

Theology Matters: The Gospels

Session 2: Genre

What are gospels anyway?! Why do we have four of them? And why are there differences between the accounts? How were they written? And what are the particular challenges involved in reading them?

This session will give some guidelines for how we can get the most of our reading the four gospels.

Genre: What are the Gospels?

What type of books are the gospels? And how does that affect the way in which we should read them?

Gospel

euangelion = good news

'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' (Mark 1:1)

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Biography

bios / bioi = 'life'
Graeco-Roman biographies

'Memoirs of the Apostles'
(Justin Martyr, *First Apology*)

Whilst they are historical documents, they're not expected to be strictly chronological in order, but are often arranged thematically in order to emphasise the overall thrust and focus of the individual's life and work.

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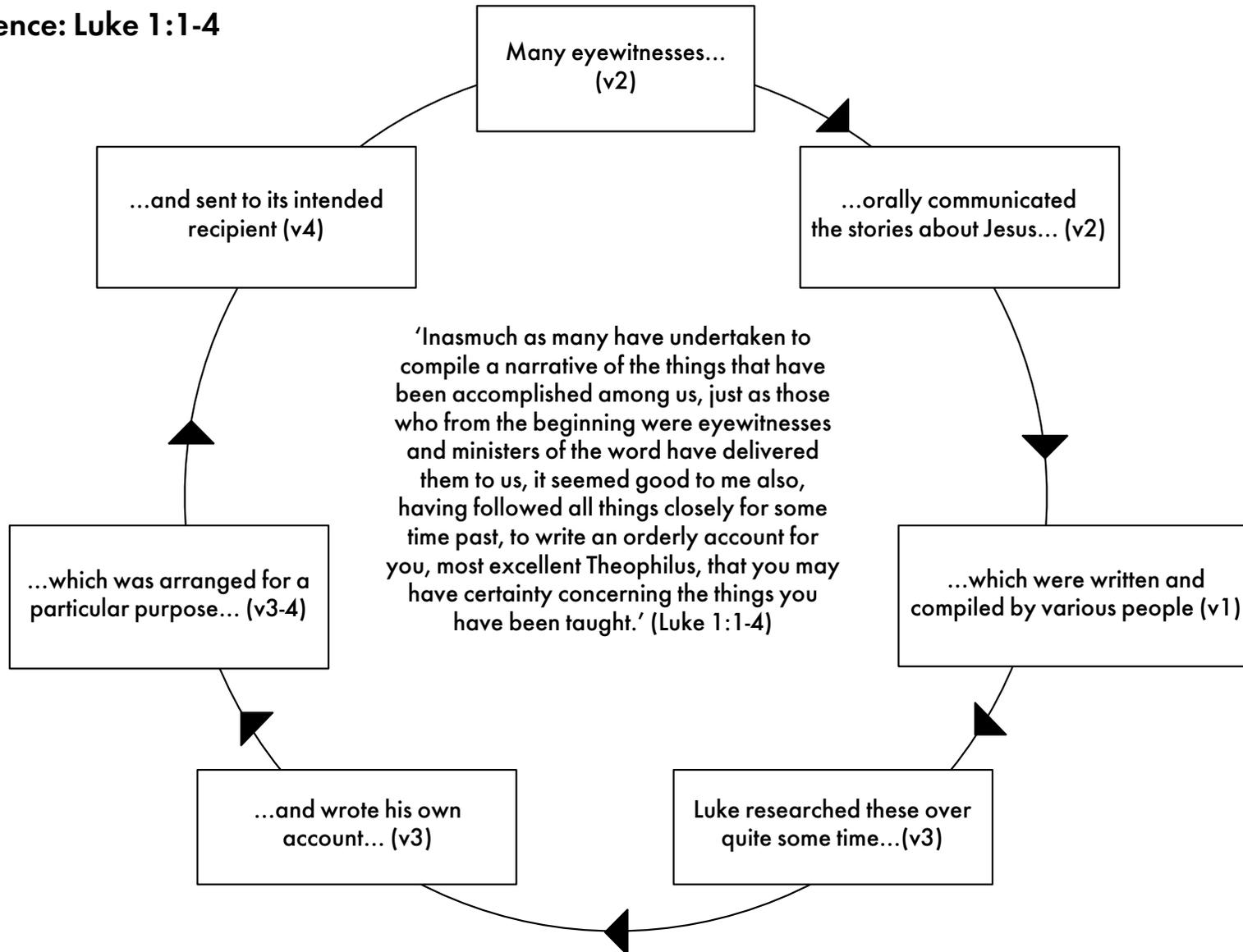
Christological Biography

