

NEW TESTAMENT INTRODUCTION

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Contents

Jesus—The Reason for It All	2
Jesus' Life	4
The Gospels	6
Matthew	8
Luke	10
John	12
The Acts of the Apostles	14
Paul's Early Letters	16
Paul and Corinth	18
Paul and Rome	20
Paul's Later Letters	22
Hebrews	24
Peter and John	26
James, Jude, and 2 Peter	28
Revelation: A Book for the Millennium	30
Index	32
For Further Reading	32



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The Gospels

The four Gospels are the centerpiece of the New Testament—indeed, of the Christian faith. Without them Christianity could not have developed as it did, for as a religion it depends absolutely on the historical claim that Jesus of Nazareth lived, taught, acted, died, and rose from death at a particular time and place, and that these events show Him to be Son of God and Savior.

So Christianity exposes itself to the fundamental challenge:

- *Are the Gospels reliable?* They clearly purport to be historical accounts of the life of Jesus, but does the claim stand critical scrutiny? This question quickly involves another:

- *What exactly are the Gospels?* We need to judge them on their own terms, and not ask them to conform to our requirements. And this in turn makes us ask:

- *Why are there four Gospels—and how should we understand the relationship among them?* At first sight, both the overlaps and differences between them set a question mark against their reliability.

What are the Gospels?

We start with the second question. In recent years a scholarly consensus (led by Dr. Richard Burridge, of King's College, London) has grown that the Gospels are examples of a genre, or type of writing, known as the “Bios” (Greek for “life”). The Greco-Roman “Bios” was typically a work of short to medium length (fitting on one papyrus roll), concentrating on an individual of special significance, whose story would be told through typical incidents revealing his or her character, drawing moral lessons to be learned, and focusing on the birth and death of the person concerned.

This immediately suggests that we should not ask the Gospels to provide a comprehensive biography of Jesus, minutely documenting the details of His life. Not “biography,” but “Bios”—a broad-brush presentation—of the person through typical incidents that enable us to understand Him.

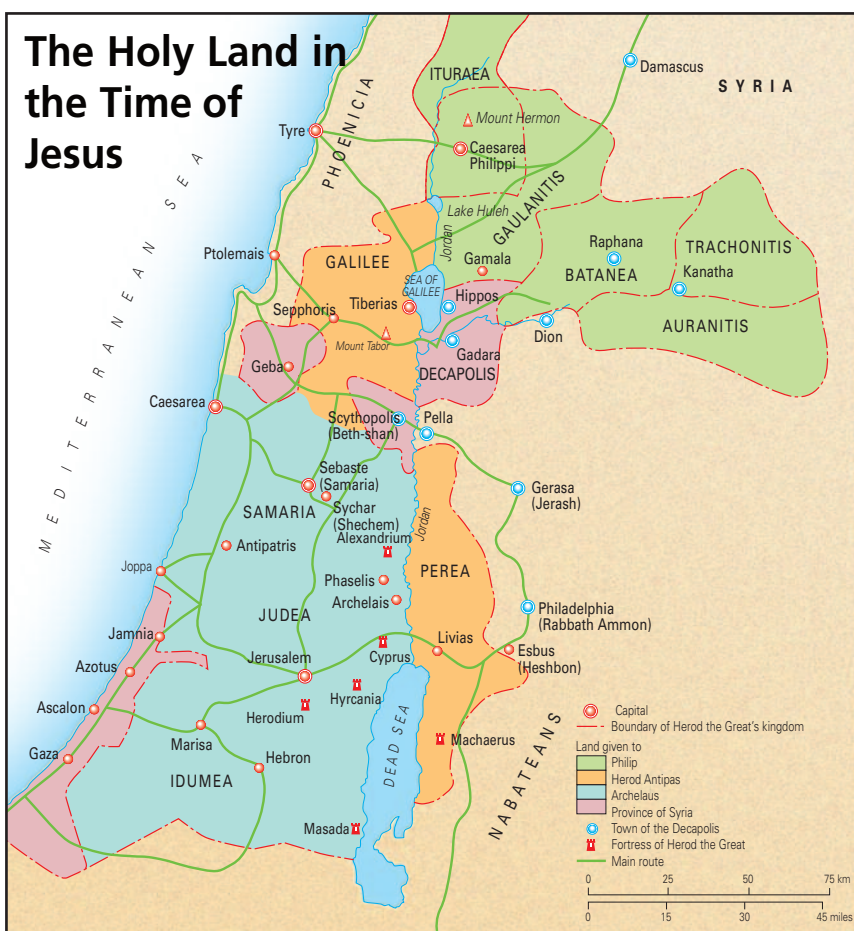
Why four Gospels?

