

Why Four Gospels?

Arthur W. Pink

BIBLE TRUTH DEPOT
PUBLISHERS AND BOOKSELLERS

COPYRIGHT
1921

BIBLE TRUTH DEPOT
SWENGEL, PA.

Introduction

Why Four Gospels?

Why four Gospels? It seems strange that such a question needs to be asked at this late date. The New Testament has now been in the hands of the Lord's people for almost two thousand years, and yet, comparatively few seem to grasp the character and scope of its first four books. No part of the Scriptures has been studied more widely than have the four Gospels: innumerable sermons have been preached from them, and every two or three years sections from one of the Gospels is assigned as the course for study in our Sunday Schools. Yet, the fact remains, that the peculiar design and character of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, is rarely perceived even by those most familiar with their contents.

Why four Gospels? It does not seem to have occurred to the minds of many to ask such a question. That we have four Gospels which treat of the earthly ministry of Christ is universally accepted, but as to *why* we have them, as to *what* they are severally designed to teach, as to their peculiar characteristics, as to their distinctive beauties—these are little discerned and even less appreciated. It is true that each of the four Gospels has much in common to all: each of them

deals with the same period of history, each sets forth the teaching and miracles of the Saviour, each describes His death and resurrection. But while the four Evangelists have much in common, each has much that is peculiar to himself, and it is in noting *their variations* that we are brought to see their true meaning and scope and to appreciate their perfections. Just as a course in architecture enables the student to discern the subtle distinctions between the Ionic, the Gothic, and the Corinthian styles—distinctions which are *lost* upon the uninstructed; or, just as a musical training fits one to appreciate the grandeur of a master-production, the loftiness of its theme, the beauty of its chords, the variety of its parts, or its rendition—all lost upon uninitiated; so the exquisite perfections of the four Gospels are unnoticed and unknown by those who see in them nothing more than four biographies of Christ.

In carefully reading through the four Gospels it soon becomes apparent to any reflecting mind that in none of them, nor in the four together, do we have anything approaching a *complete biography* of our Saviour's earthly ministry. There are great gaps in His life which none of the Evangelists profess to fill in. After the record of His infancy, nothing whatever is told us about Him till He had reached the age of twelve, and after the brief record which Luke gives of Christ as a

boy in the Temple at Jerusalem, followed by the statement that His parents went to Nazareth and that there He was “subject unto them” (Luke 2), nothing further is told us about Him until He had reached the age of thirty. Even when we come to the accounts of His public ministry it is clear that the records are but fragmentary; the Evangelists select only portions of His teachings and describe in detail but a few of His miracles. Concerning the full scope of all that was crowded into His wonderful life, John gives us some idea when he says, “And there are *also* many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written” (John 21:25).

If then the Gospels are not complete biographies of Christ, what are they? The first answer must be, Four books inspired, fully inspired, of God; four books written by men moved by the Holy Spirit; books that are true, flawless, perfect. The second answer is that, the four Gospels are so many books, each complete in itself, each of which is written with a *distinctive design*, and that which is included in its pages, and all that is left out, is strictly *subordinated* to that design, according to a principle of selection. In other words, nothing whatever is brought into any one of the Gospels save that which was strictly relevant and pertinent

to its peculiar theme and subject, and all that was irrelevant and failed to illustrate and exemplify its theme was excluded. The same plan of *selection* is noticeable in every section of the Holy Scriptures.

Take Genesis as an example. Why is it that the first two thousand years of history are briefly outlined in its first eleven chapters, and that the next three hundred years is spread out over thirty-nine chapters? Why is it that so very little is said about the men who lived *before* the Flood, whereas the lives of Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Joseph are described in such fulness of detail? Why is it that the Holy Spirit has seen well to depict at greater length the experiences of Joseph in Egypt than He devoted to the Account of Creation? Take, again, the later historical books. A great deal is given us concerning the varied experiences of Abraham’s descendants, but little notice is taken of the mighty Nations which were contemporaneous with them. Why is it that *Israel’s history* is described at such length, and that of the Egyptians, the Hittites, the Babylonians, the Persians, and the Greeks, is almost entirely ignored? The answer to all of these questions is that, the Holy Spirit *selected* only that which served the purpose before Him. The *purpose* of Genesis is to explain to us the *origin* of that Nation which occupies so prominent a place in the Old Testa-

