from approximately 45 to 95 AD. It comprises 27 books, including the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles, and the Book of Revelation. Contrary to chronological order, the NT begins with the Gospel According to St. Matthew due to its close alignment with the OT. St. Matthew's Gospel establishes a clear connection between Jesus and the prophecies, promises, and narratives found in the OT, emphasizing His lineage, fulfillment of prophecies, and role as the long-awaited Messiah.

Understanding the relationship between the OT and NT is crucial for comprehending the overarching narrative of God's redemptive plan for humanity. The OT provides the historical, cultural, and spiritual context for the events and teachings recorded in the NT. By reading the NT in light of the OT, Christians gain a deeper appreciation for the continuity and progression of God's revelation throughout history.

Historical Background

The intertestamental period is a significant era in religious history, spanning approximately 400 years between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament. During this period, no prophecies were made, and significant changes occurred within the Jewish community. The Roman Empire had conquered Israel by the time Christ was born, relegating the Jews to a lower social status

with limited opportunities for social mobility. Several Jewish groups emerged during this time, each with distinct beliefs and practices. A table summarizing these groups is provided below:

Group	Beliefs and Practices
Pharisees	Strict legalists focused on adhering to the law; known for their self-righteousness.
Sadducees	Upper-class Jews who did not believe in the resurrection, emphasizing doing good without hope of reward or fear of punishment.
Herodians	Political families who supported the Herod family and collaborated with the Roman authorities.
Essenes	Lived in the wilderness, emphasized purity and communal living; believed in the coming of a Messiah; associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls.
Scribes	Professional class of experts, teachers, and lawyers who interpreted and applied the Jewish law.
Zealots	Armed Jewish rebels who fought against Roman rule and sought to restore Jewish independence.
Sanhedrin	Jewish Supreme Court composed of an odd number of Pharisees, Sadducees, and priests; held authority over religious and civil matters.
Proselytes	Gentiles who converted to Judaism and fully embraced Jewish beliefs and practices.
God-Fearers	Gentiles who partially practiced or respected some Jewish customs and beliefs but did not fully convert to Judaism.

These groups held distinct beliefs, practices, and political orientations, shaping the religious and political landscape of the time. Their collective influence ultimately laid the groundwork for the emergence of Christianity.

Among the most significant groups were the Pharisees, known for their meticulous adherence to the Torah and their emphasis on ritual purity. They developed a rich tradition of oral law and interpretation, which would later become central to Rabbinic Judaism. The Sadducees, on the other hand, were an aristocratic priestly class that held a more conservative interpretation of the Torah and opposed many of the Pharisaic innovations.

The Essenes, a reclusive monastic order, sought purity and holiness through communal living, ritual bathing, and strict dietary restrictions. They retreated to the desert wilderness, establishing communities such as Qumran, where they produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, a collection of ancient Jewish texts that shed light on their beliefs and practices.

Another influential group was the Zealots, a militant movement that yearned for political independence from Roman rule. They engaged in armed resistance against the Roman Empire and

played a pivotal role in the First Jewish-Roman War. Their actions reflected the deep-seated desire for sovereignty and self-determination among many Jews during this period.

The Diaspora Jews, scattered throughout the Mediterranean and beyond, formed vibrant communities that blended Jewish traditions with Hellenistic culture. They played a crucial role in spreading Jewish ideas and practices throughout the ancient world, paving the way for the eventual spread of Christianity.

The intertestamental period witnessed intense debates, theological discussions, and political tensions among these diverse Jewish groups. Their interactions and conflicts shaped the Jewish religious and cultural landscape, creating a fertile ground for the emergence of new ideas and movements, including Christianity.

Why Only Four Gospels?

The term "gospel" originates from the Greek word "evangelion," which means "good news." In Christianity, the gospel refers to the message of salvation and the life of Jesus Christ. While there are numerous accounts and writings about Jesus and his teachings, only four gospels are recognized as canonical and included in the New Testament of the Bible.

The number four holds significant symbolism in various religious and cultural contexts. In the Bible, particularly in the books of Ezekiel 10:1-22 and Revelation 4:6-9, four living creatures—a lion, an ox, an eagle, and a human—are described as surrounding the throne of God. These creatures represent different aspects of God's character and presence. Similarly, the four gospels are seen as presenting distinct perspectives on the life and ministry of Jesus, offering a comprehensive understanding of his message and teachings. There is thus actually only one gospel: the Gospel of Jesus Christ, written by four different apostles, thus the correct way to refer to the gospel is "The Gospel According to St. ..."

