

# BIBLE SERIES: **"EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"**

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## **THE NEW TESTAMENT – INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPELS**



The Old Testament can be compared to a delicious entrée of a wonderful banquet--and now comes the New Testament as the main course—with the dessert being the book of Revelation that historically and prophetically wraps things up.

The apostle John put it this way: “For the law was given through Moses [*and* (instead of *but*)] grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). Grace and truth are certainly the basis for the Old Testament, but now in the New Testament, this grace and truth are *amplified* by Jesus Christ and the availability of the Holy Spirit to the Church. We read in Isaiah 42:21, “The Lord is well pleased for his righteousness’ sake; he will *magnify* the law, and make it *honorable*” (KJB).

This is the reason why you *can’t* understand the New Testament without the Old and the Old Testament is *incomplete* without the New.

It is most appropriate that the Gospels are situated right in the middle of the Bible--the fourth of its 7 sections: (1) the Law (2) the Prophets (3) the Writings (4) *the Gospels* (5) the Acts (6) the Epistles (7) Revelation. The previous sections point toward Christ, and those after *elaborate* on His teachings.

When you think of it, these four Gospels comprise *the most important writings in the history of mankind*—the life of God in the flesh, or Emmanuel as one of His names means--“God with us.”

All the rest of the books that exist can serve as the physical or spiritual helps, and in fact, many have contributed to much of mankind’s wellbeing. But with these four special biographies of Jesus Christ we can better learn more than anywhere else *how* we can enter the Kingdom of God and *receive* eternal life. Nothing can compare to these blessings and rewards!

This is why Christ said, “The law and the prophets were until John [since they preached God’s message]. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached [not by prophets but by the Word, God in the flesh], and everyone is pressing into it [seeking to enter it]” (Luke 16:16).

“The Four Gospels are,” writes Henry Halley, “by all odds, the *most important* part of the Bible: more important than all the rest of the Bible put together; more important *than all the rest of the books* in the whole world put together: for we could better afford to be without the knowledge of everything else than

to be without the knowledge of Christ” (*Bible Handbook*, p. 414).

This is why we should study this section with certain reverence. Here, Jesus Christ is portrayed as our perfect example, our Elder Brother, our loving High Priest, our Savior, Teacher and Coming King.

These Gospels are four accounts of Jesus Christ’s life, but carry out four *different roles*. Unger explains, “As portraits they present four different poses of *one* unique personality. Matthew by the Holy Spirit present *Christ as King*, Mark as a *Servant*, Luke as a *Man*, and John as *God*... Thus all four writers present the one and same unique Person, the God-Man, Servant of the Lord, King of Israel, and humanity’s Redeemer” (*Bible Handbook*, p. 465).

It is interesting that the four Gospels, directed to the Jews, Romans, Greeks and all of humanity, also fit the four faces of the cherubim: Matthew – Lion of Judah; Mark -- the worker Ox; Luke—humanity; and John – the eagle – representing divinity.

### **Matthew: publican and apostle**

Matthew, the first writer, was one of the original 12 apostles and was also called Levi (Mr. 2:14). It seems his original name was Levi and when named an apostle, his name was changed to Matthew, which means, “Gift of God.” We have a similar situation with Simon, whose name was changed to Peter (*Petros* in Greek or *Cephas* in Aramaic, meaning a stone), John 1:42).

Since Matthew was a publican—or a tax collector (Luke 5:27), he was well educated and knew quite well the Jewish customs. He therefore was the one who adds more information about the excessive regulations and distortions of the traditions by the Jewish authorities that had “poisoned” the well of God’s truths.

*The Illustrated Bible Manual* mentions, “Matthew focuses on Jesus’ relationship with the Jewish faith. He shows how Jesus came to fulfill the Old Testament, but at the same time, to judge the Jews for their disloyalty to their religion. No other Gospel denounces so vigorously the hypocritical attitudes of the Pharisees. The Jews are invited to see Jesus as the promised Messiah, the Son of David, and a sentence is passed against them for not responding to that calling” (p. 470). Matthew wrote this Gospel around the mid 50’s A.D.

