

Chapter 17

The New Testament



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because each one is writing for a different audience.*

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Read

Luke 1:1 - 4

Acts 1:1 - 5

Hebrews
9:1 - 10:10

Revelation
21:1 - 8

Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and teach his brother, saying, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer 31: 31-34)



The New Testament does not replace the Old Testament: it fulfills the Old Testament.

St. Augustine said that the New Testament is hidden in the Old, and the Old is revealed in the New. Without the New Testament, the Old Testament is just a collection of tragic stories and unfulfilled promises. But when we see the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament, we can see that the Old Testament is the story of the gradual unfolding of God's plan of salvation—the plan that reaches its climax with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Old Law is a *preparation for the Gospel*. "The Law is a pedagogy and a prophecy of things to come."¹ It prophesies and presages the work of liberation from sin which will be fulfilled in Christ; it provides the New Testament with images, "types," and symbols for expressing the life according to the Spirit. (CCC 1964)

How The New Testament Is Organized

The books of the New Testament can be put into the same classes as the books of the Old Testament.

1. **Law: the Four Gospels.** In the Old Testament, the five books of Moses give the old law and the story of the founding of Israel. In the same way, the four Gospels give us the New Law and the story of the founding of the Church, which is the new Israel.
2. **History: the Acts of the Apostles.** Just as the Old Testament, beginning in Joshua, gives us the history of Israel from the death of Moses, so the Acts of the Apostles gives us the history of the early Church from the ascension of Jesus Christ.
3. **Wisdom: the Epistles.** The letters written by the Apostles tell us how to live as Christians.
4. **Prophecy: the Revelation to John.** John brings us the word of the Lord in symbols and images often recalling those used in the Old Testament prophets.

The New Law: The Four Gospels

- All four Gospels tell the same story.
- Each Gospel writer tells it from a different point of view.
- The first three Gospels are called “synoptic” because their points of view are similar.



When we look at the four Gospels, we can see that they all tell the same story. But they tell it from different points of view. Each Evangelist (as the Gospel writers are called, from the Latin *evangelium*) emphasizes different details, because each one is writing for a different audience.

But of the four Gospels, John’s is the one that is *most* different. In fact, John tells the story so differently that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are often called the “synoptic” Gospels, from a Greek word that means “seeing together.” Compared with the Gospel according to John, the first three Gospels share a similar viewpoint.

Scholars have suggested many ways in which the three “synoptic” Gospels could be related. The most popular suggestion has been that Mark’s Gospel was the first of the three, and that Matthew and Luke both used Mark as one of their sources. In addition, the scholars suggest, there was a collection of Jesus’ sayings, which scholars call “Q,” from which Matthew and Luke took much of their material. We must remember, however, that all these suggestions are speculations. No one has ever seen a copy of “Q,” and scholars can only guess what might have been in it, if it ever existed at all.

No matter how the Gospels were written and what sources they used, we know that they are all true. They supplement but never contradict one another. Together, they tell us not only what Jesus did and said, but also who he was.

