STORIES OF JEWISH CHRIST
The Gospels as Jewish Literature
IN THIS LECTURE:

1. Why Jewish Gospels?
IN THIS LECTURE:

1. Why Jewish Gospels?
2. Obviously Jewish Matthew
IN THIS LECTURE:

1. Why Jewish Gospels?
2. Obviously Jewish Matthew
3. Curiously Jewish Mark
IN THIS LECTURE:

1. Why Jewish Gospels?
2. Obviously Jewish Matthew
3. Curiously Jewish Mark
4. Thoroughly Jewish John
IN THIS LECTURE:

1. Why Jewish Gospels?
2. Obviously Jewish Matthew
3. Curiously Jewish Mark
4. Thoroughly Jewish John
5. Could Luke be Jewish?
Why Jewish Gospels?
Why is it so important to know whether the gospels are Jewish or not? Simple... Our judgments and perceptions frame how we read and how we interpret them.
Why is it so important to know whether the gospels are Jewish or not? Simple... Our judgments and perceptions frame how we read and how we interpret them.

If the gospels are works of Jewish literature then we should interpret them as such. This would mean that backgrounds and references that come from the non-Jewish should not guide the interpretation process.
When it comes to gospel literature the church offers some traditional views on four canonical gospels.

The Gospel of Matthew is the most Jewish (no one disputes that). The author is quite concerned with details that matter to Jews. His logic is very Semitic and he quotes a lot of Bible passages.
The gospel of John is believed to be addressed to a universal Hellenistic audience and is deemed the most non-Jewish of the four. Instead of Jesus’ birth or genealogy (which would stress his Jewish origins) Jesus is presented as the cosmic Logos of creation by John. John’s sophisticated Christology is not deemed to be traditionally Jewish either.
Mark and Luke fall somewhere in between Matthew and John, but more on the non-Jewish side. Mark is believed to focus on Jesus’ acts and he presents Jesus as God’s Son, meant to be understood from a Roman perspective. Luke preserves many details and speeches of Jesus in his “narrative history”, reminiscent of Greek and Roman historians.
Basically, according to the broadly accepted traditional view the only true “Jewish gospel” in content, intent and purpose is Matthew...

But is this traditional view really accurate?
There is plenty of evidence to assert that all four gospels are in fact thoroughly Jewish. Each of them presents ideas that fit into the broad definition of “a Jewish trajectory”.

There is plenty of evidence to assert that all four gospels are in fact thoroughly Jewish. Each of them presents ideas that fit into the broad definition of “a Jewish trajectory”.

Israelites have always been a diverse people and have never lacked in variety of perspectives and views. To expect that all Jews would think the same, act the same, express themselves the same way and hold to the same ideals means one does understand the “disagreeing” nature of the Jewish mindset.
MOTHER
Ancient Faith of Israel

Unknown Judaisms

People of the Land

Elephantine Judaism

Samaritan Israelites

Jesus' Judaism

Hellenistic Judaism

Essene & Qumranite Judaism

Sadduceeic Judaism

Pharisaic Judaism

Militant Zealot Judaism

All siblings share traits yet are different from each other
Expected Traits of Jewish Literature:

1. Written from one of the Israelite perspectives
2. Deep knowledge of Jewish customs/rituals
3. Accurate geographic/demographic references
4. Israel-related topic, scope and setting
5. Frequent use of Hebrew & Aramaic terms
6. Presence of Literary Hebraisms
7. Use of Jewish interpretive methodology
8. Imitation of style from other Jewish sources
9. Sophisticated use of the Hebrew Bible
10. Quotations, allusions and borrowing from other works of Jewish literature
Some content and various features of the Gospels have traditionally been presented as proofs that these books are not truly Jewish. The assertion is that either the Gospels are not typically Jewish literary works, or that they display a new kind of spirituality (Christian) and are not directly addressed to a Jewish audience.
Some content and various features of the Gospels have traditionally been presented as proofs that these books are not truly Jewish. The assertion is that either the Gospels are not typically Jewish literary works, or that they display a new kind of spirituality (Christian) and are not directly addressed to a Jewish audience.

