

Formation Chapter 8: The Gospels

Note: Today is February 2, the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple

*Almighty and everliving God, we humbly pray that,
as your only-begotten Son was this day presented in
the temple, so we may be presented to you with pure
and clean hearts by Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives
and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God,
now and for ever. Amen.*

This collect derives from the Gregorian Sacramentary of the 8th Century.

About observances of Feast Days on Sundays:

Our Prayer Book (p. 15) notes: “The Principal Feasts observed in this Church are the following:

Easter Day	All Saints' Day, Nov. 1
Ascension Day	Christmas Day, Dec. 25
The Day of Pentecost	The Epiphany, Jan. 6
Trinity Sunday	

“These feasts take precedence of any other day or observance. All Saints’ Day may always be observed on the Sunday following Nov. 1...”

“All Sundays of the year are feasts of our Lord Jesus Christ. In addition to the dated days listed above, only the following feasts, appointed on fixed days, take precedence of a Sunday:

The Holy Name

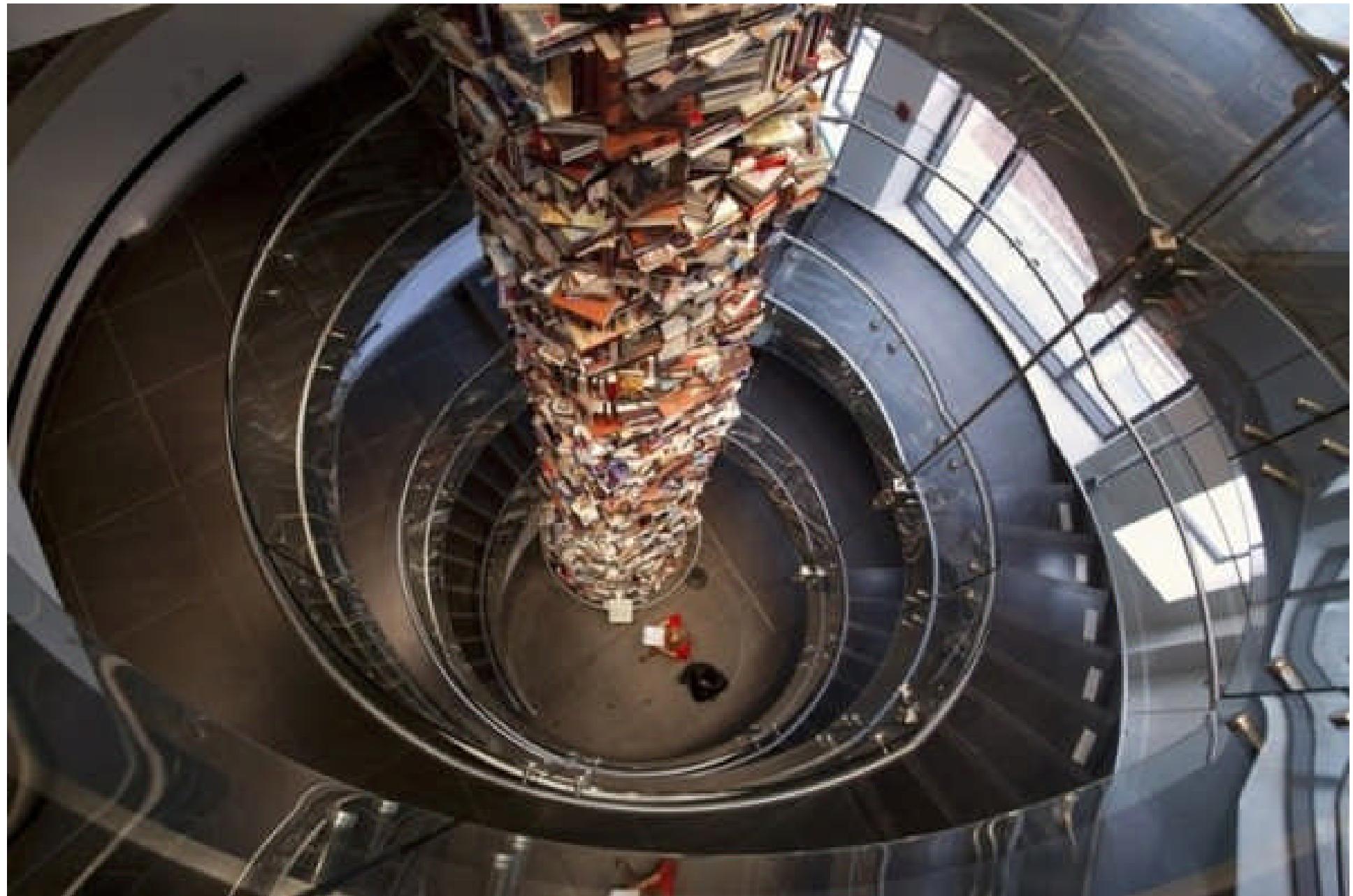
The Presentation

The Transfiguration

These are feasts of our Lord, so when they fall on a Sunday (as happens today with the Feast of The Presentation) they are observed on that Sunday in place of the regular lectionary readings for that Sunday.