The good news, expressed in the life of Christ Jesus.

'These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.' (John 20:30-31)

Genre: How did they come about?

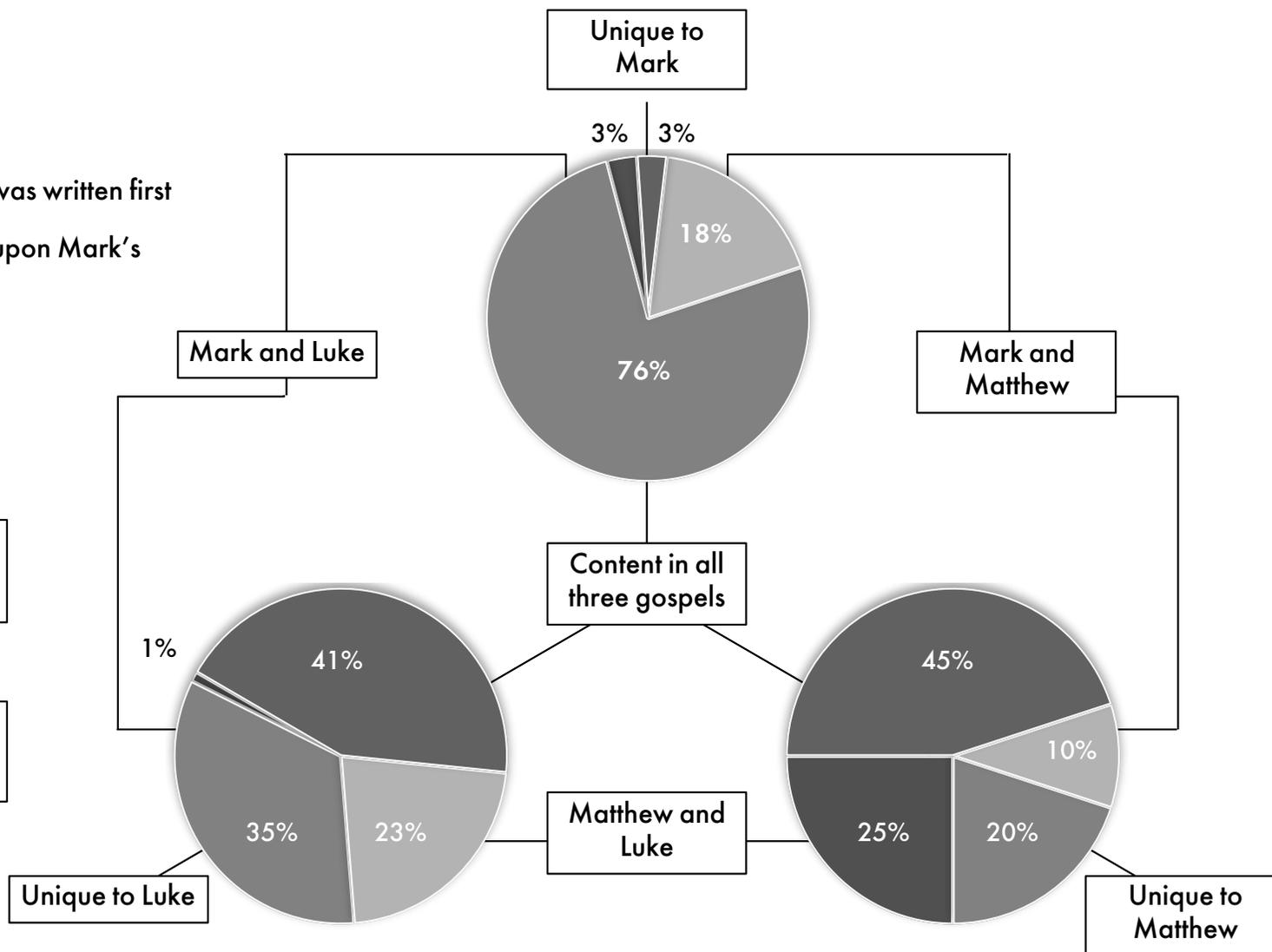
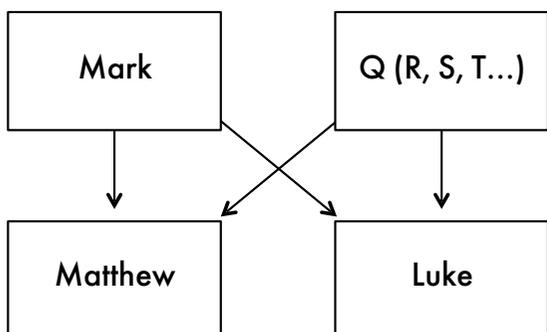
The internal evidence: Luke 1:1-4