Matthew

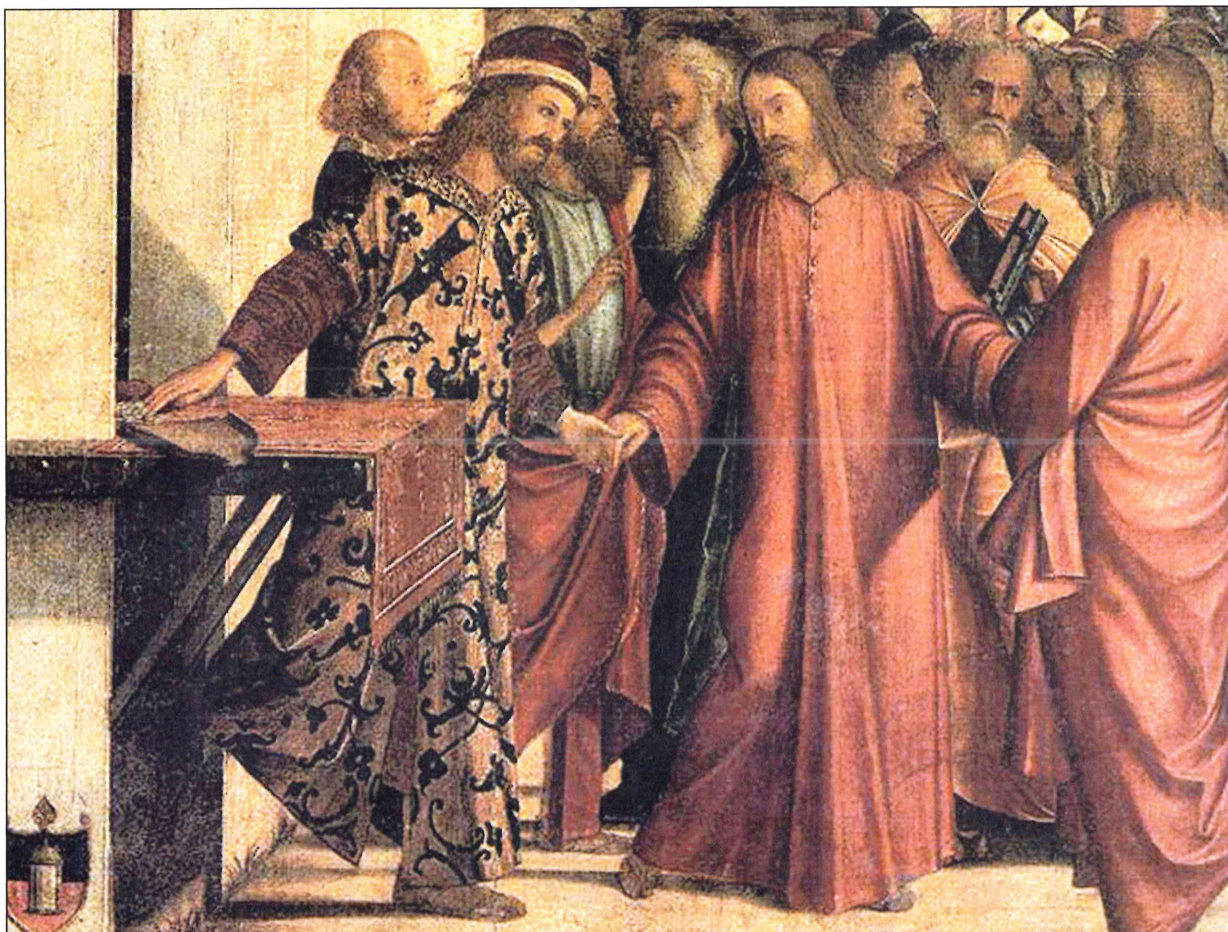
- **Jewish Christians were the main audience for Matthew's Gospel.**
- **Matthew emphasizes Jesus as the true heir of David's kingdom.**

Although most scholars believe that Matthew's Gospel was partly based on the Gospel according to Mark, some believe that it may have been the earliest of the four Gospels. Traditionally, the Church has taught that this Gospel was written by Matthew, also called Levi, a tax collector who walked away from his desk in the collections office to follow Jesus.

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. (Mt 9: 9)

Matthew's Gospel was written mostly for Jews, so to Matthew, the most important thing is to show how Jesus fulfilled their expectations of the Messiah. As we have already seen, he begins his Gospel with an artful genealogy designed to show how Jesus is the ideal successor of David. Over and over again, Matthew uses Old Testament scripture to remind us that Jesus is the Son of David, the Christ, the Anointed One who had been promised by all the prophets.

Of all the Gospel writers, Matthew is the one who most lets Jesus speak for himself. The famous Sermon on the Mount, for example, takes up three whole chapters, in which Matthew never interrupts with his own words: he simply reports what Jesus said.



"...For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mt 9: 13)

Mark

- Roman Christians were Mark's main audience.
- Mark emphasizes Jesus as leader of a new Exodus.
- Peter was Mark's main source for the story of Jesus' life.
- Many scholars believe that Mark's Gospel was the earliest of the four.

John Mark was a disciple of Peter who followed Peter to Rome and later (according to tradition) went to Egypt. He was very close to Peter; Peter calls him “my son Mark” at the end of his first letter (1 Pt 5:13).

Mark wrote his Gospel based on the stories Peter had told him. The main audience was probably the Gentile Christians in Rome. One tradition has it that Peter was so pleased with Mark's work that he had copies of Mark's Gospel made for all the churches.

Of the four Gospels, Mark's is the shortest, and many scholars believe it was the earliest. Many also believe that Matthew and Luke used it as a source for writing their own Gospels, and it is true that certain passages appear word for word in all three of the “synoptic” Gospels.