The Gospels

Does anyone know what this is?



It is a sculpture – a 34-foot tower of books about Abraham Lincoln – in the middle of a winding staircase in the Ford's Theatre Center for Education and Leadership. The tower features 205 real titles, most of which are currently in print. At three stories high, the tower represents just a fraction of the 15,000 titles written about Lincoln. The web site of the Center states that the purpose of the sculpture is to symbolize “that the last word about this great man will never be written.”

Why so many books on Lincoln? Why not simply one biography? After all, he only lived one life.

The answer, of course, is that the meaning of his life goes far beyond a simple recording of facts. His life means something different to different people in different places, different situations, different times. (A priest friend from Alabama, an amateur historian, couldn't stand Lincoln!)



It shouldn't be a surprise, then, that the New Testament contains four separate Gospels, written by four separate authors for different audiences at different times in different places.

The Gospels

The English word “Gospel” derives from the Old English “godspel”, meaning “Good News”. It is therefore the equivalent of the Greek “Evangel” (eu = “good”, angelion = “news”).

The four Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are therefore sometimes called “The Four Evangelists”.

Scholars make educated guesses about who these authors were, when they wrote, where they wrote, and for whom they wrote. Tradition has come to assume that Matthew was written by the Disciple Matthew, and John by the Disciple John; but there is no proof of this. Nothing in the original text names "Matthew" as the author, and the title "according to Matthew" was not a part of the first edition. Some believe that Mark was written by John Mark, Paul's companion, and that Luke was written by Paul's companion Luke.

Again, there is no proof of this.

What is said in this presentation is a certain “consensus” understanding of the place, time, and purpose of the Gospels; it is by no means definitive.

Scholars argue whether the Gospels can correctly be described as “biographies of Jesus”. Most seem to claim that the “Gospel form” of writing was not a true “biography”, but a new form of literature altogether.

It is important to remember that the Gospels were written for a purpose: to convince their readers of that Jesus of Nazareth was in some sense the son of God/son of Humanity, and to convert their readers into becoming followers of Jesus.

Ancient historians did not write objective history. They would probably ask, “Why would I do that? I want to write the meaning of this person’s life, not just list the facts!”

The Gospels were written to convince, convert, and persuade, and therefore they have unapologetic agendas.

This does not mean that Jesus was not a real, historical figure, or that the text of the Gospels isn't rooted in historical fact! Historians tell us that there is far more reliability when it comes to the facts of Jesus' life and teaching than there is regarding almost any other historical figure of ancient times.

In the last Faith-Seeking chapter, we saw that the letters of Paul are most likely the earliest writings of the New Testament. The Gospels were written later. It is thought that Mark was the first Gospel to be written, somewhere just before 70 C.E. The relationship between the Gospels is a matter of educated hypotheses, but there is a basic hypothesis which many scholars hold about the first three Gospels (called the “Synoptic” Gospels, since they “look alike”). It is sometimes called the “4 Source Hypothesis”.