ment Scriptures, hence, the Holy Spirit hurries over, as it were, the centuries before *Abraham* was born, and then proceeds to describe in detail the lives of the fathers from which the Chosen Nation sprang. The same principle obtains in the other books of the Old Testament. Because the Holy Spirit is there setting forth the dealings of God *with Israel*, the other great nations of antiquity are largely ignored, and only come into view at all *as they directly concerned* the Twelve-Tribed people. So it is in the four Gospels: each of the Evangelists was guided by the Spirit to record only that which served to set forth Christ in the particular character in which He was there to be viewed, and that which was *not* in keeping with that particular character was left out. Our meaning will become clearer as the reader proceeds.

Why four Gospels? Because one or two was not sufficient to give a *perfect* presentation of the varied glories of our blessed Lord. Just as no one of the Old Testament typical personages (such as Isaac or Joseph, Moses or David) give an *exhaustive* foreshadowment of our Lord, so, no one of the four Gospels presents a *complete* portrayal of Christ's manifold excellencies. Just as no one or two of the five great offerings appointed by God for Israel (see [Lev. 1-6](#)) could, by itself, represent the many-sided sacrifice of Christ, so no one, or two, of the Gospels could, by

itself, display fully the varied relationships which the Lord Jesus sustained when He was here upon earth. In a word, the *four Gospels set Christ before us as filling four distinct offices*. We might illustrate it thus. Suppose I was to visit a strange town in which there was an imposing city-hall, and that I was anxious to convey to my friends at home the best possible idea of it. What would I do? I would use my camera to take four different pictures of it, one from each side, and thus my friends would be able to obtain a complete conception of its structure and beauty. Now that is exactly what we have in the four Gospels. Speaking reverently, we may say that the Holy Spirit has photographed the Lord Jesus from four different angles, viewing Him in four different relationships, displaying Him as perfectly discharging the responsibilities of four different offices. And it is impossible to read the Gospels intelligently, to understand their variations, to appreciate their details, to get out of them what we ought, until the reader learns exactly from *which* angle each separate Gospel is viewing Christ, which particular relationship Matthew or Mark shows Him to be discharging, which office Luke or John shows Him to be filling.

The four Gospels alike present to us the person and work of our blessed Saviour, but each one views Him in a distinct relationship, and only that which

served to illustrate the separate design which each Evangelist had before him found a place in his Gospel; everything else which was not strictly germane to his immediate purpose was omitted. To make this still more simple we will use another illustration. Suppose that today four men should undertake to write a "life" of ex-president Roosevelt, and that each one designed to present him in a *different* character. Suppose that the first should treat of his *private and domestic* life, the second deal with him as a *sportsman and hunter* of big game, the third depict his *military prowess* and the fourth traced his *political and presidential career*. Now it will be seen at once that these four biographers while writing of the life of the *same* man would, nevertheless, view him in four entirely *different* relationships. Moreover, it will be evident that these biographers would be governed in the *selection* of their material by the *particular purpose* each one had before him: each would include only that which was germane to his own specific viewpoint, and for the same reason each would omit that which was irrelevant. For instance: suppose it was known that Mr. Roosevelt, as a boy, had excelled in gymnastics and athletics *which* of his biographers would mention this fact? Clearly, the second one, who was depicting him as a *sportsman*. Suppose that as a boy Mr. Roosevelt had frequently engaged in fistic encoun-

ters, which one would make mention of it? Evidently, the one who was depicting his *military career*, for it would serve to illustrate his *fighting* qualities. Again, suppose that when a college-student Mr. R. had displayed an aptitude for debating, which biographer would refer to it? The fourth, who was treating of his *political and presidential* life. Finally, suppose that from youth upwards, Mr. R. had manifested a marked fondness for children, which of his biographers would refer to it? The first, for he is treating of the ex-president's *private and domestic life*.