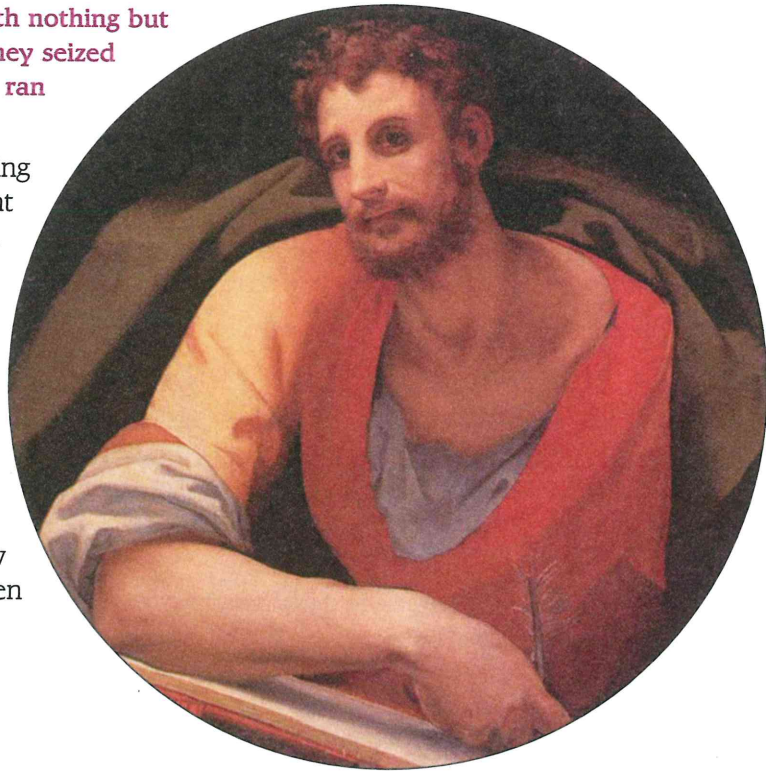
Mark's Gospel tells the story of Jesus' life in a straightforward way. Although he includes many of the words of Jesus, Mark is more interested in what Jesus did. Throughout, we see Jesus leading us—the new Israel—on a new Exodus.

Mark includes one odd little story that none of the other Gospels tell. After Jesus had been arrested, the authorities led him off to the high priest.

And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body; and they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked. (Mk 14: 51-52)

Why does Mark report this embarrassing little incident? Most scholars believe that the naked young man was Mark himself, who added this little story to remind people who knew him that he was an eyewitness to some of the events.

Mark's favorite word is “immediately”—he uses it more than forty times—and his Gospel runs along at a brisk pace. Reading Mark's Gospel straight through at one sitting is easy, and it's a good way to understand how exciting the Good News must have been to the earliest believers.



“And he said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God,...? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it...grows up...puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.’” (Mk 4: 30-32)

Luke

- **Gentile Christians were Luke's main audience.**
- **Luke includes details of Jesus' conception and birth not found anywhere else.**
- **Jesus' own Mother may have been Luke's source for those details.**

St. Paul calls Luke “the beloved physician,” and we know from the Acts of the Apostles (which Luke also wrote) that Luke spent a lot of time traveling with Paul and the others. From his own writing, we can tell that Luke was a well-educated man who had mastered all the literary techniques of the best writers of the day. He wrote mainly to Gentile converts, so he emphasizes Jesus' ministry to all nations.

When Luke wrote his Gospel, “many” other narrations of Jesus' life had already been written. So why did Luke write another one?

He probably had two reasons.

First, he emphasizes that he wants to give an “orderly account.” That probably means Luke, with his literary education, thought the other accounts of Jesus' life were not written in the best order. We don't know whether Luke's version is strictly chronological, but we do know that Luke was a careful historian who made sure to give his readers the proper historical setting for each story.

Second, he had information that none of the other Gospel writers had, especially about Jesus' conception and birth. Of the four Gospels, only Luke gives us the familiar stories of the Annunciation, the baby in the manger, the visit of the shepherds, and Jesus' teaching in the Temple when he was twelve years old.



Where did Luke get his stories about the conception, birth, and infancy of Jesus? Many great Christian teachers have believed that this information came from Mary, the mother of Jesus.

