

THE GOSPELS



What are the gospels?

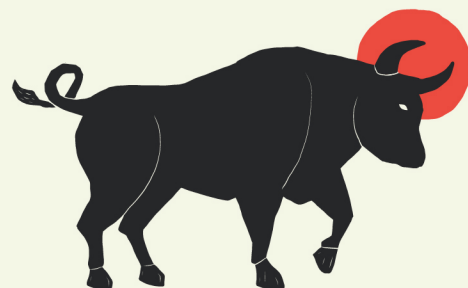
Gospel comes from the Greek word εὐαγγέλιον (*euangelion* or *evangelion*) meaning “good news.” It came into English as the Old English *gōdspel*. Gospel had a Roman connotation during the

time of Jesus. It originally referred to the good news of Caesar Augustus’s *Pax Romana*. Christians initially used the word to refer to any proclamation of the good news of God’s saving activity in Christ. The word later came to refer to the specific genre of stories of the life of Christ.

Why do we have gospels?

We may assume written accounts of Jesus’ life are an automatic part of the tradition because we’ve always had gospels. But for early Christians, *gospel* meant the proclamation of Jesus’ death and resurrection; these written, extended accounts of his life and ministry marked a fundamental shift in Christian identity. It is

likely they were composed as the generation of eyewitnesses to Jesus was dying off and they wanted to give future generations a way to know about the life of Jesus.



Who decided which stories made it in the Bible?

The four gospels that the early church came to accept almost universally are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These four are named for their association with certain apostles and other followers of Jesus. The author of Luke likely wrote the Book of Acts as well, and the author of John has been associated with the letters of John. While early church leaders asserted apostolic authorship, we do not know for sure who wrote any of the gospels.

How are the gospels related?

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called *synoptic* (from a Greek word meaning “seen together”) because of their shared narrative accounts of Jesus’ life and use of similar and identical language. Most scholars accept Mark as the oldest of the three and that it was used as source material for Matthew and Luke. John’s Gospel, on the other hand, does not seem to draw upon the same sources. For instance, John does not include parables and follows a very different chronology for Jesus’ ministry.



What about other Gospels?

In the early years of Christianity, a number of other accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry proliferated beyond the four accounts that made it into the New Testament. Some, such as the Protevangelium of James, expanded the birth stories. Others, like the gospels of Judas and Mary Magdalene or the gospel of Truth, were written after Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Unlike the gospels that would become canon, these others were not widely used by the whole church and included ideas outside of accepted church teaching.



MATTHEW

The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as Israel's Messiah. Jesus is shown to be the authoritative interpreter of God's plan for God's people through his fulfillment of prophecy, how he teaches Torah, and how the pattern of his life calls to mind the lives of people like Moses.

While Luke's Gospel details the founding and expansion of the church, Matthew is, above all, the gospel about the church and could even be read as a manual for proper conduct in the church. For instance, Matthew is the only gospel to actually use the term "church" and includes unique material about church discipline and conflict resolution.

Like Luke, Matthew also seems to use Mark as a source but expands on the basic narrative. Matthew also adds an infancy narrative and genealogy, like Luke. However, Matthew traces Jesus' lineage back to Abraham rather than Adam and also details the visit of the Magi.

Matthew has a number of unique literary structures, including its order, symmetry, and use of summary transitions—offering a smoother approach than Mark's abrupt narrative shifts. A peculiar quirk in the Gospel of Matthew is the tendency to double characters and episodes that appear as single events or characters in Luke and Mark. Matthew even has Jesus riding two donkeys into Jerusalem!

While all the gospels were written in conversation with different forms of first-century Judaism, Matthew is the one most influenced by the Pharisees/rabbinical Judaism. Matthew shows that Jesus—rather than the Pharisees—interpreted Torah rightly, fulfilled Torah, and may even be Torah personified.

Throughout Matthew, Jesus is teaching. Matthew reorganizes some material from Mark's Gospel, creating extended sermons, such as the Sermon on the Mount. This presentation shows Jesus in action as a teacher, fulfilling the passage from Matthew "as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (7:29).



MARK

Mark presents the disciples as dolts who regularly don't understand Jesus. They frequently misunderstand not only Jesus' esoteric parables and who Jesus himself is but also his most obvious teachings. For example, in Mark 7 Jesus chastises the disciples for not understanding his teaching about what can and cannot defile a person.