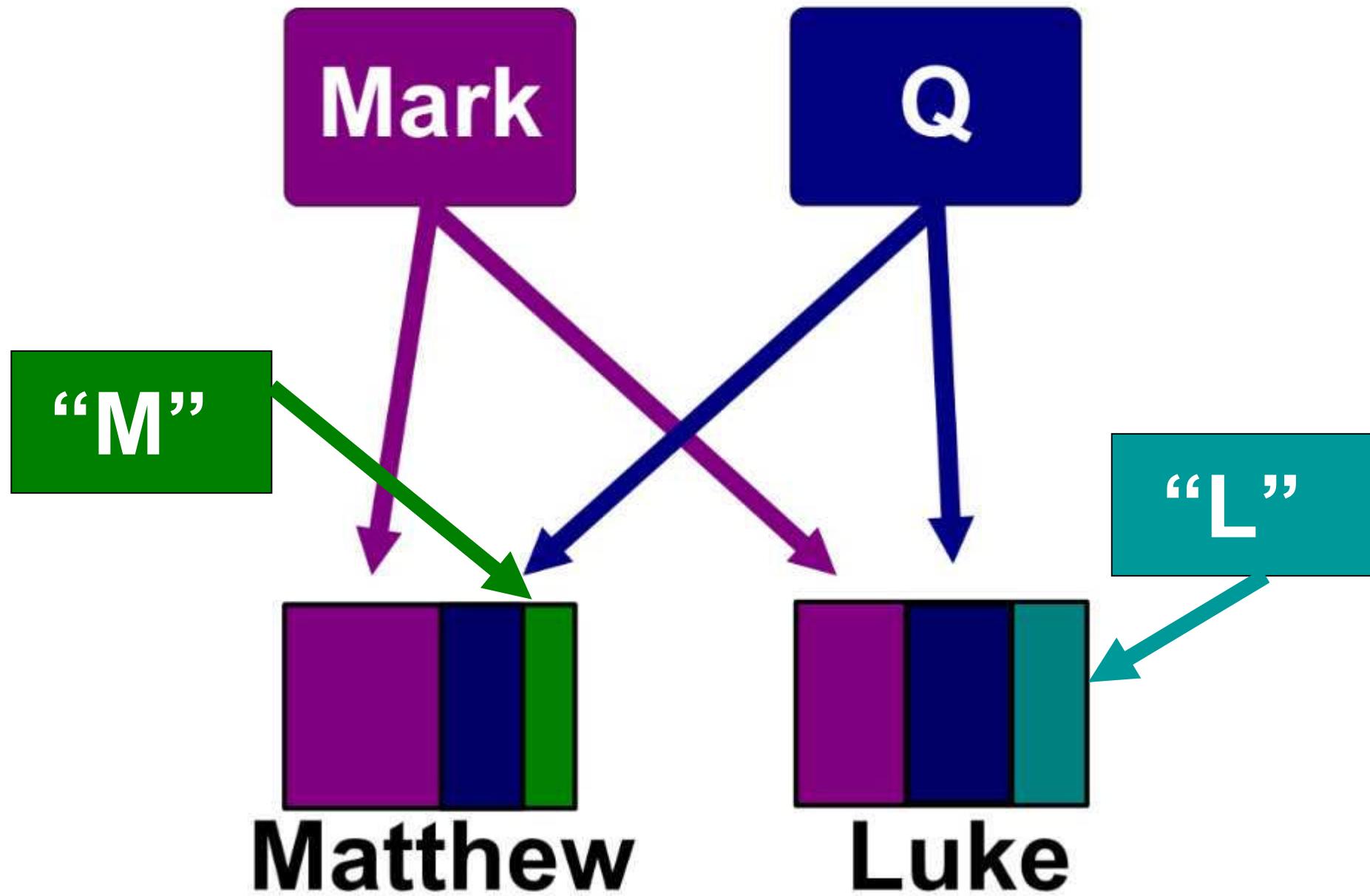
The hypothesis states that there were four written sources of information about the life of Jesus which Matthew and Luke used to write their Gospels. Matthew and Luke each had a copy of Mark's Gospel to refer to, and included a large majority of Mark in their Gospels, sometimes "tweaking" the stories to suit their own purposes and emphases. In addition, there was likely another written source (called "Q" for the German "quelle", "source") of sayings, teachings, and stories about Jesus which Matthew and Luke had access to, but Mark did not.

Finally, Matthew and Luke had their own unique sources (called “M” and “L”) which none of the other Gospel writers had.

John’s Gospel is so different from the other three that it is almost always treated separately. It is sometimes simply called “The Fourth Gospel”.

