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*Section 2*

**The  
Synoptic  
Gospels  
and the  
Acts of the  
Apostles**

## What Is a Gospel?

“Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord” (Luke 2:10–11). With these words, the angel of the Lord announced to the shepherds the birth of Christ. And with these words, this anonymous angel encapsulated for the shepherds and for us the very meaning of *Good News*: You have a Savior. Your Messiah and Lord has come.

*Gospel* means “good news.” In these verses we are told that Jesus Christ is the Good News. Jesus Christ is the Gospel. But of course, our study in this book is of the four written Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The purpose of these written Gospels, the inspired Word of God, is to lead us directly to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

In this next part, we look closely at the relationship between Jesus himself and the Gospels that witness to him and to his message. The Gospels we study today are an end result of a long process. Of course they began with the life and teaching of Jesus, but how did they come to be written in the first place? Why are the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) so similar and yet different from one another? (Remember that *synoptic* means “seeing the whole together.”) And for whom were they written? What were their target audiences in the first centuries of the Church?

There are only two articles in this part, but they lay the groundwork for a detailed study of each of the synoptic Gospels to be studied in the rest of this section.

The articles in this part address the following topics:

- Article 11: “The Formation of the Gospels” (page 60)
- Article 12: “An Overview of the Synoptic Gospels” (page 65)

## Article

## 11 The Formation of the Gospels

What exactly is a Gospel? How did it come to be? Is a Gospel one person's eyewitness account? Has the author written a kind of diary, jotting down his own observations as he witnesses events? Or has he written a research paper, gathering information together from various sources?

The answers to these questions are very important because understanding the purpose and the process of the formation of the Gospels helps us to understand why the Gospels are both similar to and different from one another, and what the inspired authors are teaching.

The inspired author of a Gospel is not claiming to be an eyewitness. Rather, he is relying on a variety of trustworthy accounts from other people. As he does so, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he thinks about the significance of these events. He tries to find the best way to communicate that significance to his audience.

For example, the author of the Gospel of Luke addresses the question of Gospel formation directly. As he begins his Gospel, he tells us how he went about writing it:

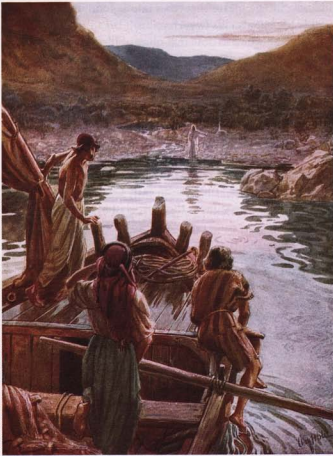
Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received. (Luke 1:1–4)

By beginning in this way, the author of Luke's Gospel explains that his finished product is the result of a three-stage process, a process that began with events in the life of Jesus Christ.

### First Stage: The Life and Teachings of Jesus

At the core of each of our Gospels are the events in the life and teachings of Jesus. You are undoubtedly familiar with many of them: Jesus' public ministry, preaching, powerful actions, Passion, death, Resurrection, post-Resurrection appearances, and Ascension. The events of the life of Jesus, his preaching and his miracles, are themselves the message

Jesus showing himself to Peter and others by the Sea of Galilee, by William Brassey Hole (1846–1917). Private Collection. (© Look and Learn, / The Bridgman Art Library)



This painting, by William Brassey Hole (1846–1917), depicts the Risen Jesus waiting for his disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Peter is jumping in! Read about this post-Resurrection appearance in John 21:1–14.

of salvation, “the bottom line” of the Gospels (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 126.)

The post-Resurrection appearances are part of this message and are indispensable to the message and mission of Christ because they confirm the reality of the Resurrection. Without the post-Resurrection appearances, the accounts of the life of Jesus would be a poignant record of a man who, for a short time, brought light and goodness to the world, yet seems to have been defeated in the end. However, Jesus was not defeated; he was victorious. He was raised from the dead. He met with his disciples. He commissioned them to spread this Good News to the whole world. Because of the Resurrection, the events in the life of Jesus took on an entirely new and powerful meaning. The Gospel accounts reflect an



understanding of Jesus that takes into account not only his earthly life but also his Resurrection.

