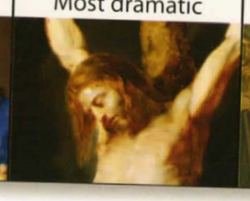
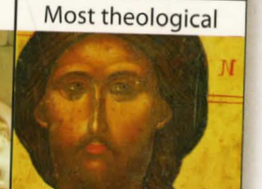
FOUR GOSPELS, ONE JESUS

When my oldest son was two years old, we took him to a portrait studio to have his picture taken. Two-year-olds are a bundle of emotions, and getting them to sit still through a photo shoot is a real challenge. During that short session, my son went through a range of moods, from contentment, to laughter, to pouting, to anger, to tears. I remember getting the proofs afterward. The first showed him serenely content, smiling at the camera. In the second, he was laughing delightedly as the photographer waved a stuffed animal in his face. In the next, he was beginning to get bored and had put on a cute little pout. The fourth showed him downright angry, with a defiant "just try to make me smile" look on his face. By the last shot, he had dissolved into tears. The poor little guy had had enough. Which of these pictures captured my son's personality? The answer, of course, is all of them! Each one caught a different side of his multifaceted personality. Together they give us an insightful glimpse into who he is.

The four unique Gospels testify to the one gospel—the good news of salvation available through Jesus the Messiah.

This little story is a good analogy for the New Testament Gospels. Each of the four Gospels—**Matthew, Mark, Luke,** and **John**—paints a unique portrait of Jesus Christ. Each provides special insight into who he is and what he accomplished. The Gospels exhibit both **unity and diversity**, bearing witness to the same Jesus (unity) but viewing him from unique perspectives (diversity). What are these four unique portraits? At the risk of oversimplifying, we may say that Matthew presents Jesus as the *Jewish* ***Messiah***, the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes; Mark portrays him as the *suffering* ***Son of God***, who offers himself as a sacrifice for sins; Luke's Jesus is the *Savior for all people*, who brings salvation to all nations and people groups; and in John, Jesus is the *eternal Son of God*, the self-revelation of God the Father. These are not contradictory portraits but complementary ones. Having four Gospels gives us a deeper, more profound understanding of **Christology**—the nature of Jesus' person and work.

Figure 1.1—Four Portraits of the One Jesus

Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
The Gospel of the Messiah	The Gospel of the suffering Son of God	The Gospel of the Savior for all people	The Gospel of the divine Son who reveals the Father
Most structured	Most dramatic	Most thematic	Most theological
			

Not only are the Gospels unique in their portraits of Jesus, they are also unique in their presentations. Mark is the most *dramatic* of the four, a powerful and vivid story which grips the reader from beginning to end. Matthew is the most *structured* of the Gospels, crafted around five carefully ordered teaching sections. Luke is the most *thematic*, with themes like God's love for the lost, the role of the Spirit, and Jerusalem's role in God's plan resurfacing again and again. John's is the most *theological* of the four, with more explicit statements concerning Jesus' identity and purpose. We should add that all of the Gospels are all of these things—dramatic, structured, thematic, and theological—but there are important differences in emphasis.

THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS AND THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

There are also degrees of diversity among the Gospels. The first three—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are known as the **Synoptic Gospels** (from the Greek *synopsis*, meaning "viewed together") because they view the life and ministry of Jesus from a similar perspective, follow the same general outline, and record a great deal of common material. The Gospel of John presents a strikingly different perspective. The author of the Fourth Gospel omits much material found in the Synoptics and includes much unique material. John also writes with a different style and dwells more on the theological significance of Jesus' words and deeds. Scholars debate whether the author knew the Synoptic Gospels and supplemented them or was writing independently of them. We will discuss this issue in more detail in our introduction to the Fourth Gospel.

