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## 2A The Gospels

### Introduction

The word “gospel” is a translation of the Greek *euangelion*, which means “good news.” The Gospel is the Good News of the in-breaking of God in the world through Jesus Christ. The Gospel gives witness to the Incarnation of God in Jesus, and his Life, Death, and Resurrection. The four Gospels were written down because the early Christians realized that the words and teachings were at risk and could be lost. Mark’s Gospel was written first, followed by those of Matthew, Luke, and John. A written record of Jesus’ Life and teaching also allowed the Church to circulate the teachings more easily.

The Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are so named because they share a great deal of common material. This material was refined and edited by the authors, but similar vocabulary, order, and subject matter remain. If these three Gospels are put side by side, observant readers can “see with their eyes” (*synopticon*) the similarities between them. The Gospel of Mark, the shortest of the Gospels, was written first, likely between AD 68 and 70. Matthew and Luke were written between AD 70 and 80 and contain most of the material from Mark’s Gospel. They also draw from a common source which scholars refer to as Q (from the German *quelle*, meaning “source.”) The Gospel of John dates from the early second century and does not rely heavily on any of the other Gospels. Therefore, it represents an independent tradition.

This chapter on the Gospels is divided into thirteen lessons, in addition to a Review Lesson and one or two test lessons. These lessons focus on dividing the material between the introductory text on the formation of the Gospels to coverage of each of the four Gospels—Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. In addition, the Acts of the Apostles, written by the author of Luke, is covered with a separate lesson. More information on each of these elements and the chapter material follows.

Mark’s Gospel was the first attempt to take all of the stories of Jesus’ Life and create one narrative out of them. Mark wrote in Greek and was likely writing to a Gentile audience unfamiliar with Jewish customs and rituals. Mark’s portrayal of Jesus is very human. Jesus expresses his emotions, showing feelings of disappointment, abandonment, sorrow, and sometimes anger.

In Mark, Jesus teaches mostly through the use of parables—stories about everyday events that symbolically teach a higher spiritual truth. Jesus uses parables to explain to his disciples the coming Kingdom of God, how to treat one another, and how to accept his message. Jesus’ teachings make up a large part of Mark’s Gospel, but in reality, the Gospel serves as an extended introduction to the Paschal Mystery, the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus. The Gospel is also a lesson in discipleship. The disciples are to live like Jesus, who came to live a life of service for others.

Matthew’s Gospel affirms and interprets Jewish Law, calling not for a break with the Law, but for a deeper appreciation and practice of it. Matthew was likely writing to either a Jewish community or a community of recent converts from Judaism. Matthew portrays Jesus as the “New Moses.” While Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in

Egypt, Matthew suggests that Jesus will lead them out of a different kind of slavery; namely, slavery to sin and death. Matthew’s Gospel is also strongly eschatological, describing through sermon and parable the coming Kingdom of God.

Luke’s Gospel seeks to expand Jesus’ message to the Gentiles. His audience was a wealthy Greek-speaking community. Luke’s Gospel is dedicated to Theophilus, which means “lover of God” in Greek. Luke emphasizes Jesus’ mission to those outside the mainstream. In this Gospel, Jesus preaches to Gentiles, heals Samaritans, and is very concerned with the welfare of the poor. Luke presents a Jesus who understands that his mission will end in his death and who steadfastly preaches and teaches all the way to Calvary. Also, in Luke, Jesus focuses on prayer and intimate relationship with God.

Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles. Acts tells the story of the early Church, from the huddled fear in the upper room to the imposition of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, to the mission to the Gentiles. In the first few years after Jesus’ death, the Christian community preached and taught throughout Israel. They were very successful in winning converts from Judaism and challenged the local Jewish authorities. One of these authorities was Saul, a student of the great Rabbi Gamaliel. Saul persecuted the Christians, beating and imprisoning many of them and playing an instrumental role in the martyrdom of Stephen. However, while traveling to Damascus, Saul received a vision of Jesus and converted. Saul, also known as Paul, became one of Christianity’s greatest evangelists. The second half of the Acts of the Apostles details Paul’s missionary journeys throughout the eastern Mediterranean and his trial in Rome.

The Gospel of John is different from the Synoptics. It drew on independent traditions about Jesus that were not available to the writers of the Synoptic Gospels. John’s Gospel is divided into two sections: the Book of Signs and the Book of Glory. The Book of Signs describes seven different signs—or miracles—of Jesus, which show his nature as the Son of God. The Book of Glory describes Jesus’ Passion. In John, Jesus’ main method of teaching is through long sermons and complex metaphors.

One of the most important sections of John’s Gospel is the first chapter, a hymn that describes Jesus as the Word of God: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” This passage laid the groundwork for the Church’s understanding of the connection between Jesus and God, expressed by the Church as the dogma of the Holy Trinity.

In summary, the Gospels are the most important part of the New Testament and the Bible as a whole. They provide the basis for understanding the meaning of Paul’s letters and the Catholic Epistles.

