

the life of our Lord Jesus Christ in a format of testimonies that were compiled by those who were eyewitnesses of our Lord and Saviour. The Gospel of John emphasizes the events in the life of Christ that confirm His deity. John weaves within his Gospel seven divine names that Jesus declares about Himself, seven miracles that show His deity, seven Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus fulfilled. John closes His Gospel with Jesus calling His disciples to follow Him. Thus, we see in the book of Acts that it is not just a chronology of the history of the early church. Rather, Luke selected particular people and events in order to reveal most accurately the situations that Christians lived in during this part of history. The book of Acts is then able to explain why the Holy Spirit was able to move so mightily in the hearts and lives of certain men. The book of Acts becomes more than a history book. It provides a moral foundation for the establishment of the doctrines of the New Testament church in the midst of persecution from all established religions. It provides a defense for the preaching of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ as well as defending the ethics of these Christians who were accused by their adversaries of committing evil atrocities. Finally, an additional theme can be found woven within all four Gospels and Acts, which is the lesson that persecutions always accompany those who choose to follow Christ. Thus, we see that these five books not only give us a biography of the life of Christ and of a history of the early Church, but they each weave within their collections of events a unique theme and a lesson to be learned.

It is important to understand the literary structure of the Gospels and Acts when reading and studying them. They are not just historical records; they were intended to be teaching tools for the early Church. When critics encounter what appear to be discrepancies and inaccuracies between the recorded events within the four Gospels, it is because these critics are basing their arguments upon the assumption that these works were intended to be historical only, when in fact their greater purpose is to teach the believers particular lessons. It is in this same manner of providing a moral lesson that ancient secular historians, such as Plutarch, Tacitus, Suetonius, Josephus, and Philo, also wrote their literature. This was the style of historiography during this period in history. Even if the events were not recorded in chronological order, even if all of the details of a particular event were not recorded, the historian made sure that he provided a moral, ethical, or polemic work that could be used to teach a lesson. This is the way that we view the arrangement of the Gospels and Acts as a genre when they record historical events.

**D. Occasion** - It was over twenty years from the time of Jesus' ascension to the writing of the first of the four Gospels. This is a reflection of the strong influence of oral tradition within the Jewish culture. There was no real need to write of such events in light of their precise and accurate practice of handing down Jewish heritage through oral tradition. When the Gospel message began to gain momentum within the Greek culture, it became necessary to record these stories in order to preserve their accuracy. Since the Greeks were less schooled at being faithful to the letter, the occasion was found to record the story. This purpose of maintaining accuracy to the historicity of Jesus Christ is stated by Luke within the preface to his Gospel (Lk 1:10-4).

**E. Thematic Scheme of the Four Gospels - Historical Development of the Themes of the Gospels and Acts** – Since the time of the early Church, biblical scholars have attempted to identify a thematic scheme for the four Gospels. This discussion will deal with a) the Use of the Term “Gospels,” b) the Symbolic Attributes of the Evangelists by the Early Church Fathers, and c) Modern Themes of the Gospels.

a) *The Use of the Term “Gospels”* - The term “Gospels” accurately reflects the foundational theme of this first major division of the New Testament, in that the “good news” (εὐαγγέλιον) offers salvation (justification) to mankind. This title has been assigned to the first division of the New Testament since the earliest days of the Church. Helmut Koester says the word “Gospels” was first used as a collective term to describe the four writings of the Evangelists as early as the middle of the second century.<sup>32</sup> For example, perhaps the earliest witness to the use of this title comes from *Justin Martyr* (A.D. 100-165), who writes, “For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon

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<sup>32</sup>Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, c1990), 24.

them.” (*First Apology* 66.3) Helmut Koester tells us that Justin Martyr uses the term “Gospel” on three occasions to refer to the writings of the Evangelists.<sup>33</sup>