It is important to note that none of the Gospels was written at the same time as the events it describes. The Evangelists were not news reporters or bloggers, constructing a day-by-day picture of the life of Jesus. Rather, the Gospels were written many years after the death and Resurrection of Christ. The Gospel of Mark is thought to be the first Gospel to have been written, and it dates to between AD 65 and 70, thirty-five to forty years after the death of Jesus.

What, then, occurred in those years between the Resurrection of Christ and the time an early Christian could have read (or heard proclaimed) the Gospel of Mark?

## Second Stage: Oral Tradition

The Good News about Jesus' life, death, Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension was first passed on through **oral tradition**. The Apostles and disciples of Jesus went forth proclaiming and teaching the Good News in both word and deed. Accounts that later would appear in the Gospels were told and retold by those who were witnesses to them. More and more people heard and believed the Good News. These new believers, in turn, shared what they had learned and the Good News continued to spread. In this way the followers of Jesus grew in faith and attracted others to their company (see CCC, 126).

During this time in which the life and teachings of Jesus were spread by oral tradition, the sharing of the message of salvation took many forms, including the following:

# Catholic Wisdom

## One Saint, Two Books

Studying Scripture is a solemn matter, but it doesn't have to make you solemn. Saint Philip Neri, who lived in Rome in the sixteenth century, always carried a Bible with him. But he also carried another book in his pocket—a joke book. Philip Neri was well known for his practical jokes and his sense of humor, saying, "A joyful heart is more easily made perfect than a downcast one."

- **Preaching to nonbelievers, those who had not witnessed or previously heard the Good News** This basic message of salvation—the life, death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus—was called the *kerygma*, a Greek word meaning “proclamation.” *Kerygma* refers both to the message of salvation itself and to the proclamation of that message.
- **Preaching to believers, to strengthen the faith of those who had accepted Jesus and the message of salvation** This teaching inspired the followers of Jesus to remain true to their new way of life and was known as *didache*, a Greek word meaning “teaching.”
- **Communal worship (*liturgia*), especially the celebration of the Eucharist** When the early Church gathered, the people would share the Body and Blood of Christ and recount the events and teachings of Jesus’ life. In the breaking of bread and in the sharing of the Good News of salvation, the early believers were strengthened and nourished. Gradually they began to collect accounts of Jesus’ sayings. Ritual language developed as the Church worshiped together and new members of the community were baptized.

### Third Stage: Written Gospels

In time the early followers of Christ realized that the saving events of his life, death, Resurrection, and Ascension, as well as his teachings, must be written down. Why? One reason was that the early disciples of Jesus, the original witnesses, had begun to die. The Church would need a record of the life and teachings of Christ so that nothing might be lost from memory. Also, there was a growing understanding among early Christians that the second coming of Jesus was not going to happen as quickly as they had originally thought, so there was a need to preserve his teachings for future generations. Preserving Jesus’ teachings in writing would keep them free of distortion by heretical teachings.

These various written accounts were used by the four inspired authors of the Gospels as source material. We know that written traditions were part of the heritage of the author of Luke’s Gospel because he says so: “Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events,” he writes, “I too have decided . . . to write it down” (Luke 1:1,3). In fact, Scripture scholars conclude that Mark’s Gospel was one of



#### oral tradition

The handing on of the message of God’s saving plan through words and deeds.

#### *kerygma*

A Greek word meaning “proclamation” or “preaching,” referring to the announcement of the Gospel or the Good News of divine salvation offered to all through Jesus Christ. *Kerygma* has two senses. It is both an event of proclamation and a message proclaimed.

#### *didache*

A Greek word meaning “teaching,” referring to the preaching and instruction offered to all who have already accepted Jesus.