## Chapter 2A Resources

### Printed Materials

#### General

Augustine of Hippo. *City of God*. London: Penguin, 1974.

Lewis, C. S. *Miracles*. London: HarperOne, 1947.

Nouwen, Henri. *Walk With Jesus: Stations of the Cross*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990. Meditations on the Stations of the Cross.

## Internet Links

### *Q Source*

[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Q\\_document](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Q_document)

A site containing information about the Q source for Matthew and Luke's Gospels, as well as links to scholarly articles on Q.

### *John Rylands Papyrus*

[www.abu.nb.ca/Courses/NTIntro/LifeJ/RylandsPap.htm](http://www.abu.nb.ca/Courses/NTIntro/LifeJ/RylandsPap.htm)

An image and translation of the John Rylands Papyrus.

### *Images of Jesus*

[www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2000/05/Images-Of-Jesus-Through-Two-Millennia.aspx](http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2000/05/Images-Of-Jesus-Through-Two-Millennia.aspx)

A site that includes images of Jesus from the third to the twentieth centuries.

### *Information on Pauline Churches*

[www.biblicalarchaeology.org](http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org)

The website for the Biblical Archaeology Review. This site contains a lot of information about the Pauline Churches.

### *Maps of the Roman Empire*

[www.biblestudy.org/maps/roman-empire.html](http://www.biblestudy.org/maps/roman-empire.html)

Links to many maps of the Mediterranean from the first century.

### *Biblical Art Images*

[www.biblical-art.com](http://www.biblical-art.com)

A database of thousands of artistic representations of biblical themes, including images of the Crucifixion, doubting Thomas, Pentecost, and Paul's conversion.

### *Maps of Paul's Missionary Journeys*

[www.ccel.org/bible/phillips/CN092MAPS1.htm](http://www.ccel.org/bible/phillips/CN092MAPS1.htm)

A site containing many maps of Paul's missionary journeys.

### *The Magnificat*

[www.ewtn.com/library/monfort/Handbook/Magnifi.htm](http://www.ewtn.com/library/monfort/Handbook/Magnifi.htm)

Information on the history and use of the Magnificat in the Catholic Church.

### *The Poem "Footprints in the Sand"*

<http://www.footprints-in-the-sand.com/>

A site devoted to the poem "Footprints."

### *Christological Heresies*

[www.fromdeathtolife.org/chistory/heresies.html](http://www.fromdeathtolife.org/chistory/heresies.html)

A site with information on the Christological heresies.

### *Saints for Social Justice*

<http://www.justpeace.org/allsaints.htm>

This site maintains a good list of Catholic saints and blessed who were active in social justice issues.

### *Greek and Roman Mystery Religions*

[www.religionfacts.com/greco-roman/overview.htm](http://www.religionfacts.com/greco-roman/overview.htm)

Information on Greek and Roman mystery religions.

### *Images of Early Christian Texts*

[www.sas.upenn.edu/religious\\_studies/rak/jewishpap.html](http://www.sas.upenn.edu/religious_studies/rak/jewishpap.html)

Links to scholarly information on early Christian papyri and links to other images of early Christian texts.

### *Map of Tombs of St. Peter*

[www.saintpetersbasilica.org/Necropolis/Scavi-map.htm](http://www.saintpetersbasilica.org/Necropolis/Scavi-map.htm)

An interactive map of the tombs in St. Peter's Basilica.

### *Images of the Crucifixion*

[www.textweek.com/art/crucifixion.htm](http://www.textweek.com/art/crucifixion.htm)

An exhaustive list of images of the Crucifixion, with hundreds of links.

### *Images of Zeus*

[www.theoi.com/Olympios/Zeus.html](http://www.theoi.com/Olympios/Zeus.html)

A site that displays many images of the Greek god, Zeus.

### *Lumen Gentium*

[www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html)

Full text of the document *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), the Second Vatican Council's document on the Church.

## Chapter Outline

### **Discovering the Good News**

### **Similarities in the Synoptic Gospels**

### **Dating the Gospels**

### **Formation of the Gospels**

### **Authorship of the Gospels**

### **The Gospel of Mark**

Whom Did Mark Write For?

Mark's Portrayal of Jesus

Parables in Mark

Discipleship in Mark

The Passion Narrative

Mark's Community

### **The Gospel of Matthew**

The "Q" Material

Whom Did Matthew Write For?