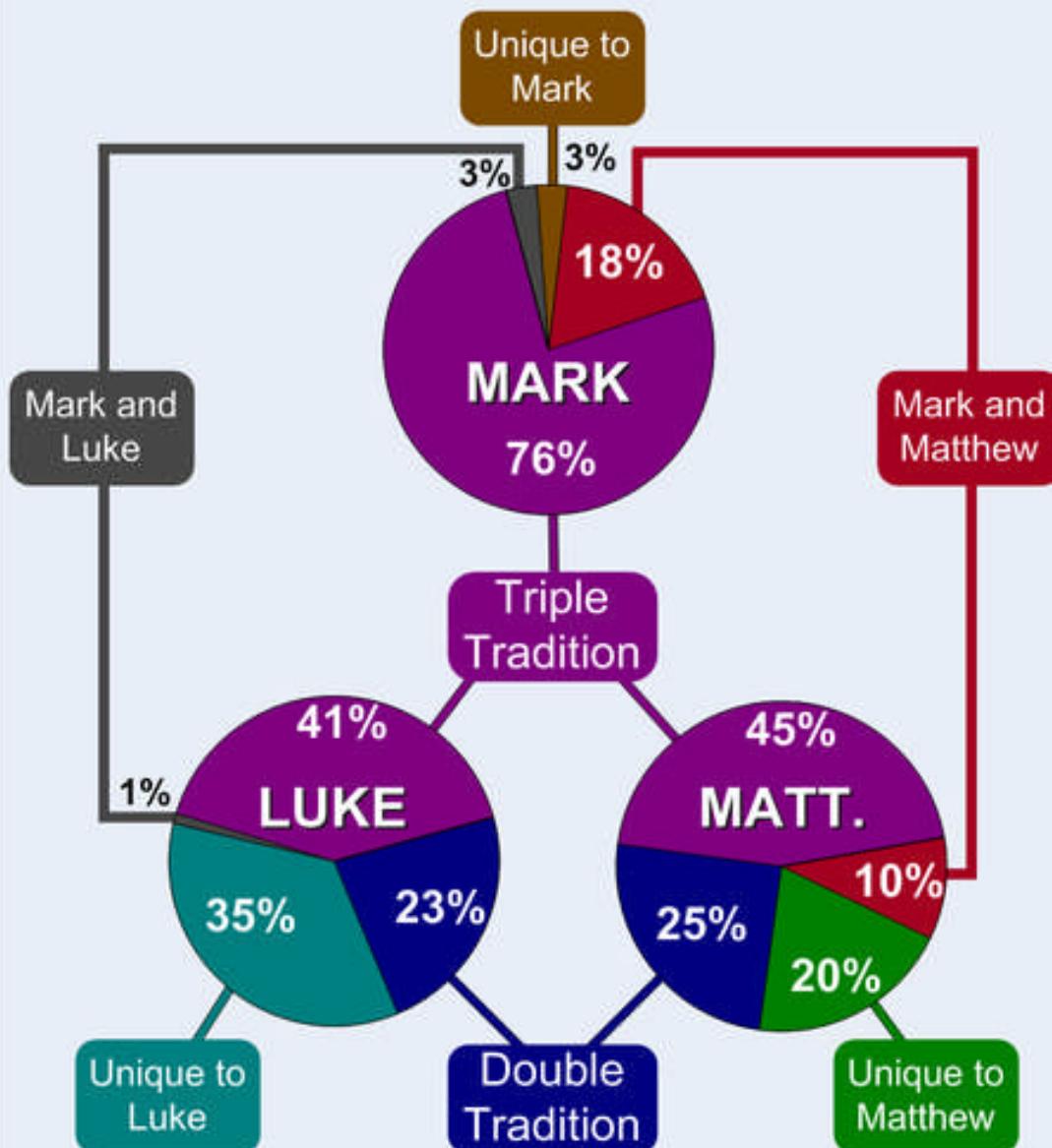
Here is a diagram of the 4 Source Hypothesis for the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke:

4-Source Hypothesis



*Here's a little different way of
depicting this hypothesis:*

Relationships between the Synoptic Gospels



Note: Today's Gospel about the Presentation in the Temple is found only in Luke, so it would be from the “L” source...

It's important to recognize that the Gospel writers were not writing just from their heads and hearts, but from written and oral sources that had been passed down through the decades since the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Oral tradition in ancient times, when much of the populace was illiterate, was a source of surprisingly accurate accounts of the past. I remember when Alex Haley was writing the miniseries "Roots", and he went back to his ancestral African town and listened to the town historian recite – from memory! – the history of his tribe. It took 3 days!

Scholars often talk about the “3 Stages” of the Gospel tradition:

Stage 1: ~4 B.C.-33 A.D. (or C.E.)

The time that Jesus lived and taught on earth.

*I like to think of this
as the stage of the
“video camera”: if
there had been video
cameras in Jesus’ day,
there would be a
completely documented
record of Stage 1.*



Stage 2: ~34-70/95 A.D. (or C.E.)