Figure 1.2—The Synoptics and John

Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke)	Gospel of John
1. Emphasize the Galilean setting of the first part of Jesus' ministry	1. Considerable movement between Galilee and Judea
2. Little information given to determine the length of Jesus' ministry; material could fit into a single year	2. Mentions at least three different Passover feasts (2:13; 6:4; 13:1), and so a ministry of 2½ to 3½ years
3. Jesus teaches mostly in parables, short sayings, and epigrams	3. Relates long speeches by Jesus, dialogues with his opponents, and interviews with individuals
4. Teaching focuses on the kingdom of God; healings and exorcisms demonstrate the power of the kingdom and the dawn of eschatological salvation	4. Teaching focuses on Jesus himself and the Son's revelation of the Father. Signs or miracles reveal Jesus' identity and glorify the Father; no exorcisms

THE GOSPEL GENRE

The first question readers must ask when approaching any literature is, What am I reading? This is the question of **genre**, or type of literature. If I pick up a newspaper and read, "The President prepares to address Congress," I recognize this as a news report and expect to read factual information. On the other hand, if I pick up a book and read, "Once upon a time,

Figure 1.3—The Background to the Term *Gospel*

The English term *gospel* comes from the Old English *godspell*, a translation of the Greek noun *euangelion*, meaning "good tidings" or "good news." *Euangelion* was used in the Greek world for the announcement of good news, such as victory in battle, or for the enthronement of a Roman ruler. An inscription for the birthday of the Roman emperor Augustus reads, "Good news [*euangelia*] to the world!"

In the Old Testament, the announcement of God's end-time deliverance of his people is sometimes referred to as "good news." Isaiah 52:7 reads, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news … who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!' " (cf. Isa. 40:9; 61:1; Ps. 96:2). Jesus probably drew from this Old Testament background when he began preaching that God's day of salvation had arrived: "The time has come.… The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15; cf. Luke 4:18).

Though Jesus was probably speaking Aramaic, the early church translated his words into Greek and *euangelion* soon became a technical term for the good news about Jesus Christ. In 1 Thessalonians, one of the earliest New Testament letters (c. AD 50–51), Paul writes that "our *gospel* came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (1 Thess. 1:5, emphasis added). Here Paul uses *euangelion* of the spoken word, the oral proclamation of the good news about Jesus Christ.

In time, *euangelion* came to be applied not only to the oral preaching but also to the written versions of the good news about Jesus Christ. Mark introduces his work with the words, "The beginning of *the gospel* about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1, emphasis added), and the church soon came to call these works Gospels. This tells us something about the way they viewed them. These were not dry historical accounts of the life of Christ but written versions of the oral proclamation. The Gospels have a living and dynamic quality, calling people to faith in Jesus. The Gospels were meant to be proclaimed … and to be believed.

Different kinds of literature (genres) require different reading strategies.

there were three bears," I know I am reading a fairy tale. I am not concerned about whether these bears actually existed, what country they were from, or whether they were grizzlies or brown bears. I read to be entertained and, perhaps, to look for moral lessons. In cases like these, we identify genre easily. But identification is not always so easy, and it is possible to misidentify literary genres. One person standing in a grocery-store checkout line may read the *National Enquirer* headline "Aliens Invade Los Angeles" and fear that they are in mortal danger. Another identifies the genre as entertainment tabloid and chuckles. Identifying genre is essential for both interpretation and application.

To understand the Gospels, we must first ask, *What are we reading?* What kind of documents are these and what sort of information are they meant to convey? Are they historical accounts meant to pass on factual information, or are they theological documents meant to teach spiritual truths? Or are they both? The identification of genre enables us to answer these questions. The genre of the Gospels may be examined under three headings: *history*, *narrative*, and *theology*.

The Gospels Are Historical Literature

The Gospels are historical in at least three ways. First, *they have a history of composition.* The authors drew on traditions and sources available to them to compile their works. The methods used to determine how the Gospels came to be are collectively known as *historical criticism*, or the *historical-critical method.* In the next chapter, we will examine types of historical criticism: source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism.

Second, the Gospels are historical in that *they are set in a specific historical context.* This setting is first-century **Palestine** during the period of Roman occupation. To understand the Gospels, we must enter into the world in which they were written, a world very different than our own. In part 2 (chaps. 4–6), we will examine the historical, religious, and cultural settings of the Gospels.

Third, the Gospels are historical in that *they are meant to convey accurate historical information.* This is implicit in all four Gospels and is explicitly stated by John (21:24) and Luke. Luke leaves no doubt that he intends to write history:

> Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.
>
> —Luke 1:1–4

Notice the author's piling up of terms of historical veracity. Luke certainly claimed to be writing accurate history. Of course, one could question whether Luke was a reliable historian or whether his sources were reliable. We will examine these questions in part 4. The point here is that Luke's intentions were historical.

