

Dear Friends,

Why do we have four different gospel accounts of Jesus' time among men? The simplest answer is that God designed and gave us His record in our New Testament so that unbelievers could not effectively contradict the record. If one man tells you something, you might conclude it was simply his opinion, possibly highly flavored by what he wanted to see. However, if four men of different background and personality gave their account, and all four accounts agree, you have much stronger affirmation of their word. Many years ago I heard an excellent explanation of the man's answer to this question. You might ask three men to describe an elephant. The first blind man touches the elephant's trunk, so he concludes that an elephant is much like a huge rope. The second blind man touches the elephant's side and concludes that an elephant is much like a wall. The third blind man touches the elephant's legs and concludes that an elephant is like a huge column. Which man is correct? All four men give us a good description of an elephant. All four of our New Testament gospel writers give us the fullest and most complete explanation and narrative of Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension we need. We read wisely to study all four and put them all together in our study of Jesus.

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

Why Four New Testament Gospels?

This is the third time I am coming to you. In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established. (2 Corinthians 13:1 KJV 1900)

In Deuteronomy 19:15, Moses requires more than one witness in the case of an accusation against someone of wrongdoing. At least indirectly, Paul seems to refer to this verse. Does he intend to take the Corinthians to court for their spiritual offenses? Obviously no, he prohibited this conduct in 1 Corinthians 6. This an excellent example of allowing a passage to interpret itself or to be interpreted by its context. I suggest that Paul explains this reference in the verse itself. *"This is the third time I am coming to you."* In this setting, "coming to you" seems to refer to Paul's "visits" with the Corinthians by way of his letters to them. This verse appears in 2 Corinthians. If more than one witness provided reasonable proof of wrongdoing in the Old Testament, Paul reasons that, during each of his visits to the Corinthians, they should review his teachings during those two prior visits and compare them with his present visit. In 1 Corinthians 5:9, Paul refers to a prior letter to the Corinthians, *"I wrote unto you...."* Thus, 2 Corinthians is actually Paul's third letter to this church. Count them. 1) This reference to a prior letter, "I wrote unto you," recorded in Paul's first Corinthian letter in the New Testament, 2) 1 Corinthians, 2) and 2 Corinthians.

Given the written record of his prior letters, and his present letter (2 Corinthians), Paul reminds the Corinthians that he wrote the same truths in all three of his letters. He didn't write one letter, change his mind, and write something different in a subsequent letter. The Corinthians could examine all three letters and see faithful consistent teaching in all three. By his "Third" letter, Paul gave them his personal third witness or testimony of godly consistent truth. Every word he wrote could be established by the Corinthians as they read all his writings.

In this example, we have a powerful reminder of Biblical consistency. If you read your Bible and think you've discovered a contradiction, study more carefully. The contradiction is in your mind, not in Scripture. The Holy Spirit who directed the writing of Scripture never changes His mind. The same principle applies to personal opinions or claims that "The Lord revealed to me that..." followed by ideas that contradict New Testament teaching. If your claimed "Revelation" contradicts New Testament teaching, beware. It may be a "Revelation," but not from the Lord.

Why do we have four different accounts of Jesus' Incarnation, of His time as a man? Each account reads differently, though they report many of the same events. First, if only one man wrote an account of Jesus' life as a man, critics might reject the record as "One man's opinion." If four men gave differing but consistent accounts of Jesus' life as a man, each man from very different backgrounds and perspectives, the record becomes much stronger.

When the police investigate a crime, they do not interview one witness and close their case. They interview every person they can find who witnessed the crime or had knowledge of it. Only after all these interviews do they assess the details and decide the appropriate legal course of action. In the case of Jesus' life and teachings, four witnesses provide far stronger corroboration of the facts than any one of them alone might give us.

Let's briefly examine each of these accounts.

1. **Matthew.** Matthew was one of the first twelve men Jesus chose to accompany Him during His roughly three and a half years of public ministry. While most of these men were fishermen, Matthew was a tax collector. Clearly Jesus didn't choose the men to represent Him after His ascension based on personality or popular appeal. The Jewish people despised tax collectors. But He chose Matthew and the other eleven based on His own criteria, not theirs.

Matthew begins his gospel with Jesus' ancestry, "the son of David."

