

## A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED:

### THE GOSPELS

The Gospels are one of the centerpieces of Christian worship. If you attended the Divine Liturgy every day, you would hear the Gospels proclaimed in their entirety. All four Gospels were composed in Greek and were attributed to men close to Jesus during their lives. They were all written in the First Century A. D. after many of the Letters of St Paul, which are the earliest books in the New Testament.

The **Gospel of Matthew** is the first Gospel in the Bible and is traditionally attributed to the Apostle Matthew, the former tax collector. While it is the first Gospel in the New Testament, most scholars now believe this Gospel was in fact the second written. This is known as the so-called “Q” hypothesis and scholars believed these passages came from another, lost gospel named Q, after the German word Quelle, or Source. Scholars noticed that the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew contained much of the same material as the Gospel of Mark. They also contained other similar passages that were identical but were not contained in Mark. These were sayings of Jesus. Finally the third part of the Gospels of Luke and Matthew was unique to each Luke and Matthew. The second, much more ancient theory held that Matthew was written in Aramaic and then translated to Greek at a later time. Currently, that is the minority opinion amongst scholars and theologians. Matthew is very concerned with connecting Jewish prophecy to Jesus. His symbol is the

ox—easy to remember since this was an animal of sacrifice under the Jewish Law.

The **Gospel of Mark** is the second Gospel in the Bible, but was most certainly the first written. He was the traveling partner of Saint Peter. This is the shortest Gospel and the most dramatic. Mark often makes use of the word “immediately”, showing continuity of action. The Gospel of Mark begins with Saint John the Baptist coming out of the desert and preaching. It is easy to remember the symbol of Saint Mark. It is the lion, easily remembered because Saint John comes out of the desert, roaring like a lion as he preaches about Jesus. (It is hard to imagine lions in the desert, but there were indeed many lions located in the desert. In fact, a Roman Emperor once had the idea of populating the desert with more lions as a way of policing the imperial borders in that area.) The Gospel of Mark has two endings; the first, original ending is that of the women running from the tomb, being scared. The remaining part of the Gospel was added later. Eventually, this ending was declared canonical by the Church.

The **Gospel of Luke** is the third Gospel written, and also is heavily dependent on the Gospel of Saint Mark and Q. Luke was the traveling partner of Paul, and thought to be a physician. This Gospel has been called the most beautiful book ever written as it contains the parables of Jesus we are most familiar with, including the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. The Gospel of St. Luke is read in the Byzantine Church after the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross until the Great Fast. The symbol of St. Luke is a man; we can

easily remember that as the Gospel of Luke is the most humane of the Gospels.

The **Gospel of John** is the fourth Gospel in the Bible. It was certainly the last Gospel written and in many ways is much different than the other Gospels. This Gospel has a very high Christology (belief in the divinity of Jesus) so it is very easy to remember the symbol of St. John, an eagle. His writing and theology soar like that of an eagle. The Gospel is well known for its Prologue (In the Beginning was the Word...) which plainly speaks about the divinity of Jesus, and the seven famous “I am” statements by Jesus. There is no nativity narrative; this Gospel is read in the Byzantine Church during the period of Pascha.

There were many other Gospels that were not included in the canon of the New Testament. These were rejected because they failed the basic requirement of inclusion in the Bible; they had to be accepted at all times, at all places, by all people. We will discuss the three most interesting of these.

The **Protogospel of James** has a special place of honor in the Byzantine world. Though it is not part of the Bible, it was considered so in many parts of the East. Many of the Traditions about the Theotokos come from this book. Among these are the traditions associated with the birth of the Theotokos and her Entrance into the Temple. This is the Gospel that explains the Brothers of Jesus were actually sons of Saint Joseph from a previous marriage. While this Gospel was highly venerated in the East, Saint Jerome, the great translator of the Bible into

Latin, did not think much of this Gospel. Hence, it was never very popular in the Western Church. This accounts for the fact the Western Church regards the brothers of Jesus as cousins of Jesus rather than stepbrothers.

The **Gospel of Peter** has fascinated scholars for a long time. The modern biblical scholar, John Dominic Crossan believes it contains an authentic witness to the trial of Jesus. This gospel was accepted for many years in the idle East, but was ultimately rejected for just one line. This gospel implies in one sentence that Jesus did not suffer on the Cross, so it was deemed to be Docetic (a heresy that Jesus did not suffer on the Cross).

The **Gospel of Thomas** has also fascinated scholars as this is a so called “sayings Gospel”. There is no narrative and the Gospel contains only sayings of Jesus. Scholars are divided over the date the Gospel was written, with many scholars believing it was written as early as the canonical Gospels, and other scholars thinking it was much later. Q, which was discussed earlier is thought to be another “sayings gospel”.

There were many other Gospels, including the **Gospel of Judas** that was recently discovered. All of these were generally thought to have been written much later and therefore failed the inclusion test.