The fact that the Gospels are historical in this third sense has profound implications for Christianity as a religion. The faith of the Gospel writers is based not on the esoteric teachings of a first-century philosopher nor on religious myths with symbolic meaning. It is based on the historical person and work of Jesus Christ. The Gospels claim to be the record of God's actions in human history, his entrance into human history in the person of his Son. As an essentially historical religion, Christianity rises or falls on the historicity of core Gospel events: (1) Jesus' words and deeds, (2) his death on the cross, and (3) his resurrection, the vindication of his claims. As the apostle Paul wrote with reference to Jesus' resurrection, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor. 15:14). For Paul, as for the Gospel writers, the historicity of these events confirms the truth of Christianity.

The Gospels Are Narrative Literature

Although historical in nature, the Gospels are not merely collections of reports or sayings of the historical Jesus. They are also narratives with features typical of stories, including plot, characters, and setting. While all four Gospels are concerned with the same historical events—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—they present different versions of these events. They present characters from different perspectives. They develop plot in different ways. They emphasize different settings. Viewing the Gospels as narratives provides important insights into their literary and theological distinctions. In chapter 3, we will examine narrative criticism and other literary approaches to the Gospels.

Figure 1.4—The Gospel Genre
Ancient Biographies?

A vigorous debate has taken place over the last century concerning the Gospel genre and its relationship to other ancient literature. Some scholars have held that the Gospels are unique in the ancient world, a genre created by the early Christians. This view was particularly popular among the form critics (we will discuss them in the next chapter), who considered the Gospels to be nonliterary collections of oral traditions, or folk literature. The Gospels were treated as products of the Christian community rather than of individual authors.

The last quarter century has seen much greater emphasis on the Gospels as literary works. It is recognized that the Gospel writers were not merely collectors of traditions but literary artists crafting their narratives. This has generated renewed interest in the literary features of the Gospels and their relationship to other ancient genres.

There is a consensus growing among scholars today that while the Gospels have many unique features, they also have much in common with Greco-Roman works, especially the broad category of writings known as "biographies" (*bioi*), or "lives." These writings were written to preserve the memory and celebrate the virtues, teachings, or exploits of famous philosophers, statesmen, or rulers. Examples of this category are Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars*, and Jewish philosopher Philo's *Life of Moses*. Since the Gospels arose in the Greco-Roman world of the first century, it is profitable to compare them with other writings of this era, identifying common literary features and narrative techniques.

At the same time, the uniqueness of the Gospels must be kept in mind. They arose in the context of the needs and concerns of the early Christian communities, and in the preaching and teaching of the good news. The Gospels were not meant simply to preserve the memory or pass on the teachings of a great leader. They were written to proclaim the good news of salvation and to call people to faith in Jesus Christ, the risen Lord and Savior.

For more details, see Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

The Gospels Are Theological Literature

While the Gospels are meant to be historical, they are more than unbiased news reports. They are theological documents written to instruct and encourage believers and to convince unbelievers of the truth of their message. This is evident in that they focus especially on the saving work accomplished through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is why we call the Gospel writers **Evangelists** (from *euangelizō*, "to announce good news"). They are proclaimers of the good news about Jesus Christ and the coming of the **kingdom of God**.

Notice John's statement of intent in John 20:30–31:

> Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

The recognition that the Gospel writers are theologians in their own right is one of the most important contributions of recent Gospel research. Each Evangelist has a story to tell and a perspective to emphasize. Each brings out certain aspects of Jesus' identity. Notice the unique way each introduces his work:

Matthew 1:1	Mark 1:1	Luke 1:3	John 1:1
"A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham."	"The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God."	"Since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account."	"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Mark introduces his story as the "gospel" and emphasizes Jesus as the Christ and Son of God, two important titles in his work. Matthew shows an immediate interest in Jesus' Jewish ancestry, especially his lineage through Abraham and David. This indicates his interest in Jesus' fulfillment of the promises made to Israel. Luke brings out his interest in producing an accurate historical account. John introduces Jesus as the pre-existent divine Word, the self-revelation of God.

