

Apostolic Handbook Series

Handbook  
on the  
Gospels



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# Contents

Editors' Preface.....	ix
Author's Preface .....	xiii
Part I Approaching the Gospels	
1. Who Do the Gospels Say That I Am? Four Gospels, One Jesus .....	3
2. What Do Men Say about the Gospels? A Journey through Time .....	13
3. What Do Men Say the Gospels Are? Literary Types and Species .....	25
4. What Should We Know about the Era of the Gospels? Essentials and Prerequisites .....	31
5. What Can We Say about the Gospels? Testimonies from a Living Voice .....	45
Part II Introducing the Gospels	
6. According to Mark.....	53
7. According to Matthew .....	59
8. According to Luke .....	69
9. According to John.....	79
Part III Gospel Exposition	
10. How Should We Analyze the Gospels? Methods and Tactics .....	91
First Segue: A Visit to the Library .....	105
11. How Should We Exegete the Gospels? Beginnings.....	107
12. How Should We Exegete the Gospels? Middles .....	119

13. How Should We Exegete the Gospels?	
Endings.....	129
Part IV Gospel Themes	
14. What Are the Major Gospel Themes?	
An Interview .....	139
Part V Applying the Gospels	
Second Segue: The Falling Tree .....	159
15. Lessons and Activities.....	161
16. Messages and Sermons .....	177
Postscript .....	187
For Further Reading.....	193
Notes.....	201
Bibliography .....	213

# 1 | *Who Do the Gospels Say That I Am?*

## *Four Gospels, One Jesus*

*The gospels continue to captivate the world's attention . . . It goes without saying that these foundational documents continue to be critically important for the church and for the doctrine and practice of contemporary Christians.*

– Marcus Bockmuehl and Donald Hagner

*There can be no doubt that the four gospels of the Christian Bible are of fundamental significance for Christian life and thought.*

– Stephen Barton

### **SUBSTRATA AND INFRASTRUCTURES**

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John form the bedrock of the apostolic church. These four accounts serve as the foundation upon which to build our lives. They invite us to open them and look inside, to read and reflect, to muse and meditate. They bid us to dig, probe, and ponder, to examine and investigate, to question and find answers. They challenge us to follow, learn more about, and be radically transformed by this remarkable savior named Jesus (John 1:38–39). His

very words are “spirit and . . . life” (John 6:63). He alone offers “the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

The Gospels provide reliable testimony, as Luke vouches about his Gospel’s integrity (Luke 1:1–4), to “all that Jesus began to both do and teach” (Acts 1:1). If we truly desire to know about Jesus, we must turn to these faithful accounts and heed them carefully. We ignore them at our peril. When all else fails, those who obey Jesus’ words will weather the storm. Those who disregard them stand on shifting sands, doomed to destruction (Matthew 7:24–27; Luke 6:46–49).

We live in a fast-paced, anxiety-ridden age filled with threats. Yet in these frantic, fearful, and uncertain times, we will (re)discover life’s number-one priority and joy by devoting ourselves to listening to what Jesus has said (Luke 10:39, 42). Busy, distracted people “cumbered about much serving” (Luke 10:40) find in the Gospels a reliable blueprint in which to construct solid, meaningful, enriched lives that will endure the test of time and make a difference that will affect eternity.

If we want to avoid worshiping a Jesus of our own making, crafted in our image, a fabricated, reconstructed Jesus who panders to our desires and lifestyle choices, we must recommit ourselves to serious Gospel study. Otherwise, we’ve merely conjured up a genie from a bottle. Such a false Jesus, however, is but an illusion, a figment of our imaginations. Only through close, prayerful, and faithful reading of these texts can we recover the true Jesus. Only through attention to Scripture can the mirror of the Word then fully inspect, illuminate, and reveal to us the condition of our vital spiritual infrastructures (James 1:21–25). And only then can the Spirit be free to do the work necessary to repair our brokenness and restore and reshape us for our true purpose in Him.

When the world pressures us to conform to its skewed values, Apostolic believers look to the four Gospels for superior wisdom to live righteously (Romans 12:2). Here we encounter the unfailing principles of God’s kingdom. In

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we uncover a vocabulary and grammar by which to remap our thinking, recharge our hearts, and reset the course of our lives (Proverbs 6:20–23).