The early Church Fathers, who played a crucial role in shaping Christian beliefs and practices, recognized the authority and authenticity of only four gospels. Irenaeus (178 AD), a prominent second-century theologian, emphasized that there is evidence to support the existence of no more or less than four gospels: "Evidence to the existence of no more or less than four Gospels." - Irenaeus (178 AD). Justin Martyr (150 AD), another influential Church Father, referred to the four gospels as the "memoirs of the apostles," underscoring their historical and eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life.

Origen (185-254 AD), a prolific scholar and theologian of the third century, acknowledged the existence of other gospel accounts, such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Matthias. However, Origen maintained that only four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—were legitimate and authoritative. He recognized the value of these other accounts for their insights into Jesus' teachings, but he did not consider them to be on par with the four canonical gospels.

The canonization of the four gospels was a gradual process that took place over several centuries. The early Church faced the challenge of discerning which writings accurately conveyed the true message of Jesus and were consistent with apostolic teachings. Through careful examination, theological debates, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church arrived at the consensus that these four gospels were inspired by God and provided a reliable and comprehensive account of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection.

Overview of Each Gospel

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Date Written	Aramaic 39-42 AD Greek 60-67 AD	60-61 AD	58-63 AD	After 70 AD
Place Written	Judea-Palestine	Rome	Rome?	Ephesus
Written for	Jews (Messiah)	Romans (Power)	Greeks (Philosophy)	Whole world (Incarnation)
Opening	Genealogy of Christ	Voice crying in the wilderness	Offerings	In the beginning was the Word
Portrayal of Christ	King	Miracle worker, Conquerer of Satan	Merciful, sacrificial	Incarnate Word
Christ came to	Fulfill the Law	Perform miracles	Save humanity	Dwell among us
Christ cared for	Prophecies	Performing miracles	History	Divinity
Symbol	Man	Lion	Ox	Eagle

The Synoptic Gospels

When a car accident occurs, the police try to collect statements from several different witnesses. This is because, together, these witnesses can provide a more complete and accurate picture of what happened. Similarly, the Gospels according to Saints Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels because they provide a "seen together" view of Jesus' life on earth.

The Synoptic Gospels are similar in style and content. They all begin with an account of Jesus' birth and early life, and they all end with his death and resurrection. They also share many of the same stories, such as the Sermon on the Mount, the feeding of the five thousand, and the raising of Lazarus.

However, there are also some differences between the Synoptic Gospels. For example, Matthew's Gospel includes a detailed account of Jesus' genealogy, while Mark's Gospel does not. Luke's Gospel, on the other hand, includes several stories that are not found in Matthew or Mark, such as the story of the birth of Jesus and the story of the prodigal son.

Despite these differences, the Synoptic Gospels are remarkably consistent in their overall message. They all portray Jesus as the Son of God who came to earth to save humanity from sin. They also all emphasize the importance of faith, repentance, and following Jesus' commands.

The Synoptic Gospels are a valuable resource for understanding the life and teachings of Jesus. By reading and comparing these three Gospels, we can gain a deeper understanding of who Jesus is and what he came to do.

Here are some additional points about the Synoptic Gospels:

- They were all written in the first century AD.
- They were all written in Greek.
- They were all intended to be read aloud to a community of believers.
- They are the most widely read and studied books in the New Testament.

The Synoptic Gospels are a testament to the early church's faith in Jesus Christ. They are a source of hope and inspiration for Christians around the world.

The Gospel According to St. Matthew

St. Matthew, whose original name was Levi, was one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ. He referred to himself as a tax collector, indicating his previous profession before becoming a follower of Jesus. St. Matthew's gospel was primarily written for a Jewish audience and contains significant references to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies by Christ. The word "fulfilled" appears 82 times in his gospel, highlighting Christ's role in bringing to completion the ancient prophecies.

St. Matthew aimed to correct the misconception that the Messiah would be an earthly king, as many Jews anticipated. Instead, he focused on the heavenly kingdom and the spiritual nature of Christ's reign. Chapters (5-8, 10, 13, 18, 23-25) are particularly notable for Christ's words and parables, which emphasize the values and principles of the heavenly kingdom.