But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. (Lk 2: 19)

...and his mother kept all these things in her heart. (Lk 2: 51)

Who but Mary could have told him the things she kept in her heart? Luke might have made these remarks to explain why his Gospel contained information not found in the many other accounts of Jesus' life. We know that Luke was with the Apostles at the same time as Mary. If he had decided to write an orderly account of Jesus' life, it would have been natural for him to ask her what happened at the beginning.

The Gospel according to St. Luke emphasizes the action of the Holy Spirit and the meaning of prayer in Christ's ministry. Jesus prays before the decisive moments of his mission: before his Father's witness to him during his baptism and Transfiguration, and before his own fulfillment of the Father's plan of love by his Passion (cf. Lk 3: 21; 9: 28; 22: 41-44). He also prays before the decisive moments involving the mission of his apostles: at his election and call of the Twelve, before Peter's confession of him as “the Christ of God,” and again that the faith of the chief of the Apostles may not fail when tempted (cf. Lk 6: 12; 9: 18-20; 22: 32). Jesus' prayer before the events of salvation that the Father has asked him to fulfill is a humble and trusting commitment of his human will to the loving will of the Father. (CCC 2600)

John

- **John emphasizes Jesus as the Word of God Incarnate.**
- **John also stresses our new creation in Christ.**
- **John's Gospel fills in details left out of the other three Gospels.**
- **The family relationship of the Trinity is revealed most completely in John.**

The Gospel of John itself tells us that it was written by “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” Jesus’ best friend John. Tradition tells us that John lived to be very old, and most scholars believe that his Gospel was the last of the four to be written.

To John, the most important thing is to remind his readers that Jesus Christ was truly God Incarnate, the Word of God who had existed with God from the beginning.

John’s Gospel was probably written mostly for Jewish Christians, since it is filled with allusions to Old Testament events and symbols that only Jewish readers would have understood.



“So Jesus again said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep.... I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.’” (Jn 10: 7-11)

History: The Acts Of The Apostles

St. Luke wrote this book as a sequel to his Gospel. He gives us our only reliable history of the Early Church. Archaeologists and historians have confirmed that Luke was an extraordinarily careful historian. Every detail of his narrative that can possibly be verified has turned out to be exactly right.

Luke himself was an eyewitness to many of the events he describes. For large portions of the book, he switches from “they” to “we”—indicating that he himself was traveling with the Apostles. His account of the shipwreck at Malta (Acts 27) is famous as one of the most vivid and accurate descriptions of navigation in ancient history.



The Gangitis River near Philippi, Greece is thought to be the river where Lydia was baptized by Paul.

“We remained in this city some days; and on the sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we... spoke to the women who had come together. One... was a woman named Lydia,... who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul.” (Acts 16: 12-14)

Wisdom: The Epistles

As the Church spread, the Apostles wrote letters to the churches they had founded. Some of the letters addressed specific problems that came up, such as incorrect teachings. Others were more general, and some were addressed to the whole Church at large. All of them address problems that faced Christians as they tried to live holy lives in a secular world.

By far the largest part of this new wisdom literature was written by St. Paul, whose conversion from persecutor to Apostle dramatically changed the course of history. Paul was an intelligent and well-educated Roman citizen, Jewish by birth, whose background gave him both a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures and a good grasp of popular trends in pagan philosophy. He was able to draw on both sources to fulfill his mission of spreading the Gospel to the Gentiles.

The letters of Paul are arranged together in the New Testament, roughly in order from longest to shortest. Most of them are written to churches in various cities of the Roman Empire:

Romans
1 Corinthians
2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 Thessalonians
2 Thessalonians

Four of St. Paul's letters are written to individuals:

1 Timothy
2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon



The letters to Titus and Timothy give advice to Christian leaders who worked with Paul. The letter to Philemon asks a particular favor: Philemon's slave Onesimos had run away, but Paul had converted him to Christianity, and now he asks that Philemon take Onesimos back as a brother. It was a dangerous thing Onesimos was doing, going back to his master, since Philemon had the legal right to punish him with death if he wanted. But since the letter was kept and passed around in the early Church, we can guess that Philemon did what Paul wanted. Early Church history knows a bishop named Onesimos, who may well have been Philemon's former slave, freed by his master and accepted as a brother Christian.

Hebrews. The author of Hebrews does not give us his name. One ancient tradition says it was Paul, but many modern scholars think it was written by one of Paul's disciples. It shows how the Old Testament is fulfilled in the life of Jesus Christ. It is one of the most important tools we have for understanding the connection between the Old Testament and the New.