Genre: Why do we have four of them?

What are the 'synoptic' gospels?

- *Synoptic* = *syn* (together) + *optic* (view)
- The most likely hypothesis is that Mark was written first and that Matthew and Luke both drew upon Mark's account (and possibly others).
- John was written independently



Genre: Why do we have four of them?

The feeding of the 5,000: an example of independence and interdependence

Number of words used to tell the story

Gospel	Number of words used
Matthew	157
Mark	194
Luke	153
John	199

Number of words common to all of the synoptic gospels: 53

Number of words John has in common with the synoptic gospels: 8

(five, two, five thousand, took loaves, twelve baskets of pieces)

Percentage of agreement between the gospels

Comparison	Percentage
Matthew / Mark	59
Matthew / Luke	44
Luke / Mark	40
John / Matthew	8.5
John / Mark	8.5
John / Luke	6.5

'The following conclusions seem inevitable: John represents a clearly *independent* telling of the story. He uses only those words absolutely necessary to be telling the same story, and even uses a different Greek word for "fish"! The other three are just as clearly *interdependent* in some way. Those who know Greek recognise how improbably it is for two people independently to tell the same story in a narrative form and have a 60 percent agreement in the words used, and often in the exact word order.'

(Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth*)

Genre: Why do they differ?

Why are there differences between the various accounts?

Event	Matthew	Mark	Luke
Cleansing of leper	8:1-4	1:40-45	5:12-16
Centurion of Capernaum	8:5-13	no parallel	7:1-10
Peter's mother-in-law	8:14-15	1:29-31	4:38-39
Sick healed	8:16-17	1:32-34	4:40-41
Following Jesus	8:18-22	no parallel	9:57-62
Stilling the storm	8:23-27	4:35-41	8:22-25
Gadarene demoniac	8:28-34	5:1-20	8:26-39
Healing of the paralytic	9:1-8	2:1-12	5:17-26
Matthew's call	9:9-13	2:13-17	5:27-32
Fasting question	9:14-17	2:18-22	5:33-39
Jairus and the Woman	9:18-26	5:21-43	8:40-56

- The authors were selective

'Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book [...] there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.' (John 20:30; 21:25)

- The authors were creative

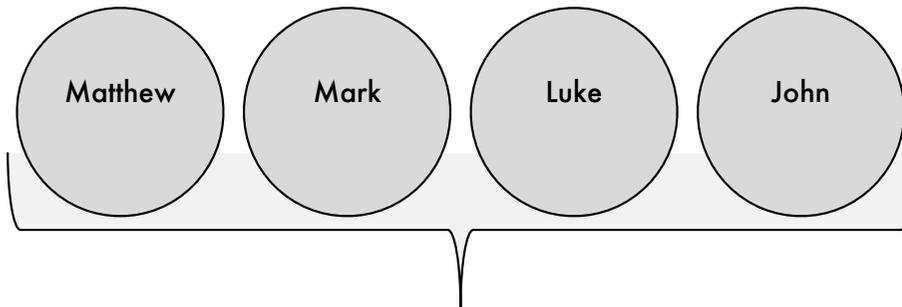
Compare the temptations in Matthew 4:5-10 and Luke 4:5-13. Why are they in a different order?