## Canonical or Apocryphal?

The narratives that were accepted by the Church as authentic and genuine accounts of the truth of God's Revelation are called **canonical**. Among the canonical books of the New Testament are the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They were accepted into the canon of the New Testament because they met the criteria of acceptance. The four Gospels we have today were in standard use in the early Church by the end of the second century. The entire New Testament was in place, accepted as canonical, by the end of the fourth century. However, the canon was not officially closed until the sixteenth century. At that time the Council of Trent, in response to questions brought up by the Protestant Reformation, declared that no book would be added to the canon, and no book would be taken away.

Other narratives in existence were not accepted into the canon. Many of these are called apocryphal books. (The Greek word **apocrypha** means "hidden, unknown.") These were writings that were not accepted as valid accounts by the Church because they distorted in some way the truth about Jesus or about the Christian message. For example, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas includes a fanciful story of the child Jesus forming birds out of clay, and then bringing them to life. This story distorts the reality of Jesus, who is both truly God and truly man, the Word of God who became flesh and lived among us, "tested in every way, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15), and who used his divine powers in service to the Kingdom of God and its message of salvation.



© Brooklyn Museum/Corbis

the written sources that the authors of both Luke and Matthew consulted and included in their own accounts.

Thus the inspired human authors of the Gospels, the Evangelists, can be seen as *editors* as well as authors. They carefully went over the inherited oral and written traditions about the events, and wrote “an orderly sequence” (Luke 1:3) to meet the needs of the audience to whom each was writing. The Evangelists were not trying to teach history, even though at the core of their accounts are historical events. As Luke tells us, they were trying, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to help others to grow in faith, to “realize the certainty of the teachings [they] have received” (Luke 1:4) and to encourage their readers and hearers to live out the Gospel in a variety of different circumstances (see CCC, 126). ✞

### canonical

When referring to Scripture, *canonical* means included in the canon—that is, part of the collection of books the Church recognizes as the inspired Word of God.

### apocrypha

Writings about Jesus or the Christian message not accepted as part of the canon of Scripture.

Article

## 12 An Overview of the Synoptic Gospels

Mark, Matthew, and Luke's Gospels, the synoptic Gospels, can be “seen together” because they contain common points of view and have many similarities. They all proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and convey the same truth about him. However, they also differ from one another in various ways. In this overview of the synoptic Gospels, we discuss the reasons for both the similarities and the differences. Both are important as we strive to understand the fullness of

## Catholic Wisdom

### The Baptism of Jesus

Every synoptic Gospel contains an account of the Baptism of Jesus (see Mark 1:9–11, Matthew 3:13–17, Luke 3:21–22), and, in the Gospel of John, John the Baptist testifies to it. The Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Baptism of the Lord on the Sunday after January 6. On this Sunday we also celebrate the mystery of the Trinity, for at Jesus' Baptism, the presence of all three Persons of the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—was made known: The Father's voice was heard from the cloud, and the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove upon Jesus, revealed as the Son of God. The mystery of the Trinity is the central mystery of our faith and of our Christian life, and only God reveals this to us by making himself known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

### The Synoptic Gospels

Gospel	Date Written (Approximate)	Audience	Theme	Organization
Mark	AD 65–70	persecuted Roman Christians	Suffering and death lead to eternal life.	begins with Baptism and public ministry, recounts acts of power and controversies with Pharisees
Matthew	AD 85	primarily Jewish Christians	Jesus is the Messiah who continues the Jewish tradition.	begins with infancy narrative, including genealogy beginning with Abraham, placing Jesus in the context of the Israelites' salvation history
Luke	AD 80–90	Gentile Christians	God's covenant love is universal.	begins with infancy narrative, includes genealogy going back to Adam, and structures the Gospel around a journey to Jerusalem, the center of Jewish faith.

Revelation the Church faithfully passes on from generation to generation.

### Sources

One of the reasons the synoptic Gospels are so similar is that, as mentioned earlier, Mark is believed to have been a source for both Matthew and Luke. If you were to take a scissors and cut out of Matthew and Luke what also appears in Mark, you could almost reproduce Mark by rearranging the cut-out parts.

Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, with Marcan material removed, still have a great deal of common material consisting mostly of things Jesus said. Biblical scholars have surmised that Matthew and Luke had a second common source, a hypothetical written collection of Jesus' sayings and teachings known as "Q" or the **Q Source**. (Its name comes from

the German word *quelle*, meaning “source.” It is *hypothetical* because it is assumed to have existed.) Matthew’s and Luke’s use of both Mark and Q is the reason the synoptic Gospels have so much in common.



### Q Source

A hypothetical written collection of the teachings of Jesus shared among the early followers of Christianity surmised by Scripture scholars to be a source for both Matthew and Luke.

## Audiences and Themes

One of the reasons the synoptic Gospels differ is that they were written for different audiences. We all know that we describe events differently depending on the audience to whom we are speaking. For example, if you were asked to write directions for sending a text message, the steps and descriptions you would include would be influenced by who was going to be reading the directions. You would describe the process one way to someone who is familiar with cell phones and another way to a person who has never used a cell phone. Your description would be influenced by what you think that particular person needs to hear. You would, however, be describing the same process. The same is true with the Gospels. In sharing the same truths about Jesus,

## Live It!

### Faith

It is tempting to think that the people of Jesus’ time found it easier to believe in him and to follow his teachings than we do because they were with him when he was alive on earth. But that’s not really true. Without television, phones, photographs, and movies, only a relatively few people actually got to see or hear Jesus. Unless a person happened to be in a particular village at the exact time Jesus was teaching or performing a miracle, he or she would have had to rely on what others had seen and heard—just like we do.

The calming of the storm at sea, in both the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, addresses the need for faith in the midst of uncertainty and even danger.

In Mark we read about Jesus “asleep on a cushion” (Mark 4:38) as the waves were pouring into the boat. The Apostles woke Jesus and asked, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (4:38). Jesus immediately said to the sea, “Quiet! Be still!” (4:39), and there was a great calm. Jesus then asked them, “Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?” (4:40). Then the Apostles said to one another, “Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?” (4:41).

This powerful miracle does not mean that our faith in Jesus will spare us from every danger or from death itself. But it assures us that Jesus, who died and was raised, will bring his followers with him, beyond death and terror, into eternal life.

each Gospel author is responding to the needs of his particular audience.

Mark's Gospel is believed to have been written between AD 65 and 70 in Rome during a persecution of Christians. Mark's audience was asking, "Why should we suffer for our belief in Christ?" Mark responds to this question by presenting a narrative of Jesus' life that helps his community to make sense of its suffering and persecution. The narrative teaches that Jesus didn't want to die, but still chose fidelity to his Father's will. Because of this, death, rather than being an end, leads to eternal life.

Matthew was written approximately AD 85 to settled Jewish Christians, probably in Antioch, Syria, who were adjusting to the presence of Gentile Christians in their midst. They were asking, "Is becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ an act of fidelity to my ancestors' two-thousand-year covenant relationship with God or not?" Matthew highlights Jesus as the fulfillment of many Old Testament hopes and prophecies. Matthew wanted his Jewish Christian readers to know that believing in Jesus was not a break with their tradition. Rather, he wanted them to see it as a continuation of their tradition. At the same time, he wanted to make clear that Gentile disciples of Jesus were also welcome to join the community.

Luke was writing to Gentiles between the years AD 80 and 90. Luke's Gentile audience had questions related to

## Pray It!

### Help My Unbelief!

Even though our faith is the cornerstone of our lives, we all have times when we struggle to believe. In those moments it's okay to wonder and question because, as Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman said, "Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt." If he, who is on his way to canonized sainthood, could struggle with his faith, so can the rest of us.

When you are facing a challenge to your faith and wonder what to do, it can help to remember Jesus' healing of a boy who had seizures. When the boy's father asked Jesus if he could heal his son, Jesus said, "Everything is possible to one who has faith" (Mark 9:23). The father immediately cried out, "I do believe, help my unbelief!" (9:24).