Why were the publicans so despised by the Jews? One source mentions, "As a tax collector, Matthew could have been one of the local inhabitants who bid for the office, agreeing to pay Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, a certain sum in advance. Any money collected over that amount went into his own pocket. His tax office would have been located at a border to collect tolls on goods being brought from one district to another. Understandably, tax collectors were widely despised, not only because they at least indirectly served the oppressors of the Jews, the Romans, but also because they made a profit by adding their own charges to the established levies. They were classified as unclean individuals whom pious Jews could not associate. When Jesus ate at Matthew's home in a company of 'tax collectors and sinners,' he scandalized the Pharisees. Yet to Jesus, this action was a symbol that his kingdom included all people no matter how the world viewed them, 'for I came not to call the righteous, but sinners'" (Mt. 9:10, 13, *Who's Who in the Bible*, pp. 289-290).

Since Matthew's main audience is the Jewish people, he wants to make perfectly clear Jesus' impeccable ancestry that goes back to David and Abraham. He begins the Gospel with the phrase, "The book of the *genealogy* of Jesus Christ, the Son of *David*, the Son of *Abraham*" (Matthew 1:1).

Unger adds: "Matthew is a Jewish Gospel, rooted in OT prophecy relating to the coming of Messiah-King and His kingdom...The King is first named 'son of David' in the kingly line, the true heir to David's throne. Then, the 'son of Abraham,' the seed through whom the whole earth will be blessed. The order is significant because to the Jew (and this Gospel is slanted to the Jew) the Lord was first to present Himself as *King*, after that as Savior (Jn. 1:11-12)" (pp. 470-471).

### **The Gospel of Mark**

Mark directs his Gospel primarily to the cruel Romans, who ruled over Israel. He stressed that Jesus, the true King, came to serve and not be served. Unger adds, "It is slanted not to the Jew as in Matthew, but to the *Roman world*, giving a portrait of Jesus as the powerful Son of God whose word was law in the natural as well as the supernatural realm. The paradox is that this strong Son of God is Servant of man, Savior, Redeemer (Mark 10:45)" (p. 492).

Regarding Mark's background, Unger notes, "He was the son of a certain Mary of Jerusalem (Acts 12:12). He accompanied Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary tour (Acts 13:5), but for some reason left them at Perga (Acts 13:13). Later Paul and Barnabas separated because Paul refused to have Mark on the second tour. Mark accordingly went with [his cousin] Barnabas. Later Paul and Mark were reconciled (Col. 4:10-11; Philem. 24)...Like Luke, Mark was not an apostle, as were Matthew and John" (p. 493). Peter later regarded him as his own son (1 Peter 5:13) and Mark must have received much of the information about Jesus from Peter himself. He also wrote his account in the 50's A.D.

### **Luke, Paul's faithful companion**

Just as Mark gathered much of his information about Christ by accompanying Peter, it was Luke who accompanied Paul in many of his travels.

Unger explains, "The writer is Luke, 'the beloved physician' (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11). He, with Mark, was a companion worker of Paul, shown by the 'we' sections of Acts 16:10-11; 20:5; 21:1...Luke wrote his Gospel very likely while he was in Caesarea during Paul's imprisonment there (Acts 27:11), about A.D. 58, and before Acts was penned about A.D. 63."

Halley adds, "The special emphasis of Luke is on the *humanity* of Jesus. Representing Jesus as the Son of God, Luke features His Kingdom toward the Weak, the Suffering and the Outcast.

"While each of the Gospels was intended ultimately for all mankind, *Matthew* seems to have had in immediate view the *Jews*, *Mark*, the *Romans*, and *Luke*, the *Greeks*.

"Jewish civilization had been built around the Scriptures. Therefore Matthew appeals to their Scriptures. Roman civilization gloried in the idea of government and power. Therefore Mark calls particular attention to the *miracles* of Jesus as exhibiting His supernatural power. Greek civilization represented culture, philosophy, wisdom, reason, beauty, and education. So, to appeal to the thoughtful, cultured, philosophic Greek mind, Luke, in a complete, orderly, and classical story, which has been called the 'most beautiful book ever written,' depicts the glorious beauty and perfection of Jesus--the ideal, universal man. Then, to these three Gospels, John added his, to make it clear and unmistakable that Jesus was *God in human form*.