The "catholic epistles" ("catholic" meaning "universal") are addressed to the whole Church.

James tells Christians to be "Doers of the word, and not merely hearers." The letter gives some of the best advice for Christians living together.

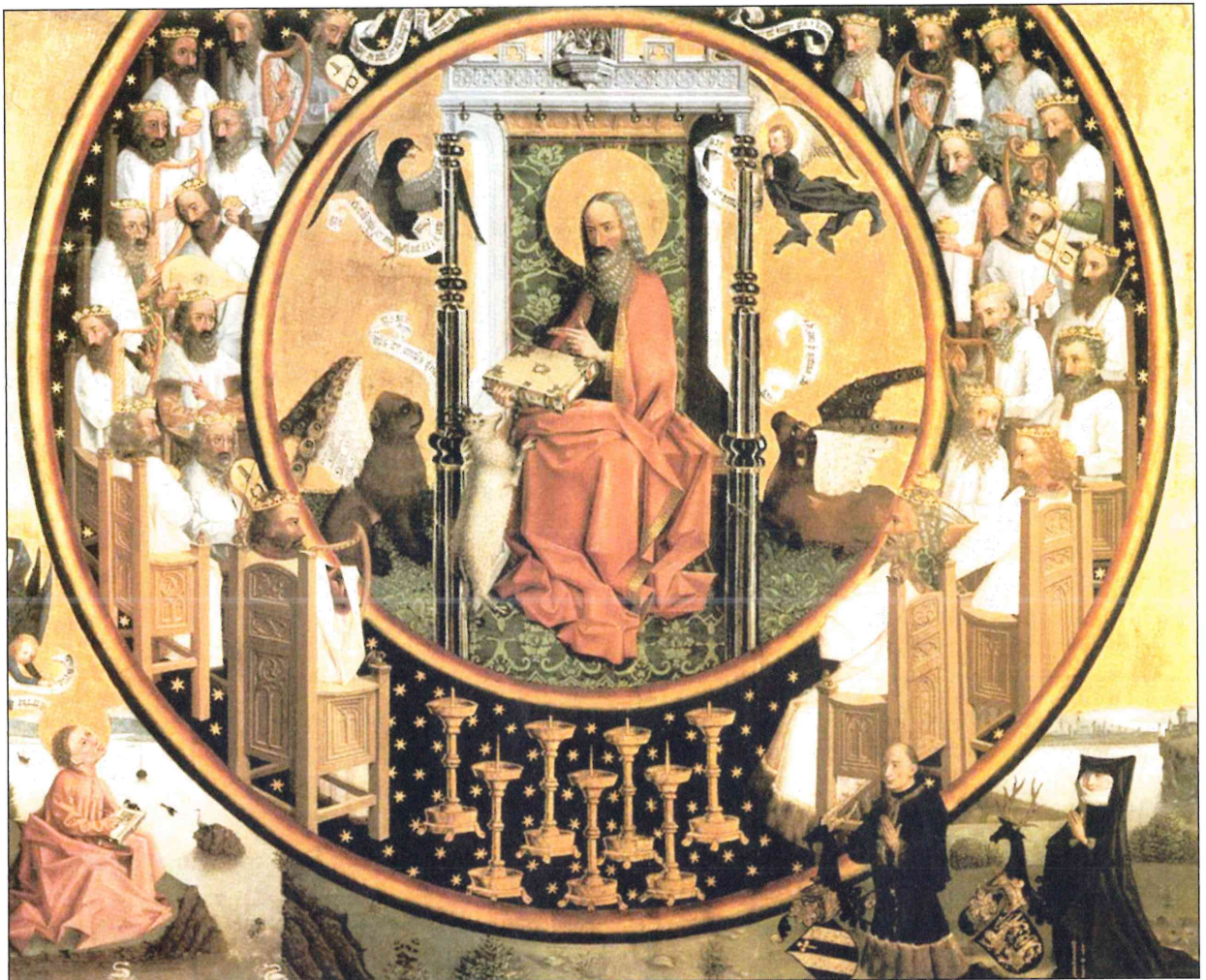
1 Peter helps Christians live their faith in a hostile world. **2 Peter** warns against false teachers and reminds us of the promised return of Christ.

The three letters of **John** warn against false spirits and teachers who lead the Church astray, and remind us that our first duty as Christians is to love.