Jesus, the New Moses

### **The Gospel of Luke**

Differences between Luke and Mark

The Needs of the Poor

Prayer in Luke's Gospel

Women in Luke's Gospel

The Passion Narrative

### **The Gospel of John**

The Beloved Disciple

Authorship of John's Gospel

Comparing John's Gospel to the Synoptic Gospels

Unique Elements of John's Gospel

Christology in John's Gospel

## Acts of the Apostles

- Forming a Church
- Outreach beyond Jerusalem
- Missionary Trips of Paul and Barnabas
- To the Ends of the Earth

## Strategies for Reading, Studying, and Praying the Gospels

### Advance Preparations

#### For Lesson One

- 3"x5" index cards
- Tape
- Images of Zeus or Jupiter
- Map of the Greek empire after the death of Alexander the Great
- Map of the Roman empire under Julius Caesar
- Map of the world in the early first century AD

#### For Lesson Two

- A short film clip from any Best Picture Oscar winner (pre-1970)
- Parallel Gospels
- Worksheet 25, "Dating the Gospels"
- Images of the John Rylands Papyrus

#### For Lesson Three

- Primary source news articles about a historical figure
- Later modern descriptions of the same historical figure
- Copies of Worksheet 26, "Gospel Authorship"

#### For Lesson Four

- Two to three clips of Jesus from contemporary films
- Worksheet 27, "Parables of Jesus"
- Images of Jesus in art

#### For Lesson Five

- Image of El Greco's *The Agony in the Garden*
- Worksheet 28, "Responding in Faith"
- Script for Stations of the Cross
- From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians* PBS documentary, Part Three

#### For Lesson Six

- List of verses in Matthew derived from Q
- From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians* PBS documentary, Part Three
- Jesus Movie (*King of Kings, Jesus of Nazareth, Passion of the Christ*)

#### For Lesson Seven

- Three-foot-by-five-foot piece of art paper
- Magazines and newspapers (with pictures)
- Markers, crayons, and colored pencils
- Glue
- Blank paper

#### For 2A Mid-chapter Test Lesson

- Copies of Chapter 2A Test

#### For Lesson Eight

- Worksheet 29, "Compare and Contrast: The Synoptic Gospels"
- Information about saints and martyrs that practiced social justice
- Supplies (music, bibles, candles, rosaries) for prayer project

#### For Lesson Nine

- Props for Good Samaritan skit
- Film recording of *Godspell* (Prodigal Son scene)
- Blank paper
- Crayons, colored pencils, markers
- Medieval, Renaissance/Baroque, and modern images of the crucifixion or computer access to these images

#### For Lesson Ten

- Worksheet 30, "Compare and Contrast: The Gospel of John"
- Theological texts on miracles (see resources section)

#### For Lesson Eleven

- Eighteen index cards with Scripture citations from pages 226–227
- Sketch paper
- Colored pencils or other art media
- Musical setting of John 1
- Text of the Nicene Creed (on overhead)
- Artistic depiction of "Doubting Thomas"

#### For Lesson Twelve

- Blank paper
- Crayons, colored pencils, markers
- Artistic depictions of the Pentecost
- Selections from *City of God* and *Lumen Gentium* on the "visible and invisible Church" (see resources section)

#### For Lesson Thirteen

- Artistic depictions of Paul's conversion
- Worksheet 31, "Paul's Missionary Journeys"
- Maps of Paul's missionary journeys
- Blank paper
- Crayons, colored pencils, markers
- Images of Ephesus, Thessalonica, Rome, Corinth, and Galatia (first century archaeological sites)
- Images of Peter and Paul's burial sites
- Information about local missionary groups (Diocesan missionary office)

#### For Chapter 2A Review Lesson

- Slips of paper

#### For Chapter 2A Test Lesson

- Copies of Chapter 2A Test Lesson

# Lesson One (pages 190–193)

## Objectives

In this lesson, the students will:

- understand the importance of the Gospels in the life of the Church.
- be able to explain why the Gospels are the “Good News.”
- appreciate the personal nature of Jesus Christ, God incarnate.

## Overview

This is an introductory lesson on the Gospels. The Gospels allow us the most detailed glimpse into the Life of Jesus. The Gospels announce the Good News of what Jesus has done and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, continues to do for us today. The four separate Gospel accounts provide a solid survey and message of Jesus. This lesson begins with the emphasis of the Gospels as Good News. It also focuses on Christ, God incarnate, as the centerpiece of the essential piece of Good News, that “He is Risen.”

## Opening the Lesson

1. To remind the students of their current familiarity with the Gospels, divide the class into two teams. Call on a representative from one team at a time to finish a Gospel passage (sample passages are below; answers are in italics). If the person is correct, the team gets five points. If wrong, the passage is read to a representative of the other team. A correct answer merits four points. Continue with the passage back and forth until three is a correct answer, down to a possible one point. Determine ahead of time whether or not to allow conversation among team members, and call on new responders for each round.

### Passages

- “My Father, if is possible, *let this cup pass from me.*” (Mt 26:39)
  - “Go, therefore, and make *disciples of all nations.*” (Mt 28:19)
  - “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; *I no longer deserve to be called your son.*” (Lk 19:18–19)
  - “As the Father loves me, *so I also love you.*” (Jn 14:9)
2. Introduce the lesson and the topic of this chapter, “The Gospels.” Remind the students of the essential place that the Gospels have in the New Testament and in all of the Bible because of how they narrate and share the Life and teachings of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, who came into the world to redeem the world.
  3. Lead a general discussion. Ask the students to share either their favorite Gospel stories or questions they have about Jesus.