The identification of the Gospel writers as theologians has important implications for the way we read the Gospels. We ought to read each Gospel seeking to discern these theological themes.

In summary, we can classify the Gospels as *historical narrative motivated by theological concerns.* Their intention is not only to convey accurate historical material about Jesus but also to explain and interpret these salvation-bringing events. The Gospels were written not by detached, uninterested observers but by Evangelists, "proclaimers of good news," announcing the good news of Jesus Christ and calling people to faith in him.

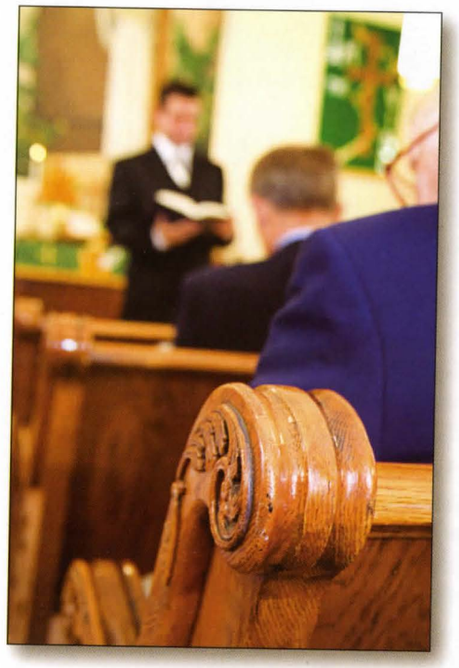
The Gospels are historical narrative motivated by theological concerns.

WHY WERE THE GOSPELS WRITTEN?

We have already touched on the question of why the Gospels were written. The simple answer is that each Gospel writer had a story to tell. Each wished to paint a particular portrait of Jesus, to emphasize certain theological themes, and to address specific concerns within the church. The following are some suggested further motivations.

Historical: The need for a faithful and authoritative record of the words and deeds of Jesus. The apostles would not live forever, and the Gospel writers wanted to preserve the traditions that had been entrusted to them.

Catechetical: The need to instruct converts in the Christian faith. New believers coming into the church needed to be instructed concerning the words and deeds of Jesus. Like a "new believers class" offered by a church today, the Gospels provided summaries of Jesus' life and teaching. Scholars sometimes distinguish between the ***kerygma***—the essential "preaching" of the message of salvation—and the ***didache***—the "teaching" of the Gospel traditions about Jesus.



© istockphoto

The Gospels served a teaching and worship purpose in the early church, much as Scripture is read in worship services today.

Liturgical: The need for worship material in the church. The Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) were read in the synagogues, but for Christians, this was only half the story. The promise had to be supplemented with the fulfillment. Some scholars have argued that the Gospels were written to provide a Christian liturgy.

Exhortatory: To encourage and assure believers in their faith. As a small and persecuted minority, the early believers needed reassurance of the truth and reliability of the story of Jesus.

Theological: The need to settle internal disputes. From time to time, false teaching arose in the church. The Gospels may have been written in part to counter false teaching about Jesus or to combat an alternate religious worldview like **Gnosticism**.

Apologetic: The need to respond to external attacks on the church. The church was under attack from its enemies, and the Gospels may have been written in part to respond to these attacks. Matthew's Gospel appears to be responding to accusations made by the Jewish community against Jesus' messiahship and against the Jewish-Christian church.

Evangelistic: The need to call people to faith in Jesus. While the Gospels were written primarily to believers, all of them contain an implicit call to faith in Jesus Christ. John's Gospel cites this as one of its purposes (20:31).

These factors are not mutually exclusive, of course, and various needs and concerns may have motivated each Gospel writer. We will discuss various proposals made by scholars as we examine the purpose and theme of each Gospel in part 3.

THE GOSPEL AUDIENCES: TO WHOM WERE THE GOSPELS WRITTEN?

There is almost universal agreement that the Gospels were written primarily to believers rather than to unbelievers. But who were the specific audiences? None of the Gospels identify their recipients except Luke, who addresses his work to a certain Theophilus (Luke 1:3). Yet even Theophilus is probably the patron who sponsored Luke's Gospel, rather than the primary or exclusive recipient. Luke surely expected his work to be read by others.