Jude again warns against false teachers, and against those who would divide the Church.

Prophecy: The Revelation

The Revelation, traditionally attributed to the apostle John, is a vision of the things to come that is both terrifying and comforting. Since it speaks in symbols, it is sometimes hard to understand, and not everyone agrees on the interpretation of it. But the main message is that, in spite of many tribulations to come, God will preserve all his people and bring them into the Heavenly Jerusalem, where all their tears will be wiped away.



"After this I looked, and lo, in heaven an open door!... At once I was in the Spirit, and lo, a throne stood in heaven,... Round the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated... were twenty-four elders,... and before the throne burn seven torches of fire,..." (Rev 4: 1-5)

SUPPLEMENTARY READING

Jerome, *Against Jovinian*, 1: 26

Matthew as though he were writing of a man begins thus: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham;” Luke begins with the priesthood of Zechariah; Mark with a prophecy of the prophets Malachi and Isaiah. The first has the face of a man, on account of the genealogical table; the second, the face of a calf, on account of the priesthood; the third, the face of a lion, on account of the voice of one crying in the desert, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.” But John like an eagle, soars aloft, and reaches the Father Himself, and says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God,” and so on.

Jerome, *On Illustrious Men*, 1

Simon Peter, the son of John, from the village of Bethsaida in the province of Galilee, brother of Andrew the apostle, and himself chief of the apostles, after having been bishop of the church of Antioch and having preached to the Dispersion—the believers in circumcision, in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia—pushed on to Rome in the second year of Claudius to overthrow Simon Magus, and held the sacerdotal chair there for twenty-five years until the last, that is the fourteenth, year of Nero. At his hands he received the crown of martyrdom being nailed to the cross with his head towards the ground and his feet raised high, asserting that he was unworthy

to be crucified in the same manner as his Lord.... Buried at Rome in the Vatican near the triumphal way, he is venerated by the whole world.

Jerome, *On Illustrious Men*, 8

Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter wrote a short Gospel at the request of the brethren at Rome embodying what he had heard Peter tell. When Peter had heard this, he approved it and published it to the churches to be read by his authority as Clement in the sixth book of his *Hypotyposes* and Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, record. Peter also mentions this Mark in his first epistle, figuratively indicating Rome under the name of Babylon: “She who is in Babylon elect together with you salutes you and so does Mark my son” (1 Pt 5: 13). So, taking the Gospel which he himself composed, he went to Egypt and first preaching Christ at Alexandria, he formed a church so admirable in doctrine and continence of living that he constrained all followers of Christ to his example.... He died in the eighth year of Nero and was buried at Alexandria, Annianus succeeding him.

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New Law and the story of
the founding of the Church,
which is the new Israel.*



VOCABULARY

ANNUNCIATION

The visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary to tell her that she would be the mother of the Messiah. The story of the Annunciation is found in Luke.

APOSTLE

One who is sent. The Twelve Apostles were chosen by Jesus Christ to spread his message throughout the world; they are the foundation upon which the Church is built. The word "apostle" is used to describe the Twelve and St. Paul.

CATHOLIC

Universal. The Catholic Epistles are the epistles written to the whole Church.

EPISTLE

Letter. Much of the New Testament consists of epistles written to individuals, to whole congregations, or to the Church as a whole.

GOSPEL

Good News. Specifically, a book that tells the Good News. The four Gospels were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

PEDAGOGUE

A slave who acted as a private tutor for the master's children. Until the children reached adulthood, the pedagogue had absolute authority over them. According to St. Paul, the Law of Moses acted as our pedagogue until the coming of Christ.

Q

A hypothetical collection of Jesus' sayings that many scholars think was used by the Gospel writers. No one knows for certain whether the document ever existed; all the evidence for it comes from scholarly analysis of the Gospels.

SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They are called "synoptic" (Greek for "seeing together") because they have a similar point of view when contrasted with the Gospel of John.

A page from the *Book of Kells* depicts the four Evangelists identified by their symbols. Matthew's symbol is a man because his gospel emphasizes Christ's humanity and opens with his genealogy. Mark's symbol is a lion because it opens with the command "Prepare the way of the Lord." Luke's symbol is a bull because his gospel speaks of priestly duties and temple sacrifices. John's gospel is symbolized by an eagle because of the lofty language in the opening verses.



STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Briefly describe the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament.
2. What is the Old Testament?
3. What are the similarities between the divisions of the Old and New Testaments?
4. Why are the writers of the New Testament called evangelists?
5. Why are the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke called synoptic?
6. Who was the main audience for Matthew's Gospel?
7. Which Gospel represents the tradition taught by Peter?
8. Who was Mark's main audience?
9. How does he relate his Gospel?
10. Who was Luke's audience?
11. Name two reasons why Luke wrote his Gospel.
12. Name four stories from Jesus' early life that can only be found in the Gospel of Luke.
13. How could Luke have known about those stories of Jesus' early life?
14. What does the Gospel of Luke emphasize?
15. What was John's main goal in writing his Gospel?
16. Who were most likely John's main audience?
17. Which book gives us a reliable history of the early Church?
18. Who wrote the Acts of the Apostles?
19. Who wrote the bulk of the Epistles in the New Testament?
20. Which of the Epistles are called "Catholic Epistles"?
21. Why are they called "Catholic"?

PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1. The stories we have about Jesus' life are gathered from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. What are the advantages of having four different Gospels to tell the same story? What if there had only been one Gospel to recount each story? Would the writings be more or less believable? Would we have a better understanding of what happened or of what God intended?
2. Personal letters (epistles) are rare in the Old Testament, but they make up more than half of the New Testament. Why do you think

personal letters are so appropriate for spreading the Word of God? What should be a main priority in all of our closest relationships with our family and friends?

3. In everyday life we come across opportunities to help other people realize who God is. If someone were to ask you who Jesus was and what he taught, how would you respond? Briefly give an account of Jesus' most important teachings and actions in the New Testament.

FROM THE CATECHISM

124 “The Word of God, which is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, is set forth and displays its power in a most wonderful way in the writings of the New Testament” (DV 17; cf. Rom 1: 16) which hand on the ultimate truth of God’s Revelation. Their central object is Jesus Christ, God’s incarnate Son: his acts, teachings, Passion and glorification, and his Church’s beginnings under the Spirit’s guidance (cf. DV 20)

140 The unity of the two Testaments proceeds from the unity of God’s plan and his Revelation. The Old Testament prepares for the New and the New Testament fulfills the Old; the two shed light on each other; both are true Word of God.

214 God, “He who is,” revealed himself to Israel as the one “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex 34: 6). These two terms express summarily the riches of the divine name. In all his works God displays not only his kindness, goodness, grace, and steadfast love, but also his trustworthiness, constancy, faithfulness, and truth. “I give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness” (Ps 138: 2; cf. Ps 85: 11). He is the Truth, for “God is light and in him there is no darkness”; “God is love,” as the apostle John teaches (1 Jn 1: 5; 4: 8).

515 The Gospels were written by men who were among the first to have the faith (cf. Mk 1: 1; Jn 21: 24) and wanted to share it with others. Having known in faith who Jesus is, they could see and make others see the

traces of his mystery in all his earthly life. From the swaddling clothes of his birth to the vinegar of his Passion and the shroud of his Resurrection, everything in Jesus’ life was a sign of his mystery (cf. Lk 2: 7; Mt 27: 48; Jn 20: 7). His deeds, miracles and words all revealed that “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col 2: 9). His humanity appeared as “sacrament,” that is, the sign and instrument, of his divinity and of the salvation he brings: what was visible in his earthly life leads to the invisible mystery of his divine sonship and redemptive mission.

1967 The Law of the Gospel “fulfills,” refines, surpasses, and leads the Old Law to its perfection (cf. Mt 5: 17-19). In the Beatitudes, the New Law *fulfills the divine promises* by elevating and orienting them toward the “kingdom of heaven.” It is addressed to those open to accepting this new hope with faith—the poor, the humble, the afflicted, the pure of heart, those persecuted on account of Christ—and so marks out the surprising ways of the Kingdom.

2640 St. Luke in his Gospel often expresses wonder and praise at the marvels of Christ and in his *Acts of the Apostles* stresses them as actions of the Holy Spirit: the community of Jerusalem, the invalid healed by Peter and John, the crowd that gives glory to God for that, and the pagans of Pisidia who “were glad and glorified the word of God” (Acts 2: 47; 3: 9; 4: 21; 13: 48).

Endnote

1. St. Irenaeus, *Adv. haeres.* 4, 15, 1: PG 7/1, 1012.