The above example may serve to illustrate what we have in the four Gospels. In Matthew, Christ is presented as the Son of David, the King of the Jews, and everything in his narrative centers around this truth. This explains why the first Gospel opens with a setting forth of Christ's *royal* genealogy, and why in the second chapter mention is made of the journey of the wise men from the East, who came to Jerusalem inquiring "Where is He that is born *King of the Jews?*", and why in chapters five to seven we have what is known as "The Sermon on the Mount" but which, in reality, is the Manifesto of the King, containing an enunciation of the Laws of His Kingdom.

In Mark, Christ is depicted as the Servant of Jehovah, as the One who through equal with God made Himself of no reputation and "took upon Him the form of a

servant.” Everything in this second Gospel contributes to this central theme, and everything foreign to it is rigidly excluded. This explains *why* there is *no genealogy* recorded in Mark, why Christ is introduced at the beginning of His public ministry (nothing whatever being told us here of His earlier life), and why there are more miracles (deeds of service) detailed here than in any of the other Gospels.

In Luke, Christ is set forth as the Son of Man, as connected with but contrasted from the sons of men, and everything in the narrative serves to bring this out. This explains why the third Gospel traces His genealogy back to Adam, the first man, (instead of to Abraham only, as in Matthew), why as the perfect Man He is seen here so frequently in prayer, and why the angels are seen ministering to Him, instead of commanded by Him as they are in Matthew.

In John, Christ is revealed as the Son of God, and everything in this fourth Gospel is made to illustrate and demonstrate this Divine relationship. This explains why in the opening verse we are carried back to a point before time began, and we are shown Christ as the Word “in the beginning,” with God, and Himself expressly declared to be God; why we get here so many of His Divine titles, as “The only begotten of the Father,” the “Lamb of God,” the “Light of the world” etc.; why we are told here that prayer should be

made in His Name, and why the Holy Spirit is here said to be sent from the Son as well as from the Father.

It is a remarkable fact that this four-fold presentation of Christ in the Gospels was specifically indicated through the Old Testament seers. Conspicuous among the many prophecies of the Old Testament are those which spoke of the coming Messiah under the title of “the Branch.” From these we may select four which correspond exactly with the manner in which the Lord Jesus is looked at, respectively, in each of the four Gospels:—

In [Jer. 23:5](#) we read, “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto DAVID *a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign* and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.” These words fit the first Gospel as glove fits hand.

In [Zech. 3:8](#) we read, “Behold, I will bring forth *My Servant the Branch.*” These words might well be taken as a title for the second Gospel.

In [Zech. 6:12](#) we read, “Behold *the Man* whose name is *the Branch.*” How accurately this corresponds with Luke’s delineation of Christ needs not to be pointed out.

In [Isaiah 4:2](#) we read, “In that day shall *the Branch of the Lord* be beautiful and glorious.” Thus, this last quoted of these Messianic predictions, which spoke

of the Coming One under the figure of “the Branch,” tallies exactly with the fourth Gospel, which portrays our Saviour as the Son of God.

But, not only did Old Testament prophecy anticipate the four chief relationships which Christ sustained on earth, the Old Testament types also foreshadowed this fourfold division. In [Gen. 2:10](#) we read “And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into *four heads*.” Note carefully the words “from thence.” In Eden itself “the river” was one, but “from thence” it “was *parted*” and became into four heads. There must be some deeply hidden meaning to this, for why tell us how many “heads” this river had? The mere historical fact is without interest or value for us, and that the Holy Spirit has condescended to record this detail prepares us to look beneath the surface and seek for some mystical meaning. And surely that is not far to seek. “Eden” suggests to us the Paradise above: the “river” which “watered” it, tells of *Christ* who is the Light and Joy of Heaven. Interpreting this mystic figure, then, we learn that in Heaven Christ was seen in one character only—“The Lord of Glory”—but just as when the “river” left Eden it was parted and became “four heads” and as such thus watered the earth, so, too, the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus has been, by

the Holy Spirit, “*parted into four heads*” in the Four Gospels.