Genre: How should we read them?

I - The Descriptive Task

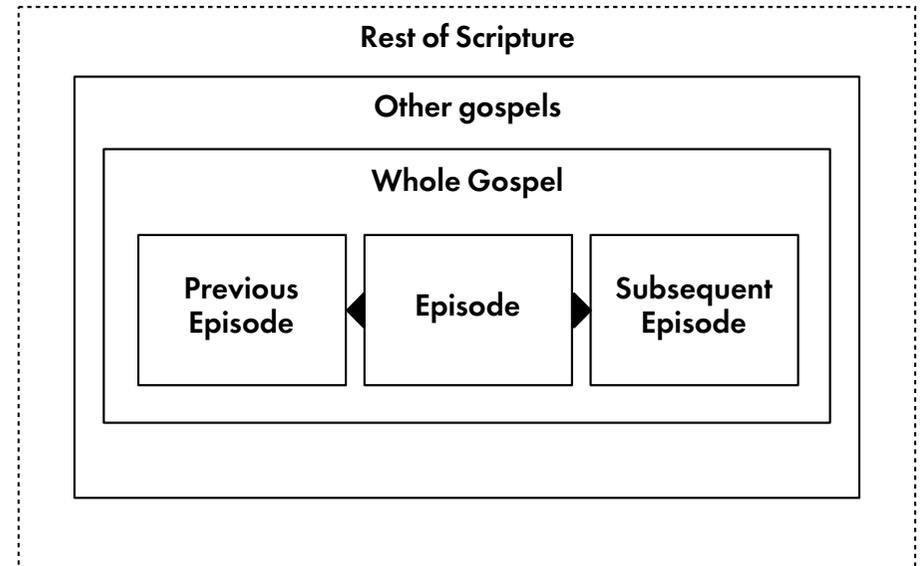
'The first thing we must do in order to understand the ethics of the New Testament is to explicate in detail the messages of the individual writings in the canon, without prematurely harmonising them. When we read the texts in this way, we note distinctive themes and patterns of reasoning in the individual witnesses' (Richard Hays - *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*)

'We must let the individual voices speak if we are to allow the New Testament to articulate a word that may contravene our own values and desires. Otherwise, we are likely to succumb to the temptation of flipping to some comforting cross-reference to neutralise the force of any particularly challenging passage we may encounter.' (Hays)



II - The Synthetic Task

'If we are pursuing New Testament ethics with theological concerns in view [...] we must move on to ask about the possibility of coherence among the various witnesses. When we ask this question, we move from the descriptive to the synthetic task. Is it possible to describe a unity of ethical perspective within the diversity of the canon?' (Hays)



- Ask basic questions: Who, what, when, where, why?
- What is the author trying to say by putting these stories together?
- What are the common themes, patterns or contrasts?
- Pay attention to transitional statements or hints from the author (e.g. Luke 14:7; Matt 5:1-2; Mark 7:19)
- Check out scriptural quotations and their original contexts

Genre: How should we read them?

Compare the following passages and consider why they may have been placed together

Group 1		
Matt 8:23-27	Matt 8:28-34	Matt 9:1-8

Group 2		
Mark 8:14-21	Mark 8:22-26	Mark 8:27-30

Group 3		
Mark 11:12-14	Mark 11:15-18	Mark 11:18-25

Group 4		
Luke 18:9-14	Luke 18:15-17	Luke 18:18-30