St. Matthew's gospel includes several unique events not mentioned in the other gospels. These include the visit of the Magi and the massacre of infants at Bethlehem (2:1-18), the flight to Egypt and the return to Nazareth (2:19-23), the miracle of the two blind men (20:30-34), and the miracle of the coin found in the fish's mouth (17:24-27).

In addition, St. Matthew mentions six significant events that occurred during Passion Week. These include the suicide of Judas Iscariot, the dream of Pilate's wife, the resurrection of saints after Christ's crucifixion, the plot by the chief priests and Pharisees to steal Jesus' body, the watch at the sepulcher by Roman soldiers, and the earthquake that accompanied Christ's resurrection.

St. Matthew's gospel is a valuable source of information about Christ's life and teachings, providing unique insights into His ministry and the events surrounding His crucifixion and resurrection. It emphasizes the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and the spiritual nature of Christ's kingdom, offering valuable guidance for Christians seeking to understand and follow the teachings of Jesus.

The Gospel According to St. Mark

St. Mark, also known as John Mark in Hebrew, stands as one of the 72 apostles. St. Mark's gospel is distinct in its focus on events and miracles. Despite being the shortest of the four gospels, it offers a vivid portrayal of Christ's emotions, capturing instances where Jesus sighed, had compassion, and

experienced deep distress. This attention to Christ's inner life adds depth and humanity to the narrative.

Written primarily for a Roman audience, St. Mark's gospel highlights Christ as a triumphant conqueror over death and evil. He emphasizes Christ's power through miraculous acts, showcasing his authority over nature, illness, and even death itself.

Among the unique events recorded exclusively in St. Mark's gospel are the parable of the seed in chapter 4, the healing of the deaf-mute man in chapter 7, the restoration of sight to a blind man in Bethsaida in chapter 8, the teaching on forgiveness as a prerequisite for receiving forgiveness in chapter 11, and the intriguing account of the young man who fled naked in chapter 14. All statements of Christ's authority.

St. Mark's gospel serves as a compelling testament to Christ's unwavering power and compassion. It invites readers to witness the profound impact of his ministry, as he confronts evil, heals the sick, and offers hope to the marginalized. Through St. Mark's vivid portrayal of Christ's actions and emotions, we gain a deeper understanding of his sacrificial love and unwavering commitment to redeeming humanity.

The Gospel According to St. Luke

St. Luke, a distinguished physician and the sole Gentile among the gospel writers, authored the longest gospel in the New Testament. His gospel is primarily intended for a Greek audience, and it presents a unique portrayal of Jesus Christ as the Physician of Humanity. Unlike the other gospel writers, St. Luke highlights Christ's role as a healer and savior for all people.

According to St. Luke, Christ embodies perfection and mercy. He emphasizes Christ's humanity, emphasizing that Christ experienced every aspect of human life except sin. St. Luke's gospel conveys the message that Christ came to redeem all people, irrespective of their social status, education, or wealth. Through his love and compassion, Christ offers salvation to the educated and illiterate, the philosopher and simple, the rich and poor.

Significantly, St. Luke's gospel does not focus on the Pharisees or the intricacies of Jewish law. Instead, he prioritizes translating Hebrew words and concepts for his Greek readers. By doing so, he aims to make the gospel accessible to a broader audience. Additionally, his gospel places emphasis on the good deeds of Gentiles, such as the ten lepers, the Centurion, and the good Samaritan. These narratives highlight the universality of God's love and grace, transcending cultural and religious boundaries.

St. Luke's gospel is further distinguished by its inclusion of several significant events that are not mentioned in the other gospels. These include the annunciation and birth of St. John the Baptist, as well as the annunciation of Jesus to St. Mary and her visit to Elizabeth. Events portraying the coming of the Lord as man. Furthermore, St. Luke narrates the appearance of angels to the shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem. The angels announce the birth of Jesus, calling him the Savior and Christ the Lord. This event emphasizes the significance of Jesus' birth not only for the chosen people of Israel but also for all of humanity.