### Incarnation

The dogma that God's eternal Son assumed a human nature and became man in Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. The term literally means “taking on human flesh.”

### Paschal Mystery

The saving love of God most fully revealed in the life and especially by the Passion, Death, Resurrection, and glorious Ascension of His Son, Jesus Christ.

### Liturgy

A name for the official public worship of the Church. The sacraments and Divine Office constitute the Church's liturgy. Mass is the most important liturgical celebration.

## Discovering the Good News

The Greek word for “gospel,” *euangelion*, used seventy-six times in the New Testament, is made up of two words, *eu*, meaning “good,” and *angelos*, meaning “news” (note that an angel or angel is a messenger, and *angelion* is a message or the “news” a messenger brings). The Old English word for “good news” is “gospel.”

Most of the references to “Good News” in the New Testament refer not to stories of Jesus' life, but to the content of what he preached. For example, the first time the word “gospel” appears in the New Testament is in Matthew

4:23, when it is reported that Jesus “went around all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom.” Jesus wasn't preaching about his life at that moment. Rather, he was teaching the Galileans about how God was breaking into the world, what they should believe, and how they should seek repentance so that they could respond correctly to what God was doing in their lives.

That means that the word “gospel” didn't originally mean “a narrative of Jesus' life.” It only came to mean that because of the way the word is used in Mark 1:1: “The beginning of the good news [or ‘gospel’] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The way “gospel” is used in that passage sounded so very much like a title that eventually the term was used to describe the other three narratives about Jesus—Matthew, Luke, and John—because they were written to resemble Mark's “Gospel.”

There is no Revelation of God more personal or full than at the Incarnation, the becoming flesh of Jesus, God's only Son. The Incarnation, the union of divine and human natures in the Person of the Word, Jesus Christ, is the basic mystery of our faith. It is also the foundation of our joy. Because this is true, the four Gospels that narrate his life and teach about the events of the Paschal Mystery have always held the central place of all the inspired and Sacred Scriptures. This special significance is witnessed in the liturgy: The assembly stands in respect while the



Gospel is proclaimed. Alleluia praising the Lord precedes its reading. There is a special introduction that includes the signing of the forehead, lips, and heart. The Gospel is only read by an ordained minister, a bishop, priest, or deacon. At the end of the reading, he kisses the Book of the Gospels. At times, even incense is used as another sign of the sacredness of the

readings. All these are signs of the profound respect that the Church has for the Gospels.

### Reflect

How do you equate “Good News” to the message of the Gospels?

## WHAT IS GOOD ABOUT THE GOOD NEWS?

monotheistic

monotheistic

## Teaching Approaches

Discovering the Good News (pages 190–191)

- The Greek word for gospel is *euangelion*, which literally translates to “good news.” The Gospel refers to (1) the Good News preached by Jesus; (2) the Good News of Salvation won for us in the person of Jesus (he is the Good News proclaimed by the Church); and (3) the four written records of the Good News—the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

- Share with the students the teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

The *Gospels* are the heart of all the Scriptures “because they are our principal source for the life and teaching of the Incarnate Word, our Savior.” (125)

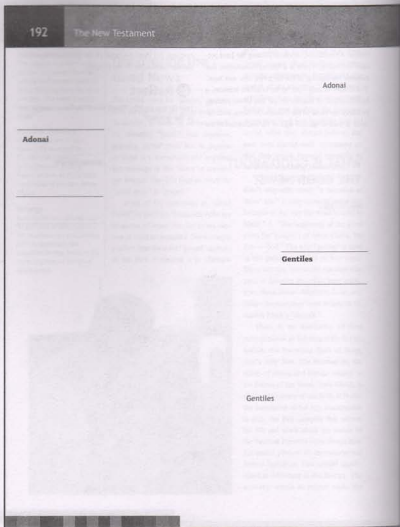
- Focus on Jesus’ presence in the Gospel as part of the liturgy. Point out that the celebration of the Eucharist in the early Church helped to shape many of the stories about Jesus that the Church preserved. Certain key events, teachings, and prayers of Jesus were recalled at the early celebrations of the Eucharist. Some examples include Jesus’ words at the Last Supper, the Lord’s Prayer, and the story of the Paschal Mystery.
- Write the words **Incarnation** and **Paschal Mystery** on the board. Ask students to define these words from the Glossary definitions. Point out that the ordained minister, an extension of Jesus’ commissioning of the Apostles, is likewise a sign of his presence in the Gospel.