## **FOYERS AND FORETASTES**

A convenient way to begin the study of the Gospels is to raise the crucial issue of Jesus' identity, a subject the Gospels themselves feature and highlight. So who was this prophet, teacher, and healer anyway? We'll deem this chapter, therefore, a foyer or entranceway into our larger discussion of the Gospels. It offers a foretaste of things to come. Who Jesus is makes all the difference in the world. If we are to worship, serve, and center our very lives around this figure, we need a clear, focused picture of who He is. And the Gospels provide our primary witnesses.

At a turning point in His ministry, Jesus posed a pivotal question concerning His identity: "Whom do men say I am?" (Matthew 16:13; Mark 8:27; Luke 9:18). The varied responses, conveyed through His disciples, showed the degree of speculation and confusion that swirled around this popular—and highly controversial—figure. Perhaps people thought, *He's John the Baptist, or an ancient prophet like Elijah or Jeremiah, come back to life* (Matthew 16:14; Mark 8:28; Luke 9:19). Deep confusion about Jesus, of course, persists to our day. But unlike some of today's bizarre ideas about Jesus, at least those misguided suggestions of candidates came out of the right book: the Bible.

Jesus' follow-up question was more pointed: "But whom say ye that I am?" (Matthew 16:15; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20). While Peter's revelatory confession seemed straightforward ("Thou art the Christ, the son of the Living God"; Matthew 16:15; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20),<sup>1</sup> the apostles themselves would continue to struggle to fully comprehend Jesus' nature, magnitude, and mission.<sup>2</sup> His words and deeds far surpassed their expectations, leaving them bewildered, shocked, and amazed.

Jesus' awe inspiring signs and wonders even made them wonder, "What manner of man is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41; Matthew 8:27; Luke 8:25).

At this juncture, I'd like to introduce a slight, but significant, twist to these questions posed by Jesus, reframing them as, "Who do the Gospels say that I am?" Recasting the issue in this way will help to underscore the individual contributions of the four writers. While the Gospels are unified in their depiction of Jesus as "God . . . manifest[ed] in the flesh" (I Timothy 3:16), each goes about the task in a different way.

To be sure, the Gospels are not interested in answering many of the questions about Jesus' nature posed by various post-New Testament theologians. Such questions were often abstract or metaphysical in nature. And such questions tended to be framed by Greek philosophical categories and constructs. They ran counter to or were foreign to the primary intentions and interests of the Gospel writers.

Each Gospel writer sought to present Jesus within the framework of the overarching scriptural narrative. They considered, for example, the relationship of Jesus to Yahweh (Jehovah); what kind of Messiah He was; how He fulfilled the Scriptures; how His death, burial, and resurrection were the apex or climax of the grand Old Testament storyline; and so forth. Thus, the Gospels chiefly explained Jesus through the lens or matrix of Old Testament thought and expectations, not Greek philosophy. They were unanimous in telling "the story of how the God of Israel was embodied in Jesus."<sup>3</sup>

But before we try to answer our question (Who do the Gospels say that I am?), let's again be perfectly clear about something that is obvious but easy to overlook: there are four distinct Gospels, not one. Matthew is not Mark, John is not Luke, and so forth. This reality of multiple Gospels will affect the way we answer the question.

## **A GOSPEL-FLAVORED MILKSHAKE**

At one time or another probably, most preachers (myself included) have been guilty of picking and preaching from the one Gospel out of the four that best makes the point he or she was hoping to make. It is also tempting to blend the four Gospels into a single *mega*-Gospel. I call the result a Gospel “milkshake.” While it may not taste bad, the downside is that such an approach obscures the individual “flavors” each Gospel has to offer. We can miss out on each Gospel’s unique characteristics and features, including its distinctive coloration, hues, and nuances.