Possible Non-Jewish Literary Traits:

1. Greek name of the author
2. Good and articulate Koine Greek
3. Affinity and positive portraits of Gentiles
4. Explanations and translations of Jewish terms
5. Criticism of Jewish values, laws and customs
6. Harsh criticism of Israel’s leaders, Jews as a people, or Jewish subgroups (Ioudaioi, Pharisees, Scribes, etc.)
The Bible does not need to be rewritten, but it needs to be reread.
Obviously
Jewish
Matthew
As Jewish as Matthew is, the gospel account does have some content that can be put on the non-Jewish literary traits list as well.
As Jewish as Matthew is, the gospel account does have some content that can be put on the non-Jewish literary traits list as well.

1. Non-Jewish interests / Affinity to Gentiles (Matthew has positive examples of Gentiles who have a keen sense that Jesus is not a mere man.
As Jewish as Matthew is, the gospel account does have some content that can be put on the non-Jewish literary traits list as well.

1. Non-Jewish interests / Affinity to Gentiles (Matthew has positive examples of Gentiles who have a keen sense that Jesus is not a mere man.

2. Harsh criticism of Israel’s leaders - Pharisees, Scribes, etc. (In Matthew’s Jesus’ words directed to religious leaders are less than flattering)
1 The **book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ**, the son of David, the son of Abraham. 2 Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah... 16 and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ. 17 So all the generations from Abraham to David were **fourteen generations**, and from David to the deportation to Babylon **fourteen generations**, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ **fourteen generations**. (Mat 1:1-17)
What may be lost to the modern western reader of English Bible actually jumps out at the Jewish reader. Triple repetition is always significant in Jewish tradition. The same goes for the number seven (and its multiples).
What may be lost to the modern western reader of English Bible actually jumps out at the Jewish reader. Triple repetition is always significant in Jewish tradition. The same goes for the number seven (and its multiples).

To understand the significance of 14 generations in Matthew you have to know some Hebrew. In Hebrew letters also function as numbers. Fourteen in the Hebrew Gematria corresponds to the Hebrew name David - letters 4, 6 and 4. And Matthew already gave us a key to solve this in verse 1 by calling Jesus “Son of David”.
What may be lost to the modern western reader of English Bible actually jumps out at the Jewish reader. Triple repetition is always significant in Jewish tradition. The same goes for the number seven (and its multiples).

To understand the significance of 14 generations in Matthew you have to know some Hebrew. In Hebrew letters also function as numbers. Fourteen in the Hebrew Gematria corresponds to the Hebrew name David - letters 4, 6 and 4. And Matthew already gave us a key to solve this in verse 1 by calling Jesus “Son of David”.

David

\[4 + 6 + 4 = 14\]
[**Blessed** is one who speaks] ...with a pure heart, and does not slander with his tongue. **Blessed** are those who adhere to her laws, and do not adhere to perverted paths. **Blessed** are those who rejoice in her, and do not burst out in paths of folly. **Blessed** are those who search for her with pure hands, and do not pursue her with a treacherous heart. **Blessed** is the man who attains wisdom, and walks in the law of the Most High (Qumran Beatitudes - 4Q525)
[Blessed is one who speaks] ...with a pure heart, and does not slander with his tongue. **Blessed** are those who adhere to her laws, and do not adhere to perverted paths. **Blessed** are those who rejoice in her, and do not burst out in paths of folly. **Blessed** are those who search for her with pure hands, and do not pursue her with a treacherous heart. **Blessed** is the man who attains wisdom, and walks in the law of the Most High *(Qumran Beatitudes - 4Q525)*

This Qumran fragment predates the gospels and stylistically sounds a lot like the famous “Sermon on the Mount” (Matt 5). The reason is simple. Both are imitating the poetic beauty of Psalm 1 Hebrew.
Matthew exhibits a clear Judean-centered Israelite view.

“These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.” (Matt 10:5-6)
Matthew exhibits a clear Judean-centered Israelite view.

“These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.” (Matt 10:5-6)

In his story Jesus says 1 - Do not minister to the Gentiles, 2 - Do not even preach to heretical Israelites, 3 - Reach out only to the Judean Israelites.
Curiously
Jewish
Mark
Mark’s Gospel displays many Jewish literary traits:

1. Deep knowledge of Jewish customs and rituals
2. Accurate geographic and demographic references
3. Israel-related topic, scope and setting
4. Frequent use of Jewish (Hebrew) terminology
5. Presence of Literary Hebraisms & Hebrew Idioms
6. Imitation of style from other Jewish sources.
The claims that Mark’s writing was not addressed to a Jewish audience and that his gospel is not really Jewish is built on these points.