Another unique event in St. Luke's gospel is the presentation of Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem. According to Jewish tradition, every firstborn male child was to be presented to the Lord in the temple, and St. Luke includes this event to show that Jesus fulfills the requirements of the law. St. Luke also provides a glimpse into Jesus' early years, describing how he grew in wisdom and stature, gaining favor with God and people. This account emphasizes Jesus' humanity and his natural development as a child, subject to the same processes of growth and learning as any other human being.

In addition to these events, St. Luke mentions the miracles of raising the widow's son, healing dropsy, healing the ear of the servant, and catching fish; he also records several parables that are unique to his gospel. These parables, such as the debtors, persistent neighbor, master's sudden return, barren fig tree, lost coin, lost son, unjust steward, obedient servant, unjust judge, and pharisee and tax collector, provide profound insights into Christ's teachings and the nature of God's kingdom; coming to seek the lost.

St. Luke's gospel ends with several significant events, including the angel appearing to Jesus in the garden, Jesus' journey to Herod, the presence of the thief on the right at the crucifixion, the road to Emmaus, and the sending of the 70 disciples. These events underscore the sacrificial nature of Christ's death and resurrection and His promise to send the Holy Spirit to restore, empower and guide His followers.

The Gospel According to St. John

The Gospel of John, often hailed as the "Gospel of all Gospels" by St. Clement of Alexandria and "the crown of all Gospels" by Origen, holds a unique and profound place within the New Testament. St. John the Beloved, one of the 12 disciples, had the distinction of being the only one who did not suffer a martyr's death. Instead, he lovingly cared for St. Mary, the mother of Jesus, and was later exiled to the island of Patmos, where he penned the enigmatic Book of Revelation near the end of his life.

Aptly known as "The Spiritual Gospel," the Gospel According to St. John sets itself apart from the Synoptic Gospels by not merely recounting the events of Jesus' life. Instead, it provides deeper knowledge and understanding through philosophical explanations and theological insights. The gospel begins with a majestic declaration of Jesus Christ's eternal existence, establishing his divinity from the outset. The remainder of the gospel serves as an extension and elaboration of this core belief.

Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, St. John's Gospel omits significant events such as Jesus' birth, baptism, temptation, selection of the 12 disciples, and most of his miracles. It also offers only a concise depiction of the Passion Week. However, it compensates for this by incorporating unique and captivating details not mentioned in the other gospels. Among these notable inclusions are the Wedding at Cana, where Jesus transforms water into wine; the revelation that the woman with oil was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus; and the multitude's desire to crown Christ as king after he miraculously feeds 5,000 people. The Wedding at Cana was Jesus' first public miracle, showcasing his power to transform ordinary elements into something extraordinary. It symbolizes his ability to bring joy and abundance to life. The multitude's desire to crown Christ as king after he miraculously feeds 5,000 people indicates the recognition of Jesus' authority and the people's desire for a leader who can provide for their physical and spiritual needs. This event foreshadows Jesus' eventual triumphal entry into Jerusalem, where he is hailed as the Messiah.

It is noteworthy that the miracle of feeding the multitude is the only event explicitly mentioned in all four gospels, highlighting its pivotal significance in the narrative of Jesus' life and ministry. The Gospel According to St. John stands as a testament to the profound theological insights and spiritual depth that can be found within the Christian tradition. It invites readers to embark on a journey of contemplation, encouraging them to delve deeper into the mysteries of faith and the transformative power of divine love.



Review Questions

1. The Gospels According to Sts. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as what? (The Synoptic Gospels)
2. What is the focus of the Gospel According to St. John? (Christ's divinity)
3. What is the period between the Old and New Testaments called? (The intertestamental period)
4. "The ____ is in the ____ concealed. The ____ is in the ____ revealed." -St. Augustine (New Testament, Old Testament, Old Testament, New Testament)
5. Why does St. Mark highlight Christ's power? (It is written for the Romans who value power and strength)
6. Why doesn't St. Luke mention Jewish scripture like St. Matthew? (He was Greek and writing to the Gentiles)
7. What does "Gospel" mean? (Good News)
8. Who were the Zealots? (armed Jews who attacked Romans)
9. What word does the Gospel According to St. Matthew mention 82 times? (Fulfilled)
10. Why is it incorrect to say St. Mark's Gospel? (There is only one Gospel - the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Christ's Gospel was written by four different authors).