Having four Gospels also allows us to view Jesus from within a larger visual field. We achieve, if you will, a four-dimensional experience of their shared central character. Taken together, then, these portraits permit us to see Jesus from multiple angles, perspectives, or vantage points, expanding our outlook. Jesus thus appears more life-like to readers, almost “jumping out of the pages” of Scripture. Like the nineteenth-century photographic process known as daguerreotype, in which pictures looked as though they were suspended in midair, enabling an extremely vivid and reality-like quality, having four Gospels permits a more complete, multifaceted portrait of Jesus to emerge. A single Gospel could not have achieved this same effect. As Stephen Barton points out, the “plurality” of our four Gospels “allow[s] the richness and complexity of the truth about Jesus to be displayed.” At the same time, this composite portrait retains a unity and cohesion, a “coherence of the apostolic testimony to Jesus.”<sup>4</sup>

So, in brief, who did the Gospels say Jesus was?

## **MARKAN MYSTERIES**

We begin with Mark’s Gospel since it was likely the first to be written. Mark may have been crafted in part to appeal to Roman sensibilities and cultural aspirations. Here Jesus is



the wonder-working servant. Like his fellow Gospel writers, Mark also portrayed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, the embodiment of the God of the Old Testament. Yet, he generally refrained from making explicit statements to that effect,<sup>5</sup> inviting readers to arrive at this conclusion on their own. In fact, in Mark's account Jesus seemed to evade exposure of His identity, even demanding that those aware of who He was remain silent (e.g., Mark 1:40–43; 8:27–30). Because of the allusive, almost mysterious way Jesus attempted to conceal His identity, scholars have sometimes referred to this phenomenon in Mark as the “Messianic Secret.”<sup>6</sup>

Here is one example in Mark of how readers are prompted to connect the dots for themselves. After Jesus awakened and calmed the raging storm on the Sea of Galilee, the astounded disciples wondered, “What manner of man is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?” (Mark 4:41). Those familiar with Psalm 107 would recognize that Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, is the one who responds to prayer and delivers troubled sailors from dangerous storms at sea: “Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, and he bringeth them out of their distresses. He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still” (Psalm 107:28–29). The attentive reader of Mark recognizes the implicit connection that Jesus is the gracious, prayer-answering Yahweh of the Old Testament, the only one capable of silencing a threatening storm.<sup>7</sup>

## **A MATTHEAN MESSIAH**

Where Mark seemed a bit evasive about fully divulging Jesus' divine identity, expecting readers to come to their own “aha” moments, Matthew was quite clear from the beginning. He didn't beat around the bush. This royal, Jewish descendant of Abraham and David (Matthew 1:1) was none other than the Messiah, born of a virgin by the agency of the Holy Ghost (Matthew 1:18–21). As Richard Hays affirms, “Matthew is far

more overt than Mark in his interpretative strategy; indeed, in many passages we find him providing explicit explanations of Mark's hints and allusions."<sup>8</sup>

Significantly, this Jewish-oriented Gospel presented Jesus as the New Moses, the authoritative reinterpreter of Torah or the Law, the one who fulfills the Law and the Prophets. Matthew is saturated with Old Testament quotations, each typically introduced with a fulfillment formula, such as: "Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying . . ." (Matthew 1:22). In this particular instance of scriptural fulfillment, Matthew keyed Jesus' birth to a prophetic oracle from Isaiah 7:14. The oracle, originally addressed to King Ahaz, predicted the birth of a son to a virgin. This son's Hebrew name was "Emmanuel," interpreted by Matthew for his Greek-speaking readers as "God with us" (Matthew 1:23).

Matthew, therefore, pulled no punches. Jesus was none other than the God of the Old Testament come in person to His people Israel to rule as "King of the Jews" (Matthew 27:3). By extension, He was also the all-powerful, sovereign ruler over the whole world (Matthew 28:18–19). From this Gospel's beginning (Matthew 1:23) to its ending (Matthew 28:20), Jesus is God present with us.

### **A LUKAN DELIVERER**

Given his Gospel's universal appeal, Luke seems to have capitalized on Jesus' reference to make disciples of "all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Luke coordinated his account of Jesus with secular leadership and events (Luke 1:5; 2:2–3), a broadened scope and focus that continues into his second volume (Acts 1:8; 11:27–28; 18:1–2). Of the four, Luke's Gospel most intentionally shows the expanded reach of the gospel message to various social classes, from the poor and lowly (e.g., Mary's song in Luke 1:46–55) to the elite (like Theophilus; Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1), from women (Elizabeth and Mary in Luke

1–2) to outcasts like the despised Samaritans (Luke 9:51–56; 10:25–37; 17:15–19).