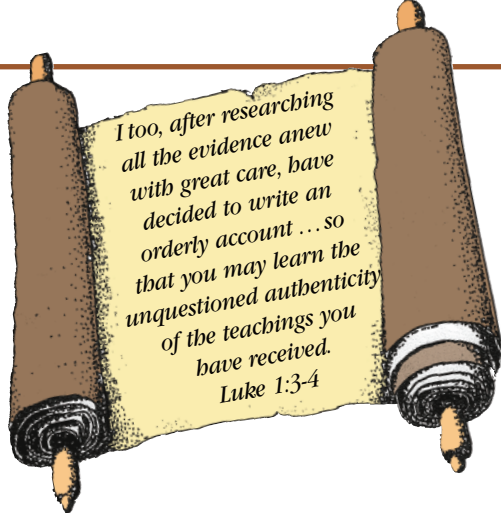
A widely-given answer is that each Gospel was associated with an important Christian center, or with one of the leading Apostles. Hence, initially (this view suggests), each Gospel was written only for a limited circle—a single church or maybe a group of churches—to address their particular needs.

Recently this theory has been attacked by a group of scholars led by Prof. Richard Bauckham of St. Andrew's University. He points out that there was extensive contact between the earliest Christian groups, and that it is highly unlikely that the Gospel-writers, as authors of a “Bios,” were trying to meet needs just in their own churches. And ancient book production was very haphazard. Authors could not prescribe who might receive a copy or make further copies for friends.

Filling in the gaps

If Bauckham's picture is right, then the Gospel writers almost certainly had contact with each other, and tried deliberately to supplement each other. This has long been recognized in the case of Mark. Mark is the shortest Gospel, and about 95% of his content is reproduced in Matthew and Luke, which are both much longer. It looks very much as if Mark was the





providing a composite of Jesus of Nazareth.

How accurate is this composite?

The Gospels first circulated under the gaze of eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry. Luke claims that his Gospel rests upon extensive research among "eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word"—that is (probably), those charged with remembering the "Word" of Jesus (Luke 1:1-4—see the scroll above). Within the parameters of the "Bios" genre, Luke strove for accuracy. The differences among the Gospels underline the impression of a figure of such towering significance that any attempt to capture Him in words is bound to be inadequate. But there is no need to doubt the broad reliability of these accounts.

Mark

An early tradition connects Mark's Gospel with Peter (see 1 Peter 5:13), and it is likely that Mark represents the collection of stories and traditions that Peter used in his long ministry. Mark wove them together into a crisp and vivid presentation of Jesus, emphasizing His power as a healer, His preaching (although

first to be written, and then Matthew and Luke both used Mark, adding further extensive material. Scholars cannot decide whether Matthew knew Luke, or vice versa, or whether they were written independently. John has so little material in common with the others that it looks as if he knew all three, and deliberately tried to widen the picture they paint—using other traditions, and telling the story very differently.

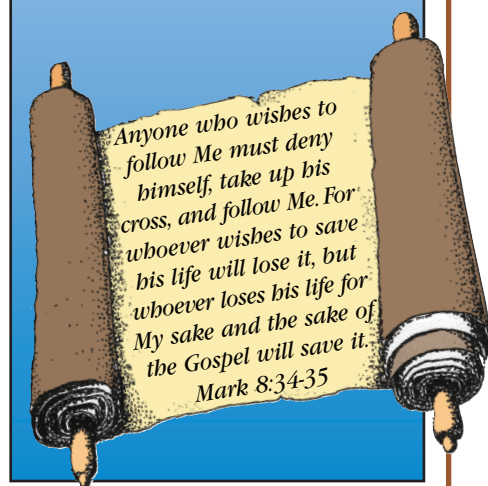
So it seems as though the Gospel writers each knew that the other Gospels were inadequate, and sought to extend the picture. The first Christians recognized this by refusing to choose among them, and accepting all four together as

The Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem, probable site of Jesus' death and burial.