What Is *Good* About the Good News? (pages 191–193)

- Ask the students how they equate “good news” with the Gospels. See the Reflect question on page 191. After sharing, point out that the Gentiles of the first century found much Good News in the Life and teachings of Jesus. Gentiles in the years surrounding the Life of Jesus had always been attracted to Judaism and its monotheistic beliefs. The message of Salvation offered by Jesus Christ was even more attractive to Gentiles in the Roman Empire. Expand on the section using some or all of the following techniques:
  - Show images of the Greek god Zeus or the Roman god Jupiter. Compare and contrast the Greek and Roman gods with YHWH. Ask: How does a monotheistic belief in God differ from polytheistic religion? Make the point that the focus of polytheistic religion was on appeasing the gods and keeping them at bay, while the focus of most monotheistic religion is to keep God intimately close through prayer and ritual.



- Show a series of maps and explain to students the geopolitical changes that occurred in the second and first centuries BC. Begin with a map of the Greek Empire after the death of Alexander the Great. Then, show a map of the Roman conquest of this empire under Julius Caesar. Finally, show a map of the world in the early first century AD, the time of Jesus. Explain that these geopolitical shifts caused great spiritual shifts as well.
- Briefly introduce information on Greek mystery religions, like the cult of Dionysus or the Mithraic cults (information can be found online using the links provided in the Resources section). Ask the students to consider why the Greeks and Romans found these cults, as well as Jewish monotheism, very appealing.



### Extending the Lesson

1. Have students create their own set of New Testament books note cards. Have them use the cards to practice ordering the books of the New Testament and record important information of each of the books as their study continues.
2. Have the students research the “mystery religions” popular with the Greeks and Romans of the first century AD. Ask them to create a short PowerPoint presentation about these religions and share it with the class.



### Preparing for the Next Lesson

1. Assign the Review Questions on page 193.
2. Assign for reading the following main text sections: “Similarities in the Synoptic Gospels” (pages 194–195) and “Dating the Gospels” (pages 196–198).

### Review

1. What do most references to the “Good News” refer to in the New Testament?
2. Why do the Gospels have the central place in Sacred Scripture?
3. How did Jews of the Old Testament experience God differently from those who practiced neighboring religions?
4. Why did the tenets of Judaism impress the Greeks, especially after being taken over by the Romans?
5. Who were the Greeks known to the Jews as “God fearers”?
6. Why was Christianity attractive to Greek-speaking Gentiles?

6. Make sure the students can identify at least three barriers that kept Greek and Roman Gentiles from becoming Jews (e.g., circumcision, observance of the Sabbath, keeping a kosher diet, language barriers, and cultural barriers). Note that this led to the development of a new “class” of Jews, the “God-fearers,” or Gentiles who supported their local synagogue but did not entirely convert to Judaism. Note that when Christianity emerged in the early first century, it built on the positive reputation of the Jews and allowed Gentiles full inclusion into the faith. This partially accounts for Christianity’s quick rise in the late first century.
7. Conclude by reminding the students about the infinite mystery of God. God’s mystery is also noted by his incomprehensibility, his plan of Salvation and Redemption, and the events of Jesus’ Life that show and accomplish this plan. Ask the students to discuss what aspects of their faith and of God that they find most mysterious.

### Review Questions Answers (page 193)

1. *What do most references to the “Good News” refer to in the New Testament?*  
Most of the references to the Good News in the New Testament refer to the content of what Jesus preached.
2. *Why do the Gospels have the central place in Sacred Scripture?*  
The Gospels have a central place in Sacred Scripture because they narrate the Life of Jesus and teach about the events of the Paschal Mystery.
3. *How did Jews of the Old Testament experience God differently from those who practiced neighboring religions?*  
The Jews believed that the one, true God was good, just, and had broken into history time and time again to save them both from their enemies and their sinfulness.
4. *Why did the tenets of Judaism impress the Greeks, especially after being taken over by the Romans?*  
The Greeks were attracted to monotheism and to the authenticity of Judaism. They also were interested in the moral practices of the Jews.
5. *Who were the Greeks known to the Jews as “God fearers”?*  
“God fearers” were Greeks who came close to converting to Judaism but did not go the whole distance of conversion.
6. *Why was Christianity attractive to Greek-speaking Gentiles?*  
Christianity was attractive to Greek-speaking Gentiles because it taught about the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

## Lesson Two (pages 194–198)

### Objectives

In this lesson, the students will:

- identify the similarities between the Synoptic Gospels.
- understand the formation process of the Synoptic Gospels.
- learn how the composition of the Gospels have been dated.

### Overview

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke contain a great deal of common material. For this reason, they are known as the “Synoptic Gospels.” “Synoptic” literally means “seen together” and careful readers can easily see their similarities. In studying these Gospels, scholars have noted that Mark contains 661 verses, Matthew has 1,068, while Luke includes 1,149. Matthew reproduces 85 percent of Mark’s verses, while Luke replicates 65 percent of Mark’s verses. The Gospel of John, however, is from an independent source. Dating the Gospels is a difficult task and is done by looking at veiled historical references in the text, as well as how often and when these texts are quoted in the nonbiblical literature. Mark was the earliest Gospel written; the Gospel of John was written much later, close to the beginning of the second century.