1. Mark explains Jewish traditions and customs.
2. Mark explains the meaning of Hebrew and Aramaic words.
3. Mark uses some Latin terms.
4. Mark suggests a break from Jewish Purity Laws (Jesus’ declaration of “all foods clean” in Mark 7)
καὶ (and) Jesus took him aside from the crowd, by himself, and put His fingers into his ears, καὶ (and) after spitting, He touched his tongue with the saliva; 34 καὶ (and) looking up to heaven with a deep sigh, καὶ (and) He said to him, “Ephphatha!” that is, “Be opened!” 35 καὶ (and) his ears were opened, καὶ (and) the impediment of his tongue was removed, καὶ (and) he began speaking plainly. 36 καὶ (and) He gave them orders not to tell anyone... (Mk 7:33–36)
33 καὶ (and) Jesus took him aside from the crowd, by himself, and put His fingers into his ears, καὶ (and) after spitting, He touched his tongue with the saliva; 34 καὶ (and) looking up to heaven with a deep sigh, καὶ (and) He said to him, “Ephphatha!” that is, “Be opened!” 35 καὶ (and) his ears were opened, καὶ (and) the impediment of his tongue was removed, καὶ (and) he began speaking plainly. 36 καὶ (and) He gave them orders not to tell anyone... (Mk 7:33–36)

It has been noted that Mark’s Greek text is full of redundant prepositions and conjunctions. Here Mark uses conjunction “and” eight times in a very redundant way. This is cumbersome for Greek but very normal for Hebrew.

In these verses Mark also uses an Aramaic word - Εφφαθα (effatah) and then promptly translates the meaning.
2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You, Who will prepare Your way;
3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight.'"
4 John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins...
7 And he was preaching, and saying, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. 8 I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."  (Mark 1:2-8)
2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You, Who will prepare Your way;
3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight.’”
4 John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins...
7 And he was preaching, and saying, “After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. 8 I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:2-8)

In this passage Mark (as well as other gospel writers) quote Isaiah 40:3 and apply these words to John the Baptizer as a fulfilment of these prophetic words.

John says that a great one is coming who will baptize (immerse people) with the Holy Spirit.
“... they shall separate from the habitations ungodly men and shall go into the wilderness to prepare the way of Him; as it is written, prepare in the wilderness the way... make straight in the desert a path for our God. This is the study of the Law which He commanded by the hand of Moses... and as the Prophets have revealed by His Holy Spirit. (1QS 8:14)
“... they shall separate from the habitations ungodly men and shall go into the wilderness to prepare the way of Him; as it is written, prepare in the wilderness the way... make straight in the desert a path for our God. This is the study of the Law which He commanded by the hand of Moses... and as the Prophets have revealed by His Holy Spirit. (1QS 8:14)

This passage from one Qumran scroll (which predates the gospels) appeals to the same phrases from the Is 40:3 passage. Qumran Jews applied this passage to their mission in the wilderness. Curiously, just as in Mark’s gospel, for Qumran Jews revelation came through the Holy Spirit! Somehow Mark and Qumranites share these ideas.
3 For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly (*literally - with the fist*), holding to the tradition of the elders... (ESV Mark 7:3)

3 For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully (*literally - with the fist*) wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders... (NASB Mark 7:3)
3 For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly \textit{(literally - with the fist)}, holding to the tradition of the elders... \textit{(ESV Mark 7:3)}

3 For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they \textbf{carefully} \textit{(literally - with the fist)} wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders... \textit{(NASB Mark 7:3)}

Mark was aware of the intricate ways in which Pharisees practiced their hand-washing, by pouring water over the fist. He also knew why the Galilean Jews did not agree with the necessity and theology of such a practice. And this detailed knowledge can all be seen in a hand-washing debate described in Mark 7.
The Bible does not need to be rewritten, but it needs to be reread.
Thoroughly Jewish John
John has the same Jewish literary traits as Matthew and Mark. Still, the claims that John’s gospel is not Jewish are built on these points.

1. John avoids genealogy and instead presents Jesus as a cosmic eternal Logos.
2. John explains Jewish traditions and customs.
3. John explains the meaning of various Jewish terms.
4. John exhibits clear anti-Jewish attitudes and casts “the Jews” as Jesus’ enemies.
John’s gospel differs greatly from Matthew, Mark and Luke. It appears that the author wanted to write his story very differently and not to repeat what was already said (if he was the last of four).
John’s gospel differs greatly from Matthew, Mark and Luke. It appears that the author wanted to write his story very differently and not to repeat what was already said (if he was the last of four).