*b) The Symbolic Attributes of the Evangelists by the Early Church Fathers* - The early Church fathers recognized that there were individual, yet unified themes among the Gospels that place emphasis upon the various aspects of the office and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Philip Schaff gives an historical summary of the “symbolic attributes of the Evangelists.”<sup>34</sup> In his discussion on the unity of the Gospels, *Irenaeus* (A.D. 130-200) says, “He [Jesus] who was manifested to men, has given us the Gospel under four aspects, but bound together by one spirit.” (*Against Heresies* 3.11.8) He goes on to compare the four Gospels to the four living creatures of Revelation 4:7, “And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle.” *Irenaeus* assigns a symbol to each Gospel in relation to the allegorical meanings of the four faces of the living creatures, an interpretation which will be imitated by many later church fathers: Matthew is symbolized by the man, Mark by the eagle, Luke by the ox, and John by the lion. In his prologue to Luke Ambrose (A.D. 339-397) draws a parallel with the living creatures of Revelation and the four Gospels (*PL* 15 cols. 1611C-1612C). In his prologue to Matthew, Jerome (A.D. 342-420) refers to the creatures in Ezekiel 1:10, “As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion, on the right side: and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle,” switching the symbolisms of Mark and John assigned by Irenaeus, but he follows the same allegorical method (*PL* 26 col. 19).<sup>35</sup> Augustine (A.D. 354-430) uses the living creatures in Revelation to assign the lion to Matthew, the man to Mark, the ox to Luke and the eagle to John.<sup>36</sup> In his *Tractates on John*, Augustine assigns the eagle to John.<sup>37</sup> In his *Synopsis Scripturae Sacrae*, Pseudo-Athanasius (4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> c.) assigns the man to Matthew, the ox to Mark, the lion to Luke, and the eagle to John (*PG* 28 col. 432D). Schaff tells us that Jerome’s interpretation of “symbolic attributes of the Evangelists” became the most popular in the centuries that followed, being represented in the arts<sup>38</sup> and Christian literature.<sup>39</sup> For example, the Christian poets Sedulius (5<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>40</sup> and Adam of St. Victor<sup>41</sup> follow Jerome’s symbolic assignment in their poetry. Juvencus (early 4<sup>th</sup> c.)

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<sup>33</sup>The three uses of the word “Gospel” as a reference to the four writings of the Evangelists are cited by Helmut Koester, with the other two uses as follows: *Justin Martyr* writes, “Moreover, I am aware that your precepts in the so-called Gospel are so wonderful and so great, that I suspect no one can keep them; for I have carefully read them.” (*Dialogue of Justin* 10.2) and he writes, “...but also in the Gospel it is written that He said: ‘All things are delivered unto me by My Father; and, ‘No man knoweth the Father but the Son; nor the Son but the Father, and they to whom the Son will reveal Him.’” (*Dialogue of Justin* 100.1) See Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, c1990), 40-41.

<sup>34</sup>Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955), 585-589.

<sup>35</sup>See also Nathaniel Lardner’s translation in *The Works of Nathaniel Lardner*, vol. 4 (London: Joseph Ogle Robinson, 1829), 440.

<sup>36</sup>Augustine, *de Consensu Evangelistarum* 1.6 (*PL* 34 col. 1046).

<sup>37</sup>Augustine associates John with the eagle, writing, “In the four Gospels, or rather in the four books of the one Gospel, Saint John the apostle, not undeservedly in respect of his spiritual understanding compared to the eagle, has elevated his preaching higher and far more sublimely than the other three; and in this elevating of it he would have our hearts likewise lifted up. For the other three evangelists walked with the Lord on earth as with a man; concerning His divinity they have said but little; but this evangelist, as if he disdained to walk on earth, just as in the very opening of his discourse he thundered on us, soared not only above the earth and above the whole compass of air and sky...” (*Tractates on John* 36.1) (*ANF* 7)

<sup>38</sup>Anna Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art*, vol. 1 (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1900), 124-166.

<sup>39</sup>Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955), 585-589.

<sup>40</sup>*S Carmen Paschael*, lines 355-359. See *Caelii Sedulii Opera Omnia*, ed. Francisco Antonio de Lorenzana (Romae, 1893), 194-195.

associates these symbols with the Evangelists in his poetry.<sup>42</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas follows Jerome's symbolism of the Gospels in his *Catena Aurea* as well as citing a number of other ancient authors who followed this scheme.<sup>43</sup> Support for these symbolic attributes of the Evangelists finds its way into modern biblical scholarship as well (note Wordsworth,<sup>44</sup> Lange,<sup>45</sup> and others<sup>46</sup>).<sup>47</sup>

In contrast, the Reformers began to take a more critical approach to the themes of the Gospels, as seen in John Calvin's (1509-1564) argument to his *Harmony of the Evangelists*, the type of approach we find reflected in modern biblical criticism.<sup>48</sup>

*c) Modern Themes of the Gospels* - The modern themes of the Gospels representing Christ as the King, Son of God, Son of Man, and Suffering Servant have become popular today, having their roots in the early Church fathers as well. For example, Augustine discusses the emphasis of Christ as the King in Matthew's Gospel when proposing his symbol as the lion.<sup>49</sup> Anthony Deane offers a lengthy evaluation of the symbolic attributes of the patristic fathers as well as those proposed by modern scholarship.<sup>50</sup> However, these efforts to propose themes in association with symbols have offered students of the Holy Scriptures very little help in unraveling the thematic schemes and structures of the four Gospels and Acts. The following discussion offers a three-fold thematic scheme of the Gospels using biblical theology that has not been offered by previous scholarship.