Over the last century, there has been a tendency to view each of the Gospels as written to a specific Christian church to address the needs of that community. For example, Mark's Gospel is often associated with the church in Rome, written to encourage that church to endure the persecutions instigated by the emperor Nero. Within this framework, scholars seek to "read between the lines" of individual Gospel stories to reconstruct the community situation in which the Gospel arose. In its extreme form, this perspective claims that the Gospels tell us more about the concerns of later Christian communities than about the life and ministry of the historical Jesus.

This perspective has been challenged in recent years, with some scholars arguing that the Gospels were written not to isolated Christian churches but to a broader Christian audience.[1] Evidence for this is the significant communication and travel among Christian communities seen in the letters of Paul and other early church writings. First-century churches were not isolated islands of belief but networks of interrelated communities scattered throughout the Mediterranean region. In this environment, an author is unlikely to have written and addressed his Gospel to a single church. A more general audience is also suggested by the literary interdependence of the Gospels. The likelihood that both Matthew and Luke used Mark as one of their sources (an issue we will discuss in chap. 2) suggests that Mark's Gospel was widely circulated among first-century churches.

While this debate over audience is far from resolved, the truth probably lies somewhere between two extremes. The Gospel writers were certainly members of individual churches and would naturally have written with the needs and concerns of their church (or groups of churches) in mind. For example, Matthew appears to be writing to Jewish-Christian communities struggling with their relationship to Judaism. He stresses the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies to show that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. It is not unlikely that Mark's Gospel was written in the context of Roman Christianity suffering under the Neronian persecutions. The author stresses Jesus' role as **suffering Servant** to call the church to cross-bearing discipleship. At the same time, it is unlikely that these communities were isolated from the larger network of first-century churches, or that they practiced idiosyncratic versions of Christianity. Even if the Gospel writers wrote especially with regard to the needs of their particular communities, they would certainly have kept a broader Christian audience in mind, expecting their Gospels to be copied and distributed among various churches.

In any case, since it is nearly impossible to identify the precise community situation in which each Gospel arose, as evidenced by the multitude of diverse and contradictory

1. See Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

theories, it is more profitable to discuss the general kinds of readers—what we call the *implied audience*—to whom the Gospels are addressed, rather than insisting on a specific situation.

WHY *FOUR* GOSPELS?

We have already begun to answer the question of why there are four Gospels. Each of the four Gospels was written to provide a unique perspective on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Each also probably arose in a different community within the early church. But why did the church retain all four in the **canon of Scripture**? The most famous early attempt to synthesize the four Gospels into one is the ***Diatessaron*** ("through four"), compiled by the church father Tatian around AD 170. Tatian brought portions of all four Gospels together into one story. Since then there have been many attempts to produce a **harmony of the Gospels**, or to synthesize the Gospels into a single story. Yet in the end, the church chose to preserve the four distinct Gospels, recognizing each as a unique literary account and as an inspired and authoritative work of the Holy Spirit.

Z. Radovan, Jerusalem

The *Gospel of Thomas* is an apocryphal gospel which was part of the Nag Hammadi library of Gnostic literature, discovered in Egypt in 1945.

WHY *ONLY* FOUR GOSPELS?

There are more than four ancient documents which claim to be Gospels, or which contain stories of Jesus, including works like the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Peter*, and a number of **infancy gospels**, fanciful accounts of Jesus' birth and childhood. The value and historicity of these so-called **apocryphal gospels** continues to be debated. Some scholars claim, for example, that the *Gospel of Thomas* may contain some independent traditions about Jesus. Yet while these writings might preserve an occasional authentic saying or story about Jesus, they are for the most part unreliable late compositions, **pseudepigraphic** (falsely written under an assumed name), and dependent on the canonical Gospels. Their greater value is in providing data concerning the first three centuries of church history, especially the second-century movement known as Gnosticism (see fig. 1.5). The sensational claim that the apocryphal gospels depict the "real Jesus" but were suppressed and silenced by the orthodox church does not hold up under critical scrutiny. In the end, the church rejected these later writings because they failed the test of historical veracity and because they lacked the spiritual power and authority that indicated the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The addendum at the end of this chapter lists the more important apocryphal gospels.