Outline of Mark

1:1-15	The scene is set
1:16-3:6	Jesus' initial ministry in Galilee
3:7-4:34	Jesus the Teacher
4:35-6:6	Jesus the Healer
6:7-9:1	On a wider stage: Jesus the Messiah?
9:2-10:45	The heart of discipleship: Jesus the Leader
10:46-13:37	Jesus the Son of David, the Master of the House
14:1-15:47	Jesus the new Covenant Sacrifice
16:1-8	The new start



Mark doesn't record much of it), the opposition He provoked, the puzzlement He caused even among His disciples, and their difficulty in deciding who or what He was. Mark emphasizes Jesus' expectation of His own death, His call to sacrificial discipleship embracing suffering like His, and His pronouncement of judgment on the Temple and the leaders of Israel. He tells the story of Jesus' last week in great detail. The Resurrection is not directly described, and Mark's story does not end so much as break off, as though Mark wanted to convey an impression of incompleteness.

Paul and Rome

Paul's letter to the Romans is his longest and most influential. Romans contains the clearest exposition of Paul's doctrine of justification by faith. Whereas Paul's other letters are related to problems in the churches addressed, Romans is more like a detached summary of his Gospel (1:16), perhaps sent to Rome because he wanted to introduce himself to them, so that they would willingly support him (1:13; 15:22-24).

Paul's manifesto

However, Romans is not "the Gospel in abstract." It is rooted in Paul's missionary work. Günther Bornkamm has called it "Paul's Last Will and Testament," because he suggests that Paul wrote it consciously at a turning point in his life. After finishing his ministry in the east (15:19, 23), he is now undertaking a

dangerous journey to Jerusalem. He does not know whether he will survive it (15:30-31). So he sends to the Roman church, which he hopes to visit, a summary of the Gospel for which he has fought, "the power of God that offers salvation" for Jews and Gentiles alike (1:16) (possibly hoping that they will share this knowledge with the church in Jerusalem by whom their church was founded).

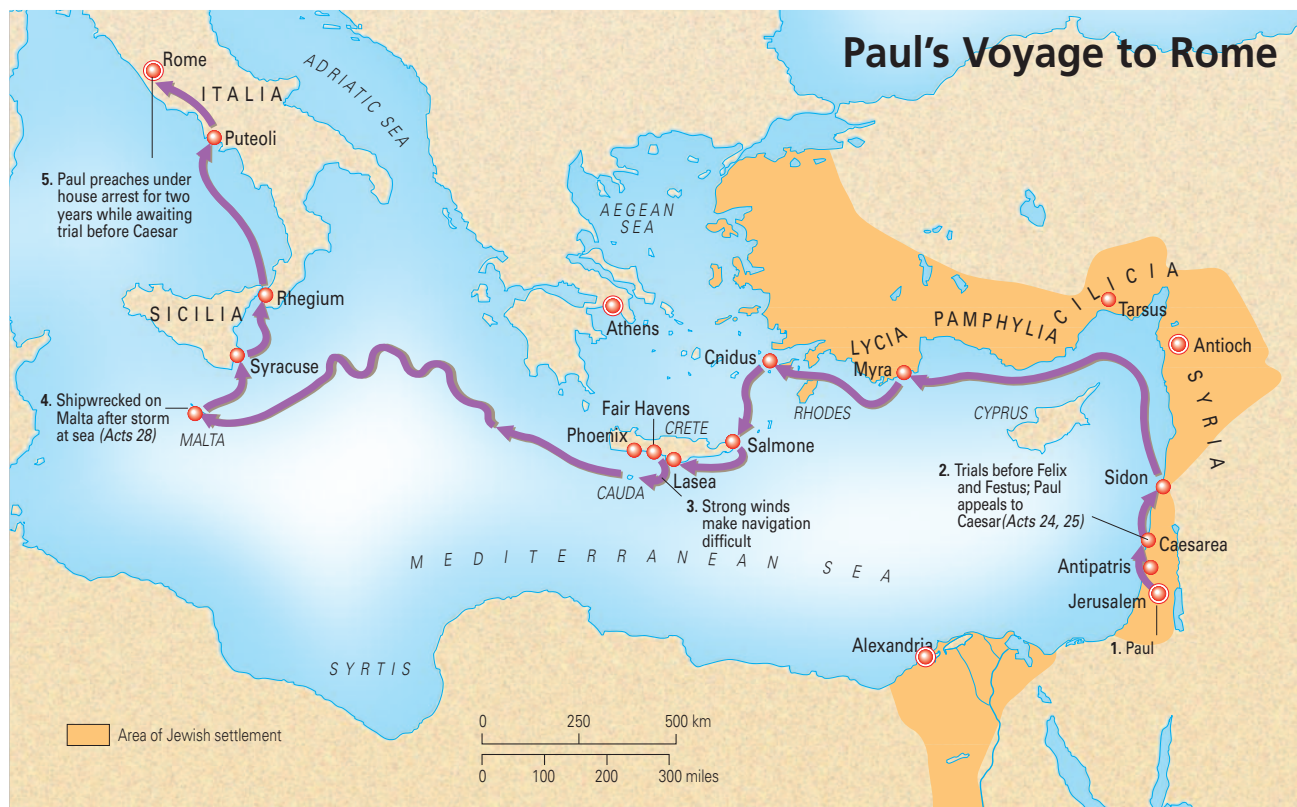
There is much drama, therefore, just under the surface. We catch echoes of the arguments, sometimes intense, through which Paul has come. And "justification by faith" is at the heart of it. In Galatians Paul argues his case directly and passionately. In Romans he reflects on the argument, draws wider implications, and spells out the consequences—but still passionately.