*d) Three-fold Theme of the Gospels and Acts* – The primary theme of the Gospels and Acts is the claim that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, sent from Heaven to atone for the sins of mankind. The secondary theme that serves as evidence to support this claim is the four Gospels and book of Acts as they present the testimony of God the Father (John), the Old Testament Scriptures (Matthew), the miracles of Jesus (Mark), and the eye-witness testimony (Luke), as well as the testimony of the early church apostles who took the Gospel to the end of the civilized world (Acts). The third theme is the call for men to believe the Gospel and follow Jesus.

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<sup>41</sup>See XXXII *St. John the Evangelist*, lines 31-42. See Adam of St. Victor, *The Liturgical Poetry of Adam of St. Victor*, trans. Digby S. Wrangham, vol. 1 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 1881), 197. See *CI Of the Holy Evangelists*, lines 31-42 and *CII Of the Holy Evangelists*, lines 21-40. See Adam of St. Victor, *The Liturgical Poetry of Adam of St. Victor*, trans. Digby S. Wrangham, vol. 3 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 1881), 159, 165.

<sup>42</sup>*Evangelicas Historiae*, book 4: Preface (PL 19 cols. 53D-56A).

<sup>43</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers*, vol. 1, second edition (Oxford: John Henry, 1864), 3.

<sup>44</sup>Christopher Wordsworth, *The New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, in the Original Greek: with Introductions and Notes*, vol. 1, fifth edition (London: Rivingtons, Waterloo Place, 1867), xli.

<sup>45</sup>John Peter Lange, *The Gospel According to Matthew, Together with a General Theological, and Homiletical Introduction to the New Testament*, in *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal, and Homiletical, with Special Reference to Ministers and Students*, trans. Philip Schaff (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1872), 25-26.

<sup>46</sup>Andrew Jukes, *The Characteristic Differences of the Four Gospels* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1853).

<sup>47</sup>William Alexander writes, "The prevalent interpretation of Biblical scholars tends to the following distribution:—the ox is the symbol of sacrifice, and stamps the Gospel of St. Matthew: the lion represents strength and victory, and suits the Gospel of St. Mark; the Man refers to the human sympathy and the salvation offered to universal humanity, and, therefore, accords with St. Luke. Heavenly aspirations and thoughts elevated by the dogma of dogmas to the Divinity of Jesus Christ, claim for themselves the symbol of the eagle, and belong to St. John." See William Alexander, *The Leading Ideas of the Gospels* (London: MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1898), 14-15.

<sup>48</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke*, 3 vols., trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1845).

<sup>49</sup>Augustine, *de Consensu Evangelistarum* 1.6 (PL 34 col. 1046). See also comments by Christopher Wordsworth, *The New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, in the Original Greek: with Introductions and Notes*, vol. 1, fifth edition (London: Rivingtons, Waterloo Place, 1867), xli.

<sup>50</sup>Anthony C. Deane, *How to Understand the Gospels*, in *Hodder and Stoughton's People's Library*, ed. Sidney Dark (London: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.).

***F. The Literary Structure of the Four Gospels*** – The literary structure of the four Gospels will discuss (1) the Structural Relationship between the Four Gospels and Acts, and (2) the Thematic Scheme of the Gospels and Acts.

*1. The Structural Relationship between the Four Gospels and Acts* - An additional comment is worth noting about the structural relationship of the four Gospels. The Gospel of John serves as a foundational book that the Synoptic Gospels are built upon. Just as the epistle of Romans serves as a foundation upon which the themes of the other eight “church” epistles are laid, that is, Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians and Colossians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Philippians, so does the Gospel of John serve the other Gospels. For example, the Gospel of John is structured so as to give the testimonies of the Father (1:1-18), of John the Baptist (1:19-51), of Jesus’ miracles (2:1 to 12:11), of Scripture (12:12 to 20:31) and of Jesus Himself (21:1-25). Matthew’s Gospel emphasizes John’s testimony of the Old Scripture. Mark’s Gospel emphasizes John’s testimony of Jesus’ miracles. Luke-Acts emphasizes John’s testimony of the testimony of men. This helps explain why the Gospel of John and the epistle to the Romans is so popular among new believers, since they serve as a foundation to their type of New Testament literature.