The next time you face a difficulty in your faith, make this your prayer:

"Lord, I do believe, help my unbelief!"



their non-Jewish heritage: “Is the salvation offered by Jesus restricted to the Jewish people, or are we, as Gentiles, welcome too?” Luke emphasized the universal nature of God’s invitation to covenant love: Everyone is invited. In a society in which the rich had special privileges and the poor were often oppressed and overburdened, Luke makes clear that Jesus is the compassionate Savior who welcomes all. In several ways he emphasizes that Jesus is a friend to the outsider, and to those who are poor or marginalized in some way.

Thus Luke gives us a particular insight into the many ways we might follow Jesus. We too are challenged to be compassionate and to reach out to the marginalized in our midst.

## Organization

Each author’s audience and theme affects the organization of his Gospel. Mark starts his account at the time of Jesus’ public ministry with the witness of John the Baptist and Jesus’ baptism. To help early Christians make sense of suffering and persecution, Mark encourages them to look forward to the final victory of the Kingdom by recounting Jesus’ acts of power. Because the early Christians in Mark’s audience are being persecuted, Mark’s Gospel reminds them that Jesus dealt with adversaries who opposed him, in his controversies with the Pharisees. Mark then describes in great detail the greatest trial of all, followed by the greatest victory: Jesus’ Passion, death, and Resurrection.

Matthew, to highlight Jesus as the fulfillment of many Old Testament hopes and prophecies, starts his account with a genealogy, beginning with Abraham, that places Jesus within the context of the Israelites’ salvation history. After accounts of Jesus’ birth, Matthew inserts five sections, reminiscent of the Jewish Law (or the five books of the Pentateuch), before his account of Jesus’ Passion, death, and Resurrection. Luke also includes a genealogy, but he goes back not to Abraham but to Adam. After his accounts of Jesus’ birth, Luke structures his Gospel around a journey: Jesus’ ministry in Galilee, his journey to Jerusalem, and his ministry in Jerusalem before his Passion, death and Resurrection. As we read and discuss each Gospel, we will discover how particular points are emphasized for particular audiences. We will also see that although the Gospels offer



different accounts of the life of Jesus, they are faithful and without error in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. We are the beneficiaries of a much richer understanding of our faith because we have a number of accounts of the Good News. †

## Attribution

Each of the Gospels is titled “The Gospel According to . . .” with the name inserted: Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. However, none of these men associated with the four Gospels identifies himself within the Gospel text. The names we associate with each Gospel are attributions to Apostles or apostolic men, often established by early Church fathers.

Papias, a bishop in Asia Minor, attributed Matthew’s Gospel to Matthew, Jesus’ Apostle. Papias also attributed Mark’s Gospel to John Mark, a companion of Barnabas and Paul whom we read about in the Acts of the Apostles. Irenaeus, a bishop in Gaul, attributed the Gospel of Luke to Luke, a fellow traveler of Paul. Irenaeus also attributed the Gospel of John to John, an Apostle of Jesus.

The attribution of a Gospel to a respected and revered teacher was considered a great compliment to that teacher and in itself a proclamation of the authenticity of the account. It may also have been a tribute to the person to whom a particular faith community owed the origins of its faith in Jesus. “Authorship by attribution” was common in the ancient world, in which personal intellectual property was less important than recognition of the origins of a body of thought.



## Part Review

1. What are the three stages in the formation of the Gospels?
2. Explain some of the forms that the preaching of the Gospel message took during the oral tradition stage.
3. What is the difference between a canonical Scripture text and an apocryphal account?
4. Why are there similarities among the synoptic Gospels?
5. Why are there differences among the synoptic Gospels?
6. When reading a passage from one of the Gospels, why is it helpful to know something about the Evangelist's audience?
7. What is the meaning of *attribution* in our understanding of the authorship of the Gospels?