

# A History of the Bible

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An opportunity to listen, reflect and discuss, led by Tom Kennar

**Part Two: 'Gospel Truth'**



## Recap of Last Week's Main Points

- The Bible is the product of a long and intriguing process.
- Few, *if any*, of the books are by one single author.
- Not one book – but a *collection*. *'Ta Biblia' – the Books / Library*.
- Books are arranged in different orders by different traditions.
- The 'King James' bible is not 'the original'!
- Parts of the Old Testament go back 1000 years before Jesus.



# Part Two:

Gospel Truth

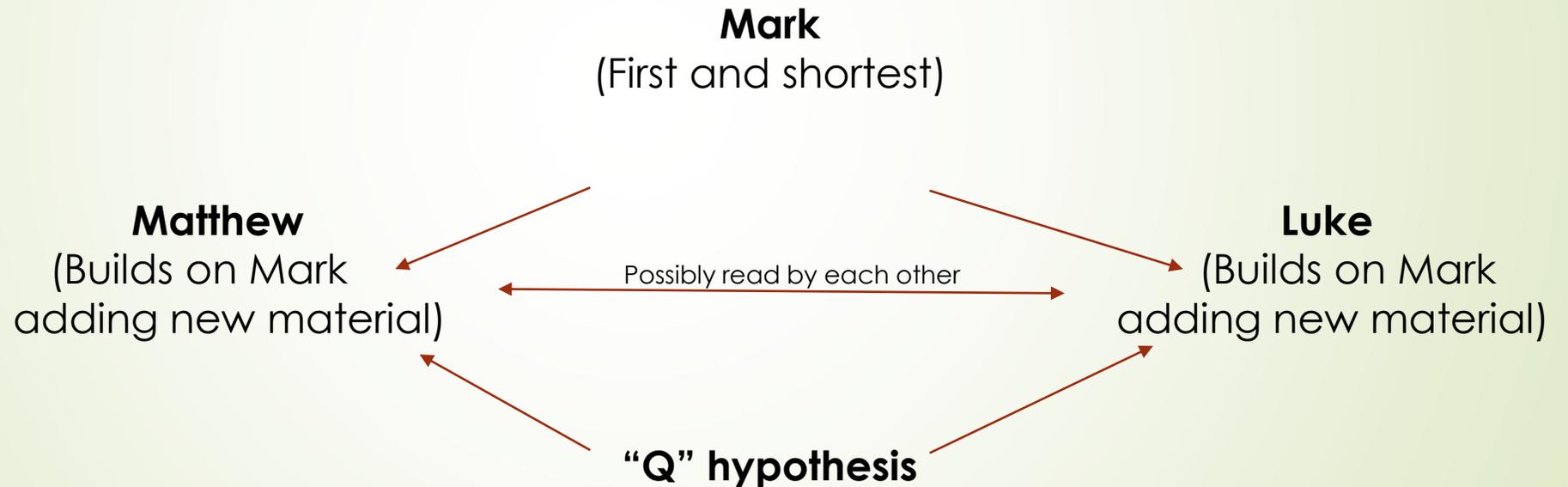


## The Order of the New Testament

**Letters of Paul:** within 10 or 20 years of Jesus (40 to 50 AD)

**Gospels: Matt, Mark, Luke** - begun around 70 AD (40 to 50 years after Jesus)

### The Synoptic Gospels



**The Gospel of John is later** – around the turn of the first century.



## What does this mean for Early Christians? (Context question!)

'For the people of New Testament times, there was no 'New Testament'.

Paul could not advise his followers to 'go and check the Gospels' – because there were no Gospels to check!

It was a long time before Paul's own letters, and the Gospels, came to be regarded as part of 'The Bible'.





## What kind of books are the Gospels?

There's nothing else quite like them, in antiquity or today's literature. They are a kind of theological biography:

- *Jesus' life, death and resurrection*
- *Jesus' memorable utterances and teachings*
- *An attempt to understand Jesus at a theological level (especially John)*

Mark seems to have been the first to attempt such a biography. He was probably resident in Syria – though *may* have been a follower of Peter.

Crucially – none of the Gospel writers was an eye-witness to the events they describe (except possibly John).

**Pondering: think about** who writes today's political biographies. Are we more likely to trust biographies written by respected historians more than political operators? How much of any biography is *actually* fact, or an interpretation of key events and speeches?

## Some Key Diversions in the Gospels

The existence of 'Q' is an unproven hypothesis. Perhaps there was a 'fifth' Gospel, no longer in existence, from which Mark and Luke drew to build on Mark's earlier work. If "Q" did exist, Matthew and Luke have certainly coloured material from it with their own outlook. Some examples:

- Only **Luke** has the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. (Did he make them up?)
- **Birth Narratives** – very different.  
*Mark and John saying nothing about Jesus' birth.*  
*Luke gives us the story of the Shepherds, and a stable.*  
*Matthew gives us the story of the Wise Men, and a house in Bethlehem.*
- John's Gospel takes place over 3-4 years. The 'synoptics' suggest a slightly more than one year earthly ministry. ("The year of the Lord's favour").

**We'll probably never know why the Gospels have such different accounts of Jesus. Perhaps the variations are designed to make us cautious of claiming 'inerrancy' for the Scriptures?**

## Origins

**First** – stories of Jesus circulated by word of mouth (not least through the Apostle's preaching)

**Then:** Codex – notebooks. (Not used for 'serious literature'). 'Real' literature was always written on a scroll.

So for the first Christians, the Gospels were perhaps a sort of 'memory aid' for preachers who were recounting the stories of Jesus orally to congregations.

**What about the inconsistencies?** Initially, there was not much concern about the differences between the Gospels. But eventually, they became problematic. St Augustine attempted a 'harmonisation' in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century. Other attempts have been made over the years – but they are usually unsatisfactory. Even today, we tend to 'harmonise' the stories in our minds.

**Example** – the 'rich young ruler', who is described as 'young' in one Gospel, and 'a ruler' in another.

**Another example:** Blessed are the poor (Luke) or Blessed are the poor in spirit (Matthew). Which kind of poverty was most important to Jesus. Both? Or is one version simply the spin of the biographer?

## What can we conclude?

- The Gospels were important to early Christians but not as Scriptures. They were authoritative sources, treasured and copied, but not 'Gospel Truth'! Not 'sacred' to the early Christians, while the Old Testament remained 'sacred'.
- The Gospel writers shaped the material they had inherited with particular concerns and contexts in mind – e.g. *Luke is more concerned with the needs of women and the poor. Matthew is more concerned with persuading Jews of Jesus the Messiah. John is more concerned with deep questions of Jesus' identity as the incarnate God/Man.*

The Gospel writers come *between* us and Jesus (they both transmit him to us, and also shield him *from* us). But they have the 'ring of truth' about them: e.g. *No early Christian would have invented Jesus' saying that 'only God is good'.*

**We may not have a totally reliable report of what Jesus said and did, but we do come away with a picture of a consistent person, whose character explains why people felt not only challenged, but accepted and affirmed by him.**

I often wonder why Jesus did not write down his own teachings. Perhaps he wanted to keep us open to the continual work of the Spirit. Perhaps he knew how written words on a page can be used for great evil as well as great good?