2. **Mark.** Mark joins the company of the faithful later in the inspired record of Jesus and His disciples. His mother's home was a place where "many were gathered together praying." (Acts 12:12 KJV. The reference to "John" is likely our Mark whose name was "John Mark") That his family owned a home large enough for such a gathering suggests that he was raised by wealthy parents. Perhaps he started his faith journey before he developed sufficient experience and spiritual strength. In Acts 13:13, he abandons Paul. Luke refers to him as referenced above, "John Mark." Then in the closing verses of Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas have a bitter disagreement over whether to take Mark on a second missionary journey. Barnabas, Mark's uncle (Colossians 4:10), sees value in the young man; Paul remembers his failure. However, Mark learned from his failure and grew strong in his faith and in Paul's respect and love for him. (Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11) Peter refers to him as "Marcus my son," his son in the faith and ministry, as Paul regarded Timothy and Titus as his sons. Bible authorities generally believe that Mark learned much of what he wrote in the gospel from Peter's eyewitness testimony to him. As we shall note with Luke, while this may well be the case, it was the Holy Spirit's appointment, not merely Peter's testimony, that empowered Mark's gospel. Mark begins his gospel rather abruptly, "*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*" (Mark 1:1 KJV) I love Mark's focused brevity. He takes us into the action of Jesus's ministry and gets to the

important truths we need to know. He devotes more of his account to Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem and the events of that final week than the other three gospel writers. The Mark who wrote the gospel by his name is not that immature and unstable young man who abandoned his post. He is a faithful godly man whom Paul learned to respect—and whom the Holy Spirit chose to write this gospel record.

3. **Luke.** Luke was another "Late arrival" on the scene. He wrote both the gospel by his name and Acts. Through the first chapters of Acts, Luke consistently wrote of what "They" did. In Acts 16:10, we read Luke's first "We" account of the events he records, indicating that he joined Paul at that time. We also find "We" narratives in Acts 20-21 and 27-28. How then did Luke come to write an account of the birth and life of Jesus? He tells us. In Luke 1:3, Luke explains, "...having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first." The Greek word translated "**first**" in this verse is the same word John used in his narrative when Jesus taught Nicodemus of the new birth. When Jesus told Nicodemus, "*Ye must be born again...*" (John 3:7 KJV), "**again**" was translated from the same Greek word that Luke used "*the very first.*" Most KJV Bibles with center column references include a footnote to this word "**from above,**" fully supported by the definitions in respected New Testament Greek dictionaries. In the same way that Nicodemus must be born by a power and life "From above," Luke claimed direction and enlightenment "From above" as his authority to write the gospel by his name. As Matthew started his writing with Jesus' ancestry, and Mark with the preaching of John, Luke begins his account with the birth of John. We have strong proof of Luke's "From above" authority in 1 Timothy 5:18. Paul refers to writings from Moses **and from Luke** as "Scripture."

4. **John.** John, as Matthew, was one of the first twelve men Jesus chose as His followers to witness His life and to establish His truth and His church after His ascension. John begins his gospel with Jesus, the eternal "Word."

Thus, though reliably consistent, we find four very distinct perspectives in each of the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth, life, and teachings. All are true; all are inspired by the Holy Spirit and rightly form a part of our New Testament record. If we accept all four accounts, we have a consistent record of Jesus' coming, person, and work, beginning with His eternal existence, followed by the birth and ministry of John to His death, resurrection, and victorious ascension. We need all four records for a complete perspective.

Many of those early believers suffered intense persecution or death for their faith, and they maintained their faithful witness to the end. Occasionally critics of our Christian faith will belittle their faith by observing that believers in all kinds of superstition have also suffered for their beliefs. They ignore a key difference. Believers in error typically believe based on other men's testimony. They sincerely believe that testimony. However, these first-generation witnesses to Jesus were **eyewitnesses** of the things they believed, taught, and wrote in our New Testament record. If they wrote a known falsehood, would they endure fierce persecution and even a tortured death for something they knew to be false? No. What did they do? They endured persecution and painful death because they knew their testimony to be true, based on their eyewitness knowledge. The critics' claim fails.

We believe, as Paul affirmed in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, that our Scriptures (By his including Luke as Scripture along with Moses, both the Old and the New Testament) are the result of divine origin, "inspiration," literally, God's breath. Therefore, we have in our New Testament a reliable record of Jesus' coming, person, and work for His people, along with the subsequent life and testimony of His first generation followers. The history of godly Christian people who lived their faith is marked by their love

and respect for “The open Book,” Scripture and Scripture alone, as their source and authority for what they believed and how they lived their lives.

Our generation of believers desperately need to reacquaint themselves with the amazing treasure we have in our Bible, and to spend more time with it and less with human opinions about it. Let the study, the “Midnight oil,” begin today.

Elder Joe Holder