The author writes from a Judean perspective. In John, Jesus is not a Jew from Galilee who comes to Jerusalem, but really a native Judean who happens to spend a lot of time in Galilee. It seems Jerusalem is always in John’s focus.
John’s story defines Semitic terminology, but appeals primarily to non-mainstream Israelite communities in its language, in particular to the Samaritans. He says things like “Passover of the Jews”. Who else celebrated Passover that would not be called a Judean? Samaritans of course.
John’s story defines Semitic terminology, but appeals primarily to non-mainstream Israelite communities in its language, in particular to the Samaritans. He says things like “Passover of the Jews”. Who else celebrated Passover that would not be called a Judean? Samaritans of course.

John is also the most temple-preoccupied gospel. His stories display priestly interests in feasts, worship and constant themes of water and purity rituals.
The appearance of anti-Judaism in John is a substantial charge that has to be addressed. John does criticize the Jerusalem authorities very harshly.
The appearance of anti-Judaism in John is a substantial charge that has to be addressed. John does criticize the Jerusalem authorities very harshly.

Jesus’ polemic and struggle in John is with οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι (hoi Iudaioi) “the Jews” or “Judeans”. But this special term John uses does not include all Jews collectively, only the ruling Jerusalem elites. Unfortunately, this special term has been misread to represent all Jews (as a people) by many Christians and John’s words are still presented as anti-Jewish in countless books and sermons.
The Bible does not need to be rewritten, but it needs to be reread.
Could Luke be Jewish?
By now you should be able to see that the content and the style of all gospels is clearly Israelite and even Jewish/Judean. Similar internal evidence of traditional Jewish literary traits can be shown in Luke’s gospel as well. But with Luke there is another problem. Isn’t it a fact that Luke himself was not Jewish?
By now you should be able to see that the content and the style of all gospels is clearly Israelite and even Jewish/Judean. Similar internal evidence of traditional Jewish literary traits can be shown in Luke’s gospel as well. But with Luke there is another problem. Isn’t it a fact that Luke himself was not Jewish?

How can a non-Jew produce a Jewish document? That is an excellent question! But how do we even know that Luke was not Jewish?!
Luke and Acts are anonymous books and do not even name their author. The 2nd century church tradition ascribes these books to a person named Luke. Another church tradition says he was a Greek from Antioch, but offers no proof of his origins. The typical evidence about Luke being a non-Jew is inconclusive and weak.
Luke and Acts are anonymous books and do not even name their author. The 2nd century church tradition ascribes these books to a person named Luke. Another church tradition says he was a Greek from Antioch, but offers no proof of his origins. The typical evidence about Luke being a non-Jew is inconclusive and weak.

We cannot fully prove that Luke (Paul’s physician and travel companion) was Jewish. But neither can we prove that he wasn’t.
Besides the claims that Luke was a Gentile (based on tradition), here are some common arguments against his Jewish affiliation:

1. Luke is not a Jewish name
2. Luke’s Greek is more eloquent than the other gospel authors.
Was Luke a Gentile name? “The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you. 21 Timothy my fellow worker greets you, and so do Λούκιος (lukios) “Lucius” and Jason and Sosipater, οἱ συγγενεῖς μου (hoi sungeneis mu) “my kinsmen” (Rom 16:20-21)
Was Luke a Gentile name? “The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you. 21 Timothy my fellow worker greets you, and so do Λούκιος (lukios) “Lucius” and Jason and Sosipater, οἱ συγγενεῖς μου (hoi sungeneis mu) “my kinsmen” (Rom 16:20-21) The men named in these verses are Paul’s Jewish kinsmen. If Luke is a shorter nickname for a longer name “Lucius” Λούκιος (lukios) then we have another Jew with this not very Jewish-sounding name.

LUKE
Λουκᾶς (lukas)

a shorter form of

LUCIUS
Λούκιος (lukios)
Not all Jews had traditional Jewish names, especially if they lived in the Greek-speaking environment. And knowing Greek better than other Jews does not prove that one is a Gentile either.
Not all Jews had traditional Jewish names, especially if they lived in the Greek-speaking environment. And knowing Greek better than other Jews does not prove that one is a Gentile either.