Fact file: Paul

- 56** Writes to Rome from Corinth. Travels to Jerusalem. Riot, arrest, and hearing before Felix (*Acts 20–24*)
- 56–58** In prison without trial in Caesarea (*Acts 24:27*)
- 58** Hearings before Festus and Agrippa (*Acts 25–26*). Sea journey and shipwreck on Malta (*Acts 27:1–28:10*)
- 59** Arrives in Rome

Justification by faith

The essence of the argument concerns the relation between Christ and God's covenant with Israel. For many Jewish Christians, the covenant was the foundation of all relationship with God. It was "forever"—enshrined in the promises given to Abraham and sealed by the giving of the Law through Moses. It followed, therefore, that the blessings brought by the Messiah were available only within the covenant—to Jews, first and foremost, but also to Gentiles who committed themselves to the





The Forum, ancient Rome.

God of Israel through circumcision.

Paul's answer

Paul refused to accept this impressive argument. In a nutshell, he says:

1. The covenant with Israel was never designed to bring blessing exclusively to those within it, but was meant to bring blessing to the Gentile world. Paul uses Old Testament quotations to make this point (2:22-24; 4:16-17; 9:25-26; 10:12-13, 20; 15:8-12).

2. Neither was the covenant ever a guarantee of salvation. In fact, it promised judgment on the disobedient, as much as blessing on the circumcised (2:25-29; 9:27-29;

11:7-10, 20). Only Christ brings a guarantee of salvation (8:31-39), and He came not just to fulfill the promises to Abraham, but to meet the need of the world caused by the sin of Adam (5:12-21).

3. Jesus brings salvation, through His atoning death, to all who believe, Jew or Gentile (3:21-31), because all have exactly the same need of deliverance from the power of sin (1:18-32; 3:9-20).

4. Abraham was not "justified" before he was circumcised, and thus gives a pattern for today: uncircumcised Gentiles may be justified like him, and so claim him as their "father" (4:1-25).

5. And this has been Paul's experience: it is simply a fact that Gentile believers have received righteousness by faith in Christ—and this fact must revolutionize our understanding of the ways of God (2:14-16, 26-29; 3:22-24, 29-30; 9:30; 11:17). By the Holy Spirit, they have been transformed (6:17-18; 7:6; 8:9-10).

6. So life in the Spirit, rather than obedience to the Law, is what God now asks of His people. In any case, because of the power of sin, the Law could not deliver what it promised (7:4-8:8).

7. But God has not abandoned Israel! He is still faithful to His

Outline of Romans

1:1-17	Paul, set apart to preach the Gospel of God
1:18-3:20	The need for the Gospel: universal sin
3:21-4:25	The essence of the Gospel, illustrated in Abraham
5:1-21	The Man of the Gospel: the Christ Who dies for us
6:1-8:39	The life of the Gospel: death to sin, life in the Spirit
9:1-11:36	The people of the Gospel: Jews and Gentiles in God's plan
12:1-15:13	The obedience of the Gospel: community in Christ
15:14-33	Paul's ambitions, plans, and fears
16:1-27	Greetings to unite the church

covenant promises. But these promises will be fulfilled in the context of the worldwide salvation that He plans (11:1-36).

8. So the Church, made up of Jews and Gentiles together and defined not by loyalty to Moses but by the love of Christ, is the body that can now rightly claim to be the people of God, and must live as such (12:1-15:13)!

An example to be heeded

It appears from chapter 14 that Paul probably also had a particular issue in mind—a conflict in the Roman church between Jewish and Gentile believers over practical issues arising from their life together—the observation of Jewish food laws and festivals. Amazingly, though he has argued strongly that "Christ is the fulfillment of the Law" (10:4), Paul gently encourages the Gentile Christians simply to accept their Jewish brothers and sisters, and not to require them to go against their consciences (14:13-23).



Bust of the Emperor Nero.