"Quite commonly, it is thought that Luke wrote his Gospel about the year A.D. 60, while Paul was in

prison in Caesarea, and followed it with the book of Acts during Paul's imprisonment in Rome the next two years, for the two books, addressed to the same person are, in a sense, *two volumes of one work*.

"Luke's two year sojourn in Caesarea, A.D. 58-60, afforded him abundant opportunity to get, firsthand, from the original companions of Jesus, and first founders of the Church, accurate information concerning all the details. Caesarea was only a few miles from Jerusalem and Jesus' mother may have been still alive, at John's house in Jerusalem. Luke may have spent many precious hours with her, listening to her reminiscences of her wondrous Son. And James, bishop of Jerusalem, Jesus' own brother, could have supplied Luke with full details of the whole story of Jesus' life" (p. 486).

#### **John the Apostle beloved by Jesus**

This final Gospel is very different from the others. Why?

Halley comments, "The special emphasis of John is the *Deity of Jesus*. It consists chiefly of Jesus' discourses and conversations. It gives things Jesus *said* rather than *did*. The historian Schaff calls this Gospel the 'most important literary production ever composed.'"

"John's father's name was Zebedee (Mt. 4:21). His mother seems to have been Salome (Mt. 27:56; Mk. 15:40), who, by comparing John 19:25, seems to have been a sister of Mary the mother of Jesus. If so, John was a *cousin* of Jesus, and, being about the same age, must have known Him from childhood.

"John was a business man of some means. He was one of the partners in a fishing business that employed 'hired servants' (Mark 1:16-20). Besides his fishing business in Capernaum, he had a house in Jerusalem (John 19:7), and was a personal acquaintance of the high-priest (John 18:15-16).

"He was a disciple of John the Baptist (John 1:35, 40). If he was a cousin of Jesus, as seems implied in the passages above cited, then he was kin to John the Baptist (Luke 1:36), and must have known of the angel's announcements about John and Jesus (Luke 1:17, 32). So when John the Baptist appeared, crying that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand, John the son of Zebedee was ready to take his stand with him.

"On the Baptist's testimony, he became an immediate disciple of Jesus (John 1:35-51), one of the first five disciples, and returned with Jesus to Galilee (John 2:2, 11). Then, it seems, he went back to his fishing business. Later, probably about a year,

Jesus called him to leave his business, and go about with Him. He was therefore with Jesus continually, and thus was an eyewitness of what is written in his Gospel.

"Jesus nicknamed [his brother and] him 'Sons of Thunder' (Mk. 3:17), which seems to imply that both had a vehement, violent temper. But this they brought under control. The incident of forbidding the stranger to use the name of Christ in casting out demons (Mk. 9:38), and the desire to call down fire on the Samaritans (Luke 9:14), are interesting sidelights on his nature. He was one of the three inner circle disciples. And he was recognized as the one closest to Jesus. Five times he is spoken of as the disciple 'whom Jesus loved' (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). He must have been a man of rare qualities of character to thus attract the companionship of Jesus.

"He and Peter became the recognizable leaders of the Twelve and though utterly different in dispositions, were generally together (John 20:2; Acts 3:1, 11; 4:13; 8:14).

"For a number of years, Jerusalem seems to have been his chief residence. According to a well-established tradition, his later years were spent in Ephesus. Nothing more is known of his activities or whereabouts in the interim. At Ephesus he lived to great age, and wrote his Gospel, three Epistles and Revelation. The date of his Gospel is usually assigned to about A.D. 90." (pp. 527-528).

Lastly, we are going to cover these Gospels in chronological order, and there are sixteen sections to completely go over the life of Christ.

In the next Bible Study we will cover all of John 1 – the true beginning of the chronology of Jesus Christ that starts with His preexistence.