Another Old Testament type which anticipated the fourfold division of Christ’s ministry as recorded in the four Gospels may be seen in [Ex. 26:31, 32](#), “And thou shalt make a veil of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen of cunning work: with cherubim shall it be made. And thou shalt hang it upon *four pillars* of shittim wood overlaid with gold: their hooks shall be of gold, upon the four sockets of silver.” From [Heb. 10:19, 20](#) we learn that the “veil” foreshadowed the Incarnation, God manifest in flesh—“through the veil, that is to say, *His flesh*.” It is surely significant that this “veil” was hung upon “*four pillars* of shittim wood overlaid with gold:” the wood, again, speaking of His humanity, and the gold of His Deity. Just as these “four pillars” served to *display* the beautiful veil, so in the four Gospels we have made manifest the perfections of the only-begotten of the Father tabernacling among men.

In connection with the Scripture last quoted, we may observe one other feature—“with cherubim shall it be made.” The veil was ornamented, apparently, with the “cherubim” embroidered upon it in colors of blue, purple, and scarlet. In [Ezek. 10:15, 17](#), etc. the cherubim are termed “the living creature:” this enables us to identify the “four beasts” of [Rev. 4:6](#) for rendered literally the

Greek reads “four living creatures.” These “living creatures” or “cherubim” are also *four* in number, and from the description which is furnished of them in [Rev. 4:7](#) it will be found that they correspond, most remarkably with the various characters in which the Lord Jesus Christ is set forth in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

“And the first living creature was like a lion, and the second living creature like a calf, and the third living creature had a face as a man, and the fourth living creature was like a flying eagle” ([Rev. 4:7](#)). The first cherubim, then, was like “a lion” which reminds us at once of the titles which are used of Christ in [Rev. 5:5](#)—“*The Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David.*” The lion, which is the king among the beasts is an apt symbol for portraying Christ as He is presented in Matthew’s Gospel. Note also that the Lion of the Tribe of Judah is here termed “the Root of David.” Thus the description given in [Rev. 4:7](#) of the first “cherubim” corresponds exactly with the character in which Christ is set forth in the first Gospel, viz., as “the Son of David,” the “King of the Jews.” The second cherubim was “like a calf” or “young ox.” The young ox aptly symbolizes Christ as He is presented in Mark’s Gospel, for just as the ox was the chief animal of service in Israel, so in the second Gospel we have Christ presented in lowliness as the perfect “Servant of Jehovah.” The third cherubim “had a face

as a man,” which corresponds with the third Gospel where our Lord’s Humanity is in view. The fourth cherubim was “like a flying eagle:” how significant! The first three—the lion, young ox, and man,—all belong to the earth, just as each of the first three Gospels each set forth Christ in an earthly relationship; but this fourth cherubim lifts us up above the earth, and brings the heavens into view! The eagle is the bird that soars the highest and symbolizes the character in which Christ is seen in John’s Gospel, viz., as the Son of God. Incidentally we may observe how this description of the four cherubim in [Rev. 4:7](#) *authenticates the arrangement* of the four Gospels as we have them in our Bibles, evidencing the fact that their present order is of Divine arrangement as [Rev. 4:7](#) *confirms!*

We would call attention to one other feature ere closing this Introduction and turning to the Gospels themselves. Behold the wisdom of God displayed in the selection of the four men whom He employed to write the Gospels. In each one we may discern a peculiar suitability and fitness for his task.