Paul went to the Jerusalem temple and Luke went with him because he wrote about it in the second person plural as “we”. But unlike Trophimus, Paul’s companion, Luke is not mentioned in any accusation against Paul in bringing non-Jews into the Temple, even though he was apparently right there (Acts 21:29).
10 Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings; and also Barnabas’s cousin Mark... 11 and also Jesus who is called Justus; **these are the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision**... 14 Luke, the beloved physician, sends you his greetings, and also Demas. (Col 4:10-14)
10 Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings; and also Barnabas’s cousin Mark... 11 and also Jesus who is called Justus; **these are the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision**... 14 Luke, the beloved physician, sends you his greetings, and also Demas. (Col 4:10-14)

Out of all arguments for Luke being a non-Jew this is the strongest one. Indeed Luke is mentioned separately from other Jews several verses later when Paul mentions more people in his greeting. But Luke’s name does not immediately follow those “of the circumcision”, so it is not clear that he was expressly excluded form this category. It is possible that that Paul simply decided to mention more greetings later and added his beloved physician Luke at the end. We can try to read into this situation, but there could be many other reasons besides the proposed one. The evidence is not there.
Luke seems to have an affinity for stories with Gentiles. But Matthew and Mark tell those stories as well. Luke does not say that his audience is Gentile. His writing is addressed to Theophilus (a lover of God). Just as other authors who translate Aramaic and Hebrew, Luke explains Jewish context.
Luke seems to have an affinity for stories with Gentiles. But Matthew and Mark tell those stories as well. Luke does not say that his audience is Gentile. His writing is addressed to Theophilus (a lover of God). Just as other authors who translate Aramaic and Hebrew, Luke explains Jewish context.

Neither gospel is written to an exclusively Jewish audience, but most likely a mixed groups. This would explain why all authors chose to write in Greek, even though some of them struggle with that task. They want a maximum readability of their writings.
Like other gospels Luke contains Hebraisms. Where did he learn to speak (write) like that? If Luke is not a Jew by birth than he must be a convert, at the very least, or a God-fearer, who has spent a lot of time around Jews and Synagogues.
Like other gospels Luke contains Hebraisms. Where did he learn to speak (write) like that? If Luke is not a Jew by birth than he must be a convert, at the very least, or a God-fearer, who has spent a lot of time around Jews and Synagogues.

Luke speaks of Jesus events as something that “happened among us” (Luke 1:1-4) Who is “us”? No known Gentiles followed Jesus to witness his miracles and private teachings.
Jesus’ genealogy in Luke goes all the way back to Adam (supposedly seeking to include and connect the Gentiles). Luke still presents it in a theologically Jewish perspective of the Davidic dynasty, showing that Jesus is the promised Messiah of Israel (Luke 3:23-38).
Jesus’ genealogy in Luke goes all the way back to Adam (supposedly seeking to include and connect the Gentiles). Luke still presents it in a theologically Jewish perspective of the Davidic dynasty, showing that Jesus is the promised Messiah of Israel (Luke 3:23-38).

In the end Luke’s text is more like the other gospels than it is not. It is much easier to assume that he is a Jew like other authors then to prove the opposite.
So “which of the gospels is most Jewish and which one is least Jewish?” is a wrong question. It is not that one gospel is more Jewish than the other. Each gospel expresses a different set of Jewish values reflecting real Jewish diversity.
So “which of the gospels is most Jewish and which one is least Jewish?” is a wrong question. It is not that one gospel is more Jewish than the other. Each gospel expresses a different set of Jewish values reflecting real Jewish diversity.

All of the gospels have numerous features that attest to the their familiarity with and involvement in a Jewish setting. The issues they raise, the stories they tell, the way they tell them and how they chose what to tell, all points to the evidence that the gospels were authored by Jews of different walks and persuasions.
The features of the gospels that could possibly disqualify them from being authentically Jewish are very few and all have reasonable explanations. The evidence weighs the argument heavily in favor of all four gospels (including Luke and John) being thoroughly Jewish in character, theology and worldview.
If the gospels are truly Jewish then they have to be taught and interpreted accordingly; considering the Hebrew language and Jewish life values. The reality is that these books have been interpreted and preached for centuries from the opposite vector. A further re-reading and re-interpretation is in order. This course can be a beginning point.
The Bible does not need to be rewritten, but it needs to be reread.
Enroll in the

CERTIFICATE IN JEWISH CONTEXT AND CULTURE

www.israelstudycenter.com