

AN OVERVIEW OF THIS CHRONOLOGICAL HARMONY OF THE GOSPELS

The Bible is a collection of 66 books, divided into two sections, 39 from the Old Testament and 27 from the New Testament. *“The Old Testament is the New Testament concealed and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed.”* In other words, the two sections flow together.

The New Testament is divided into the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, Epistles (Letters), and Apocalypse (Revelation). A “Harmony of the Gospels” attempts to read the four gospels in a chronological, harmonious way. However, that is a western cultural attempt to read the Gospels like a history or a biography, which are not what the Gospels are.

First, the word gospel means “good news”. The Greek word comes from the same root in which we get “evangelism”. We use it broadly, primarily to “announce” the good message of salvation (eternal life through the forgiveness of our sins and restoration of our relationship with God).

But the four Gospels represent four different “good message” narratives. So why have a chronological harmony of the gospel? This collection complements and does not replace the gospels’ unique perspectives. Its aim is to help us appreciate the similarities and the differences. It is designed to spark your desire even more to read the Bible, the New Testament, and especially the four gospels.

MARK begins with “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ”. Mark is typically thought to be the first gospel. John Mark is described in Acts as a cousin to Barnabas, and likely met Jesus as a young man. He uses very descriptive language and more explanation of events, even though it is the shortest of the gospels. Some have thought that he was the young man in Mark 14:51-52. Written after 50 A.D. with assistance from Simon Peter, it is amazingly close in time to the events for ancient literature. It is an active gospel, using the word “immediately” 40 times. Mark’s quick style appealed to the Romans as an action-filled adventure, rapidly getting to the final week of Jesus’s earthly life in chapter 11. Jesus is proclaimed the Son of God in Mark 1:1 and shown to be the Suffering Servant. This gospel goes from Galilee, chapters 1-9, to east of Jordan, chapter 10, to Jerusalem, 11-16.

MATTHEW sees Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, superior to Abraham, Moses, and King David. The genealogy goes from Abraham to Christ in three, 14 generational segments, and differs from Luke’s genealogy after David, likely Joseph’s lineage. There are five discourses and five narratives, comparable to the five books of Moses. Jesus gives a teaching on the mount, surpassing Moses’s law, which was also given on a mountain. Written by the tax collector also called Levi, Matthew appeals to the Jews that Jesus is the promised Messiah. It ends with Jesus given all power in Heaven and Earth, and He commissions His followers to teach His commandments, and promises His eternal presence with them. Some believe Matthew may have been written before Mark in some form. Early tradition states that John Mark buried Barnabas with a copy of Matthew (not Mark’s gospel) with him.

LUKE, in contrast with Mark’s oblique cliff hanger, offers a “season two” in his writing of the gospel followed by the the book of Acts. Deemed the first “Christian historian,” Luke puts the gospel in an “orderly” account, not necessarily chronological but in successive, thematic order. Like Mark, Luke goes geographically from Galilee to Jerusalem, presenting Himself as the Divine Savior. Luke, described as a physician, well-educated, and a companion to Paul, was not an eyewitness as the other three gospel writers, but interviewed them, including Mary, whom he quotes twice as having things “in her heart” and likely listing her ancestors back to Adam. Luke was written before Acts, and Acts concludes without mentioning the death of Paul, so it likely was written in the mid-60s A.D.

JOHN was written last of all, with plenty of access to other gospel narratives, but specifically avoids almost all references to them. Whereas Matthew references two series of fives, John utilizes the number seven, including seven major sermons, seven journeys to Jerusalem, seven witnesses, seven miraculous signs, and more. Why seven? It represents deity and completion and indeed John’s gospel is the final gospel, written by the last surviving apostle, who like Matthew and Mark, never identifies himself as “John” but does interject himself as “*the disciple whom Jesus loved*”. John also emphasizes that Christ is God. Penned after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and likely closer to 90 A.D., John undoubtedly had seen Christianity’s popularity beyond Judaism, and writes with explanations to the Gentiles.

With these explanations of the gospels, realize that one of the marks of authenticity of testimonies is found in the unique perspectives. These are not contradictions in their differences. They are in fact harmonies of the same song, orchestrating a beautiful song from the gospels.

—Introduction written by Timothy C. McKeown, associate pastor of FBC Killeen

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