### Opening the Lesson

1. Play a short segment from a Best Picture Oscar winner from a pre-1970 film. The less familiar the students are with the film, the better.
2. After playing the segment, divide the class into two groups. Tell both groups to write a short review of the film based on the segment that they watched. However, give one of the groups a printed article with information on the film. Do not give the article to the other group. Allow time for writing.
3. Call on students from each group to read their descriptions aloud. Note the differences between both kinds of reviews (e.g., the choice of vocabulary, the information that is included or not included). Also note the similarities in style and vocabulary between the reviews written by the group that had the printed article.
4. Explain that the Synoptic Gospels were developed in a similar way to the descriptions of those students with your text. There are similarities in the text of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) that can be explained by their use of similar source material. The Gospel of John is derived from the same events, but does not share the sources that the Synoptic Gospels share.

### Similarities in the Synoptic Gospels



**Synoptic Gospels**  
The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which because of their similarities, can be “seen together” in parallel columns and mutually compared.

Scholars early on noted that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke contained a great deal of common material. For example, about 85 percent of the content in Mark, the shortest Gospel, very closely resembles about 50 percent of the Gospel of Matthew, which is considerably longer. In fact, of Mark’s 666 verses, six hundred of them contain material also found in Matthew. A slightly smaller percentage of this material makes up Luke’s Gospel. Besides the common subject matter, Matthew, Mark, and Luke also follow a very similar order. They also contain a common vocabulary.

When these three Gospels are laid out side by side, observant readers are actually able to “see with their eyes” the similarities between them. As a result, Matthew, Mark, and Luke have been called the Synoptic Gospels. In other words, they can be “looked at together”—another meaning of the term synoptic. For example, note the following comparison:

Matthew 5:13	Mark 9:49-50	Luke 14:34-35
“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.”	“Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if salt becomes insipid, with what will you restore its flavor? Keep salt in yourselves and you will have peace with one another.”	“Salt is good, but if salt loses its taste, with what can its flavor be restored? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out. Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear.”

The simplest explanation for the similarities is that one of the three Gospels was used as a primary source when the other two were written. For a variety of reasons, early on, many biblical scholars thought that maybe Matthew’s Gospel was the primary source for the other two, and the first one written. But a number of observations of the three Gospels together lead to a different conclusion.

If Matthew’s Gospel was written first, it is difficult to explain why Mark, whose Gospel is considerably shorter, would have eliminated so much of Matthew. It is particularly puzzling, since many of those missing moments are when Jesus was actually teaching, like in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:1–7:29). Why would

Mark leave out the Beatitudes or the Our Father? It makes more sense to suggest that Matthew added that material to Mark, than to conclude that Mark deleted it from Matthew.

An additional point to consider was first proposed by Greek experts who pointed out that Matthew and Luke's use of grammar is better than Mark's, which is very rough at best. The follow-up question is: why would Mark deliberately turn their good grammar into something less polished? The more likely conclusion is that Matthew and Luke corrected the grammar in Mark's Gospel.

Also, at times, the narrative sequence between Matthew and Mark are different. Whenever Matthew and Mark differ, Luke's sequence always agrees with the order in Mark's Gospel. When Luke does change the sequence, Matthew and Mark always agree. It makes the most sense to hold that Mark contained the original order that, on occasion, Matthew or Luke independently chose to alter.

Putting all the observations together, the hypothesis most likely to be accurate is that Mark's Gospel was written first. It was then copied and distributed, and made its way independently into the hands of the authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. They were apparently attracted to what Mark had done and, in turn, used it as a foundation for writing expanded narratives of the life of Christ. Matthew and Luke also have in common another 220–235 verses (in whole or in part). Scholars also theorize that the authors of Matthew and Luke also drew on another common source known as "Q" (probably from the German *Quelle*, meaning "source"). This hypothetical document was not in the form of a Gospel, but was mostly a collection of sayings of Jesus that came down to the evangelists in either written or, perhaps, oral form. While it is one way to study the Synoptic Gospels, the so-called two-source theory of Mark and Q as sources common

to the two other Synoptic Gospels remains just that, a theory.

It is also noted in this theory that in addition to Mark and Q, Matthew and Luke use materials that were unique to each of them, termed "M" and "L," respectively. The authors of Matthew and Luke fit in the additional material they had collected about Jesus as they saw fit, independently of one another.

The author of the Gospel of John, written later than the Synoptics, may have shared common written or oral traditions with Mark's Gospel, and was likely to have known certain traditions that also appear in Luke's Gospel. It is possible that the final editor of Luke's Gospel had contact with one or more of the Synoptic Gospels. However, the fourth Gospel does not rely heavily on any of them. Rather, its sources are independent traditions preserved in the churches from which it was created.

### Review

1. Define Synoptic Gospels.
2. What are three similarities in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke?
3. Why is it more likely that the Gospel of Mark was written before the Gospel of Matthew?