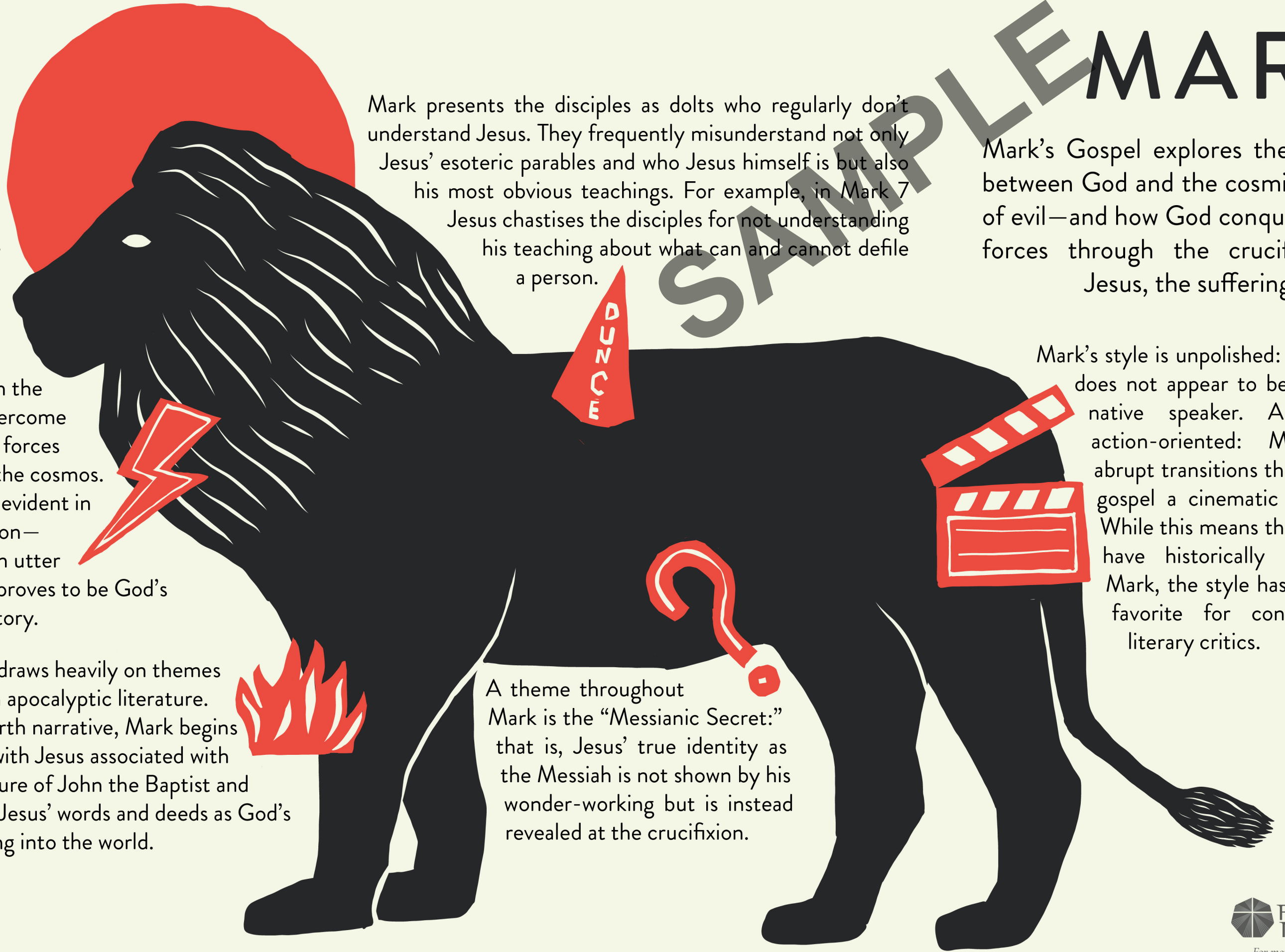
Mark's Gospel explores the conflict between God and the cosmic powers of evil—and how God conquers those forces through the crucifixion of Jesus, the suffering servant.

Mark's style is unpolished: the Greek does not appear to be that of a native speaker. And it is action-oriented: Mark uses abrupt transitions that give the gospel a cinematic character. While this means that scholars have historically disparaged Mark, the style has made it a favorite for contemporary literary critics.

Mark emphasizes Jesus' deeds more than words. Jesus is above all a messiah with the power to overcome the spiritual forces entrapping the cosmos. This is most evident in the crucifixion—seemingly an utter failure that proves to be God's greatest victory.

This gospel draws heavily on themes from Jewish apocalyptic literature. Lacking a birth narrative, Mark begins right away with Jesus associated with the fiery figure of John the Baptist and then shows Jesus' words and deeds as God's rule, breaking into the world.

A theme throughout Mark is the "Messianic Secret:" that is, Jesus' true identity as the Messiah is not shown by his wonder-working but is instead revealed at the crucifixion.



LUKE

Luke offers a well-crafted literary account of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit as Lord and savior of all of humanity. This gospel takes pains to show that the salvation of all of humanity is an extension, rather than a repudiation, of God's faithfulness to Israel.