The Gospel of John gives us the 5-fold testimonies of the deity of Jesus Christ. It opens with the testimony of the Father revealing Jesus Christ as the Son of God. After revealing the testimonies of John the Baptist, of Jesus’ miracles and of Old Testament fulfillment, the final chapter shows Jesus Christ calling us to follow Him because He is truly the Son of God. John’s Gospel takes us on a journey in which we, too, must decide whether to accept Jesus Christ as God, or to reject this testimony. If we accept this testimony, then we are ready to take the next journey into the testimonies given by the three Synoptic Gospels.

The Gospel of Matthew is structured like our spiritual journey. It begins with God’s foreknowledge of Christ’s birth, then has a brief passage about Christ’s water baptism that emphasizes justification, then takes us on a journey of sanctification using five major discourses. Each discourse emphasizes one aspect of our spiritual journey, which includes indoctrination (1<sup>st</sup> discourse), our calling (2<sup>nd</sup> discourse), how to handle persecutions from the world (3<sup>rd</sup> discourse) and false doctrine from the Church (4<sup>th</sup> discourse) and then into our glorification (5<sup>th</sup> discourse). Matthew’s Gospel serves to teach us about the Christian journey, so that we can disciple others on the journey.

The Gospel of Mark takes us on a journey that trains us how to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ with signs and miracles following.

The book of Luke-Acts teaches us how to take the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the uttermost parts of the world, beginning where we are. The book of Acts explains the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering us to accomplish these things.

*2. The Thematic Scheme of the Gospels and Acts* - As we reflect upon the four Gospels, we can note how each one of them has a popular passage. When we think of the Gospel of Matthew we are most often reminded of the Sermon on the Mount. For Mark, the most popular passage appears to be the Parable of the Sower. The pivotal point in Luke’s Gospel is Peter’s confession of Jesus as “the Christ of God” at Caesarea Philippi, which is followed by his unique material in the Travel Narrative. John’s Gospel opens with the popular poetic passage of Jesus as the Word of God, which was made flesh and dwelt among us. We can understand why each of these passages is popular within their assigned Gospels by evaluating their position and role in relation to the overall structure, or narrative scheme, of their respective Gospels.

*The Gospel of John – How the Five-fold Witness of John 1:14-18 Reflects the Structure of John’s Gospel* – Within the opening passage of John’s Gospel is found a brief summary of the five-fold witness that Jesus is the Son of God (1:14-18).



Perseverance: Worldliness (6:19 to 7:12)	⇒	See Matt 13:1-52
Perseverance: False Doctrines (7:13-20)	⇒	See Matt 18:1-35
Glorification (7:21-23)	⇒	See Matt 24:1 to 25:46

*The Gospel of Mark: How the Four Parables of Mark 4:1-32 Reflect the Structure of Mark's Gospel* – The Parable of the Sower (4:1-20) reflects the underlying theme of Mark's Gospel, which is the testimony of Jesus Christ as the Son of God through the preaching of the Gospel. The Parable of the Sower reveals how the proclamation of the Gospel produces justification with God in the hearts of men. The parabolic scheme of the three parables (4:21-32) following Mark's Parable of the Sower foreshadows the structure of the rest of Mark's Gospel, with the Parable of the Sower being the central passage of the Gospel.

Parable of the Sower (4:1-20)	⇒	on Justification
The Light Under the Bushel (4:21-25)	⇒	Mark 4:35 to 7:23 on Indoctrination
The Growing Seed (4:26-29)	⇒	Mark 7:24 to 9:50 on Perseverance
The Mustard Seed (4:30-32)	⇒	Mark 10:1 to 13:37 on Glorification

The Parable of the Light Under the Bushel (4:21-25), which teaches us that as the light of the Gospel shines forth into our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel, we become indoctrinated with God's Word, and this parable foreshadows the next passage in Mark 4:35 to 7:23, which places emphasis upon indoctrination.