The instrumental selection by God to write this first Gospel was singularly fitted for the task before him. Matthew is the only one of the four Evangelists who presents Christ in an *official* relationship, namely, as the Messiah and King of Israel, and Matthew himself was the only

one of the four who filled an official position; for, unlike Luke, who was by profession a physician, or John who was a fisherman, Matthew was a tax-gatherer in the employ of the Romans. Again; Matthew presents Christ in Kingdom connections, as the One who possessed the title to reign over Israel; how fitting, then, that Matthew, who was an officer of and accustomed to look out over a vast empire, should be the one selected for this task. Again; Matthew was a publican. The Romans appointed officials whose duty it was to collect the Jewish taxes. The tax-gatherers were hated by the Jews more bitterly than the Romans themselves. Such a man was Matthew. How feelingly, then, could he write of the One who was “hated without a cause”! and set forth the Messiah-Saviour, as “despised and rejected” by His own nation. Finally, in God appointing this man, who by calling was connected with the Romans, we have a striking anticipation of the grace of God reaching out to the despised Gentiles.

Mark’s Gospel sets before us the Servant of Jehovah, God’s perfect Workman. And the instrument chosen to write this second Gospel seems to have held an unique position which well fitted him for his task. He was not himself one of the apostles, but was rather a servant of an apostle. In [2 Tim. 4:11](#) we have a scripture which brings this out in a striking man-

ner—“Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry.” Thus the one who wrote of our Lord as the Servant of God, was himself one who ministered to others!

Luke’s Gospel deals with our Lord’s Humanity, and presents Him as the Son of Man related to but contrasted from the sons of men. Luke’s Gospel is the one which gives us the fullest account of the virgin-birth. Luke’s Gospel also reveals more fully than any of the others the fallen and depraved state of human nature. Again; Luke’s Gospel is far more international in its scope than the other three, and is more Gentilish than Jewish—evidences of this will be presented when we come to examine his Gospel in detail. Now observe the appropriateness of the selection of Luke to write this Gospel. Who was he? He was neither a fisherman nor a tax-gatherer, but a “physician” (see [Col. 4:14](#)), and as such, a student of human nature and a diagnostician of the human frame. Moreover, there is good reason to believe that Luke himself was not a Jew but a Gentile, and hence it was peculiarly fitting that he should present Christ not as “the Son of David” but as “The Son of Man.”

John’s Gospel presents Christ in the loftiest character of all, setting Him forth in Divine relationship, showing that He was the Son of God. This was a task that called for a man of high spirituality, one

who was intimate with our Lord in a special manner, one who was gifted with unusual spiritual discernment. And surely John, who was nearer to the Saviour than any of the twelve, surely John “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” was well chosen. How fitting that the one who leaned on the Master’s bosom should be the instrument to portray Christ as “The only-begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father”! Thus may we discern and admire the manifold wisdom of God in equipping the four “Evangelists” for their honourous work.

Ere closing this Introduction we would return once more to our opening query—Why four Gospels? This time we shall give the question a different emphasis. Thus far, we have considered, “Why four Gospels? And we have seen that the answer is, In order to present the person of Christ in four different characters. But we would now ask, Why four Gospels? Why not have reduced them to two or three? Or, why not have added a fifth? Why four? God has a wise reason for everything, and we may be assured there is a Divine fitness in the number of the Gospels.

In seeking to answer the question, Why four Gospels, we are not left to the uncertainties of speculation or imagination. Scripture is its own interpreter. A study of God’s Word reveals the fact (as pointed out by others before us), that in it

the numerals are used with definite precision and meaning. “Four” is the number of the earth. It is, therefore, also, the world number. We subjoin a few illustrations of this. There are four points to earth’s compass—nor the, east, south, and west. There are four seasons to earth’s year—spring, summer, autumn, and winter. There are four elements connected with our world—earth, air, fire, and water. There have been four, and only four, great world-empires—the Babylonian, the Medo-Persian, the Grecian, and the Roman. Scripture divides earth’s inhabitants into four classes—“kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation” (*Rev. 5:9* etc.). In the Parable of the Sower, our Lord divided the field into four kinds of soil, and later He said, “the field is the world.” The fourth commandment has to do with rest from all earth’s labors. The fourth clause in what is known as the Lord’s prayer is, “Thy will be done on earth.” And so we might go on. Four is thus the earth number. How fitting, then, that the Holy Spirit should have given us four Gospels in which to set forth the earthly ministry of the Heavenly One.