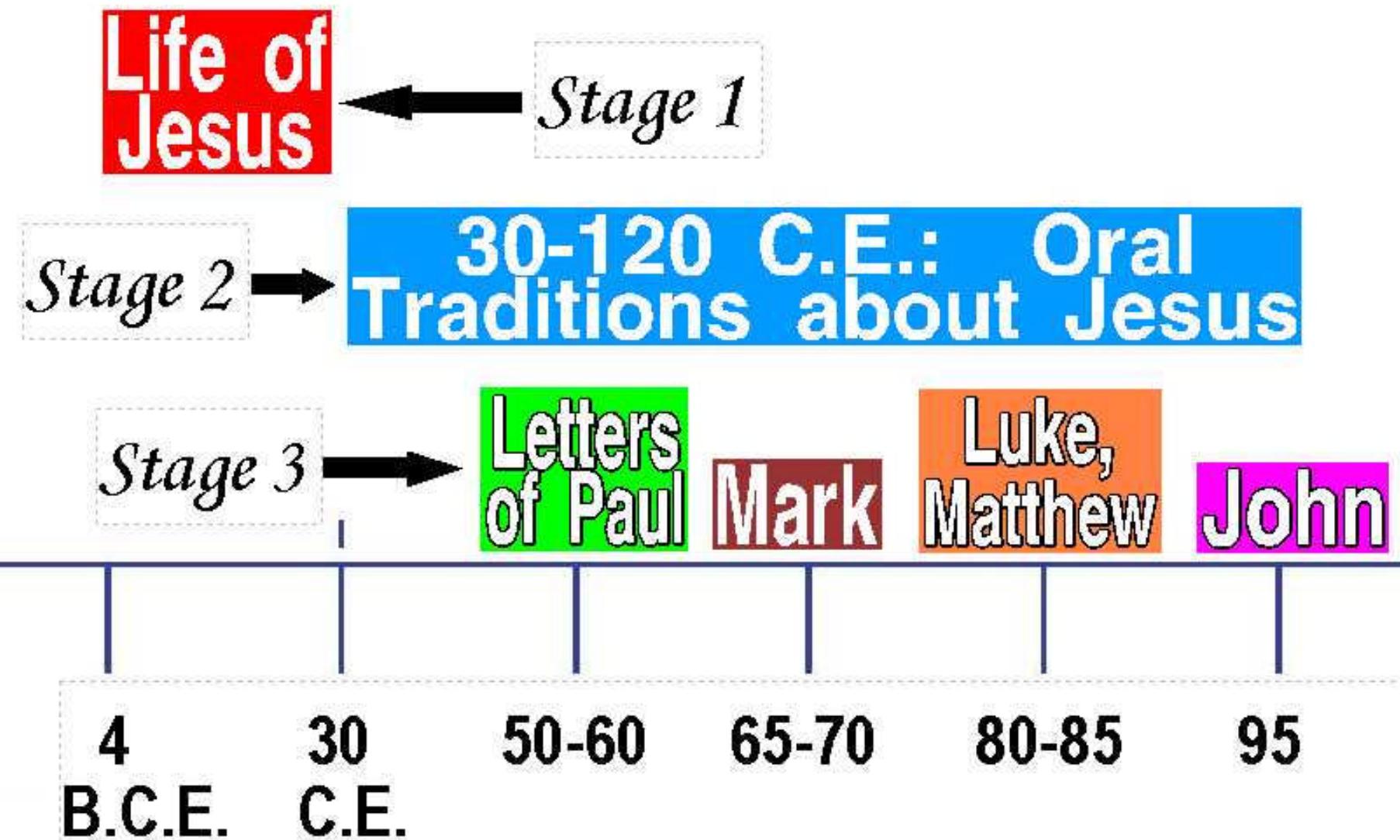
**The time that the followers of Jesus
transmitted his story and teachings, both
orally and in some early written forms.**

During this period some of the stories of Jesus' life gathered interpretations and meanings, as followers of "The Way" reflected on the impact which Jesus had on their lives. Stories took form, and some were written down in collections which we no longer have (such as the hypothesized "Q", "Proto-Luke", etc.) and circulated among early Christian communities.

Stage 3: ~70-95 A.D. (or C.E.)

The time that the Gospels were written in their final form.





Much could be said about the general character and content of each of the Gospels, but for time reasons, let's just look briefly at the structure of Matthew's Gospel – which is the Gospel we will be reading from mostly this year (Year A of our lectionary cycle).

It is thought that Matthew's community may have been in Antioch of Syria, where we know there was a very large Jewish community. Matthew saw his community at first as a community of Jews who were simply reinterpreting Judaism after the catastrophic fall of the Temple in 70 A.D. – reinterpreting Judaism along the lines of the life, death, resurrection and teachings of Jesus.

Matthew's community still observes the Jewish Sabbath (see 12:1-14, 24:20), and Matthew is very concerned with showing how Jesus fulfills Jewish prophecies.

Matthew's Gospel seems to portray Jesus as the "new Moses", delivering to the Jewish people a newly-interpreted "law".

Matthew was the most popular of the Gospels in early Christianity, probably because it is structured in a very deliberate way for learning and memorization. There are 5 discourses of Jesus, corresponding to the 5 books of the Torah.

STRUCTURE OF MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