## Teaching Approaches

Similarities in the Synoptic Gospels (pages 194–195)

1. Show students a parallel Gospel text. This type of text sets the common verses of the Gospels (particularly the Synoptic Gospels) side by side. Assign at least three examples of parallel passages in the Gospels (see examples below and the "salt of the earth" passages from page 194 of the text) and ask students what conclusions might be drawn from the existence of these parallel passages. (The Synoptic Gospels were likely written using the same source material.)

### Examples of Parallel Gospel Passages

- The Parable of the Sower (Mt 13:18–25; Mk 4:13–20; Lk 8:11–15)
  - Jesus Heals the Multitudes (Mt 12:15–21; Mk 3:7–12; Lk 6:17–19)
  - The Transfiguration (Mt 17:1–8; Mk 9:2–8; Lk 9:28–36)
2. Ask students to identify, based on their reading, the reasons that biblical scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark was the source for both Matthew and Luke. (Matthew and Luke correct problems with Mark's grammar. Matthew and Luke contain additional material that Mark does not. There are differences in the order of events which suggest that Mark was written first.)
  3. Share information on the "Q" or "quelle" source mentioned in the text. Matthew and Luke contain similar material that is not contained in Mark. This has led scholars to posit the existence of an earlier text known as "Q." Also note the "M" and "L" sources that indicate material independent of Matthew and Luke. Examples of these verses are listed below:

### Q

**Temptation of Jesus (Mt 4:1–11; Lk 4:1–13)**  
**The Beatitudes (Mt 5:3–6, 11–12; Lk 6:20–23)**  
**Good fruit (Mt 7:16–20; Lk 6:43–45)**  
**Parable of the lost sheep (Mt 18:12–14; Lk 15:3–8)**

### M

**Coming of the wise men (Mt 2:1–12)**  
**Parable of the weeds (Mt 14:24–30)**  
**Peter walking on water (Mt 14:28–33)**  
**Parable of the ten virgins (Mt 25:1–13)**

### L

**Story of the shepherds (Lk 2:1–20)**  
**Jesus at age twelve (Lk 2:41–52)**  
**Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29–37)**  
**Zacchaeus story (Lk 19:1–10)**

4. Reiterate that biblical scholars believe that the Gospel of John is derived from independent sources from the

## Review Questions Answers (page 195)

1. **Define Synoptic Gospels.**  
Synoptic means "looked at together." The Synoptic Gospels are Matthew, Mark, and Luke because of their similarities with one another.
2. **What are three similarities in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke?**  
The Synoptic Gospels share common material. They follow a similar order. They also contain common vocabulary.
3. **Why is it more likely that the Gospel of Mark was written before the Gospel of Matthew?**  
If Mark's Gospel was written after Matthew, it would not have made sense for him to leave out so much material from Matthew. Also, the grammar in Mark seems to have been corrected in Matthew and Luke.

other three Gospels. While it may draw on the same oral traditions as the other Gospels, its written sources are different.

### Dating the Gospels (pages 196–198)

5. Pass out **Worksheet 25**, “Dating the Gospels.” Worksheet 25 asks students to describe how biblical scholars have determined the date that each of the Gospels was written. Have students complete the worksheet in small groups. Allow fifteen minutes. Then go over the worksheet with the class (see answers below). Note that some of the Gospels can be dated in reference to historical events cited by the authors, while some are dated in reference to other texts that quote from them.

### Dating the Gospels

There was more than one calendar in use in the Roman Empire during the time the Gospels were composed. One calendar was from the beginning of the empire. Another, the Julian calendar, was introduced by Julius Caesar in 45 BC. The dual calendars posed a problem for Gospel authors, who wanted to date some of the incidents. Frequently, the best they could do was to relate their narrative's events to other significant historical events or people that were concurrent to them. For example, Luke uses this method to help date the ministry of John the Baptist and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry:



In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberias Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lymanias was tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert. (Lk 3:1–2)

The difficulty with this type of dating is that the reader needs to be able to convert the dates to the current Gregorian calendar (between AD 27 and AD 29 in this case). Even then, the Gospel text may include confusing facts that would make accurate dating difficult. For example, in the above passage, Luke apparently did not know that Annas and Caiaphas were not high priests at the same time. Annas had been high priest AD 6–15 and Caiaphas AD 18–36, although Annas was apparently still alive during Caiaphas's reign.

Dating Jesus' life on earth poses another particular problem. It is hard to put concrete dates on a person

who began his life as a humble son of a carpenter from an otherwise obscure town of Nazareth, and whose later activities were only briefly noticed by religious and political enemies at the end of his life. In the absence of any archeological evidence, dating his life is somewhat of a hypothetical effort, as is dating the Gospels that recount his story. A curious note in this regard is that both Matthew and Luke indicate that Jesus was born while Herod the Great was still alive (Mt 2:1; Lk 1:5). Historical records indicate that Herod died in 4 BC. So, if Jesus was born during Herod's reign, Jesus had to have been born not later than 4 BC.