The Parable of the Growing Seed (4:26-29), which explains how God causes the seeds that we sow to grow and produce a harvest when we are faithful to persevere in proclaiming the Gospel, foreshadows the next passage in Mark 7:24 to 9:50, which places emphasis upon perseverance.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed (4:30-32), which tells us the end result of our faithfulness to preach the Gospel as the Kingdom of God grows into the greatest kingdom upon the earth, foreshadows the next passage in Mark 10:1 to 13:37, which places emphasis upon glorification.

*The Gospel of Luke* – Jesus' first sermon to the people of Nazareth in their synagogue reveals the underlying theme of the book of Luke, which is the testimony of eye-witnesses as they are filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus reads from the book of Isaiah and says that the Spirit of the Lord is upon Him because of two reasons, because He has been anointed to testify of the Gospel and because He has been sent from God with this testimony. Therefore, the structure of the book of Luke reflects Jesus as He retreats to be with the Lord and is filled with the Spirit, and as He returns to preach the Gospel and demonstrate His authority to deliver this testimony by His works.

*The Book of Acts* – Jesus' final words to His disciples in Acts 1:8 reveal the underlying theme of the book of Acts, which is the witness of the apostles as they were empowered by the Holy Spirit to testify of Jesus Christ unto the ends of the earth. This verse reveals the structure of the book of Acts, which reads, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." The book of Acts reflects the progressive spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, from Jerusalem (Acts 1:6 to 5:42), into Judea and Samaria (Acts 6:1 to 12:25), unto the ends of the Earth (Acts 13:1 to 28:31).

## INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW<sup>51</sup>

The Gospel of Matthew serves the unique role of bridging the gap between the Old and New Testaments. The emphasis of the early Church immediately after Jesus' ascension into Heaven was to interpret the New Covenant in His blood in light of Old Testament prophecies. This is exactly what Jesus began to teach immediately before His departure when He walked with the two on the road to Emmaus and when He appeared to His disciples before His Ascension. As these early disciples were better able to understand how Jesus Christ fulfilled these prophecies as the Messiah, they were able to effectively proclaim the Gospel to the Jewish people. Because the Gospel of Matthew emphasizes the testimony of the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus is the Son of God, it reflects the earliest form of the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ by the emerging New Testament Church.

This introduction to the Gospel of Matthew will deal with its historical setting, literary style, and theological framework.<sup>52</sup>

### HISTORICAL SETTING

- I. Authorship and Canonicity
- II. Date and Place of Writing
- III. Recipients
- IV. Occasion

### LITERARY STYLE

- V. Comparison of the Gospels
- VI. Various Themes Emphasized
- VII. Grammar and Syntax

### THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

- VIII. Purpose
- IX. Thematic Scheme
- X. Literary Structure
- XI. Outline of the Book

## HISTORICAL SETTING

Each book of the Holy Scriptures is cloaked within a unique historical setting. An examination of this setting is useful in the interpretation of the book because it provides the context of the passage of Scripture under examination. The section on the historical setting of the Gospel of Matthew will provide a discussion on its authorship, date and place of writing, recipients, and occasion. This discussion supports the early Church tradition that the apostle Matthew was the first of the Evangelists to write his Gospel at an early date between A.D. 38-60 while in Palestine to early Jewish believers prior to his departure to preach abroad.

### I. Authorship and Canonicity

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<sup>51</sup>The following introduction to the Gospel of Matthew is largely a compilation of the works listed in the bibliography, so that the contents within the sub-sections on historical background, authorship, date, recipients, characteristics, occasion, and purpose originated from these authors. However, the sections on theme and outline originated largely from my personal insights as an effort to supply a thematic scheme to this book.

<sup>52</sup>Someone may associate these three categories with Hermann Gunkel's well-known three-fold approach to form criticism when categorizing the genre found within the book of Psalms: (1) "a common setting in life," (2) "thoughts and mood," (3) "literary forms." In addition, the *Word Biblical Commentary* uses "Form/Structure/Setting" preceding each commentary section. Although such similarities were not intentional, but rather coincidental, the author was aware of them and found encouragement from them when assigning the three-fold scheme of historical setting, literary style, and theological framework to his introductory material. See Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction*, trans. Thomas M. Horner, in *Biblical Series*, vol. 19, ed. John Reumann (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1967), 10; see also *Word Biblical Commentary*, eds. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas, Texas: Word Incorporated, 1989-2007).