At the same time, like Mark and Matthew, Luke presented Jesus as the one specifically fulfilling Jewish hopes and aspirations. As Jesus explained to His fellow Emmaus Road travellers, He was Himself the grand subject of the Old Testament, of “the law of Moses, and . . . the prophets, and . . . the psalms” (Luke 24:44; compare Acts 28:23). He was ancient Israel’s redeemer (Luke 24:41). Luke crafted his narrative to show that Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection comprised the climactic moment of Jewish (and, by extension, world) history.<sup>9</sup>

More in the vein of Mark, however, Luke was more indirect in disclosing Jesus’ divinity.<sup>10</sup> Intriguingly, as Luke’s version of the story unfolds, references to “LORD” progressively apply to Jesus Himself. The designation “LORD” (all caps or small caps in the KJV) stands for the Greek word *kurios*, equivalent to the Old Testament name of God, Yahweh. While Caesar’s subjects referred to their emperor as “Lord,” Luke has portrayed Jesus as Lord or Yahweh. He alone is the true, sovereign Lord and God of the Greco-Roman world of the first century—as well as of all human history.<sup>11</sup>

## A JOHANNINE TEMPLE

Like the first three Gospels, John sought to demonstrate that the events surrounding Jesus were in continuity with—in fact the culmination of—the ongoing saga of God’s dealings with His people. And like his predecessors, in various ways John endeavored to show that Jesus was both human and divine. But whereas Luke’s Gospel begins (Luke 1:8–11) and ends at the Temple (Luke 24:52–53),<sup>12</sup> John presented Jesus as the Temple.

In the Old Testament, God’s presence took up temporary residence in sacred spaces. God walked with Adam and Eve, for example, in the garden sanctuary of Eden (Genesis 3:8). God’s glorious presence later descended upon and dwelt

among His people, Israel. This manifestation occurred first as a glory cloud filled the newly constructed Tabernacle of the wilderness (Exodus 40:34–38), then again at the dedication of Solomon’s Temple (II Chronicles 7:1–11).<sup>13</sup> Yet, although Solomon stated that he had constructed “an exalted house . . . a place for [Yahweh] to dwell in forever” (I Kings 8:13, NKJV), he wondered if God would “indeed dwell on the earth” (I Kings 8:27, NKJV), since God’s presence could not be confined to a building “made with hands” (Acts 27:24; see also II Chronicles 2:6; 6:18; Isaiah 66:1–2).

John drew on and echoed these ancient accounts of God’s house to communicate and symbolize Jesus’ identity.<sup>14</sup> In the opening of his Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as God’s Word or *Logos* (John 1:1). This rich and multifaceted term means, among other things, spoken word, expression, or discourse. The term, especially in its biblical usage, has ties to God speaking creation into existence (Genesis 1), to God’s wisdom (Proverbs 8), and to Torah or Law (Psalm 1:1–2; 19:7–11; John 1:17). In John 1:14, God’s Word, encapsulating His person, presence, and glory, “dwelt,” “tented,” or “tabernacled” among His people once again. Here the reference of the Greek verb for dwell (*skēnoō*) is to the Tabernacle of ancient Israel. In Jesus, God set up a tent and lived in our midst. Jesus is the glory-filled Tabernacle, the Temple, the dwelling place or house of God, the embodiment of God’s majesty on earth (John 2:18–21).

Although Jesus was falsely accused of being a human who had made Himself God (John 10:33), the reverse was actually true: in Jesus, God was revealed in human flesh (Colossians 2:9; I Timothy 3:16). Through the man Jesus, the *Logos* “became flesh [*sarx*]” (John 1:14). He was the same God (the “I AM”) who had spoken to Moses in the burning bush, who had preexisted Abraham (John 8:48–59; compare Exodus 3:13–14), and who had created the world (John 1:3, 10). Jesus had made the invisible God visible and “declared,” “explained,” or “interpreted” Him (John 1:18).