There are more reliable ways to date the creation of the Gospels themselves. For example, when the Gospels mention known and dated events from history, it is accurate to be able to date the Gospel sometime after those events. Or, when the Gospel is quoted by other datable writings, it is accurate to be able to say that the Gospel was written before the document it was quoted in.

The easiest of the Gospels to date is Mark's Gospel, because of a detail in Jesus' description of the end of the world in Mark 13. The last days were important to the early Christians, since many of them believed the world

## Worksheet 25 Answers

### Dating the Gospels

Name of Gospel	When was this Gospel written?	What is the evidence for dating?
Matthew	After AD 70 and before AD 100; more specifically between AD 85–90	Written after Mark's Gospel, it is quoted in a number of other sources that can be dated.
Mark	AD 68–72, or more specifically, AD 70	Jesus' description in Mk 13 about the end of the world is connected with the destruction of the Temple in AD 68.
Luke	AD 80s	Written after Mark, but since Luke does not seem to know of Paul's letters, it cannot be much after Mark.
John	AD 90–130	More difficult to date, the Gospel did have wide circulation by AD 130, as the John Rylands Greek papyrus dates from that time.

was going to end during their lifetimes. In the midst of Jesus' words of warning, the narrator's voice adds a brief aside in parentheses: "When you see the desolating abomination standing where he should not (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains" (Mk 13:4). This interruption suggests that there was something happening about the time that Mark's Gospel was being written that the author knew that his readers would be aware of. Historians went looking for something of great import that could explain this aside, all the while acknowledging that it could be something local that they might possibly never discover. As Jesus' teaching in this case was prompted by his comment that the stones of the Temple in Jerusalem would all be torn down (Mk 13:2–4), there was good reason to tie the aside into the destruction of the Temple itself.

What is the historical record of this event? Very long dissatisfied with incompetent Roman governance, the Jews of Judea rebelled against the Roman Empire in AD 68. The Roman army responded fiercely, and for two years, under General Vespasian and then his son, Titus, reconquered Judea by force of arms. The war was terrible, lengthy, and newsworthy, especially among Jews and Christians. Finally, in the year 70, Titus took the last standing fortress in Jerusalem, the Temple itself, entering it as a conqueror. It is reasonable to assume that he was the "desolating abomination standing where he should not." For this

reason, many scholars date the composition of Mark's Gospel to sometime during these difficult events (AD 68–72). A more definite hypothesis is that the Gospel of Mark was written in AD 70, the year that the Temple was destroyed.

If Matthew and Luke, in fact, used Mark's Gospel as a starting point for their own writings, then their own Gospels must have been from sometime later than AD 70. Allowing time for the slow process of hand-copying Mark's text, and a similarly slow method of walking a completed version from one place to the next, there had to be a few years after Mark's composition before Matthew and Luke examined it and decided that it was a good source for their own narratives about Jesus.

Dating Matthew's Gospel is aided because it is quoted by a number of sources, including 1 Peter 2:12 and 3:14, as well as the *Didache*. St. Ignatius of Antioch also appears to refer to it repeatedly in his letters. Using the known dates of these documents, scholars are inclined to agree that Matthew's Gospel was written after AD 70 and before AD 100. A mediating date around AD 85–90 seems reasonable, if uncertain.

Luke's Gospel is also dated after Mark's in time, but as Luke does not seem to know of Paul's letters, it cannot have followed Mark by too late a date. Paul's letters were likely

#### Didache

A Greek word for "teaching," it refers to the teaching directed to Christians who have accepted the Gospel.

#### John Rylands Greek papyrus

A fragment of John's Gospel, found in Egypt and written on Greek papyrus that dates from around 130 BC. It is the earliest fragment from any New Testament book. It is preserved at the John Rylands University Library in Manchester, England.



6. Note that even Jesus' birth year is difficult to determine. Both Matthew and Luke indicate that Jesus was born while Herod the Great was alive (before 4 BC), but provide few other clues.

## Preparing for the Next Lesson

1. Assign the Review Questions on page 195 and page 198. The answers are on page 263 and 266 of the Teacher's Wraparound Edition.
2. Assign for reading the text sections "Formation of the Gospels" (pages 198–200) and "Authorship of the Gospels" (pages 200–202).

## Extending the Lesson

1. Show images of the John Rylands Greek papyrus, the earliest section of the New Testament in existence. Review with the students. Ask: What does the existence of this papyrus tell us about John's Gospel? (It was written before AD 130.)
2. Reread the quote from Luke 3:1–2 announcing the birth of Jesus (page 196 of the text). Ask the students to write a description of their birth in the style of the biblical writers. Make sure that they include ways to tell someone the year that they were born without telling them the date. See the Reflect question on page 198.
3. Ask students to research dating methods for other great texts of the ancient world (e.g., Plato's dialogues, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Herodotus's histories) and report on other methods that archaeologists use to date the composition of these texts.