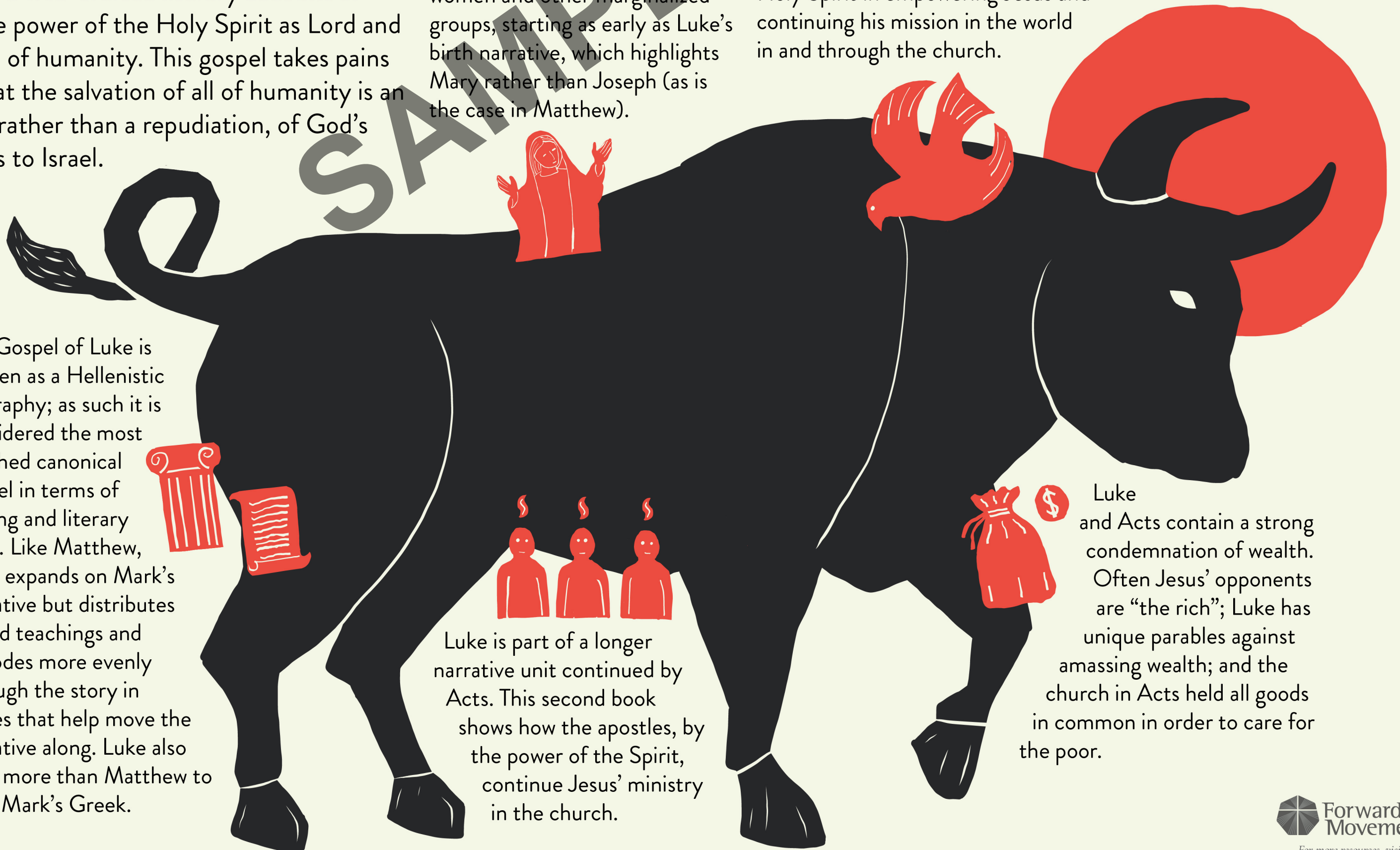
Luke's Gospel emphasizes women and other marginalized groups, starting as early as Luke's birth narrative, which highlights Mary rather than Joseph (as is the case in Matthew).

Jesus appears in Luke's Gospel as a Spirit-filled prophet. Luke emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering Jesus and continuing his mission in the world in and through the church.

The Gospel of Luke is written as a Hellenistic biography; as such it is considered the most polished canonical gospel in terms of writing and literary style. Like Matthew, Luke expands on Mark's narrative but distributes added teachings and episodes more evenly through the story in places that help move the narrative along. Luke also does more than Matthew to "fix" Mark's Greek.

Luke is part of a longer narrative unit continued by Acts. This second book shows how the apostles, by the power of the Spirit, continue Jesus' ministry in the church.

Luke and Acts contain a strong condemnation of wealth. Often Jesus' opponents are "the rich"; Luke has unique parables against amassing wealth; and the church in Acts held all goods in common in order to care for the poor.



JOHN

Extremes meet in the Jesus of John's Gospel. Jesus' divinity shines through more clearly than in any other gospel, with Jesus being clearly identified with God the Father, having intimate insight into the thoughts of others, and remaining in complete control even during his crucifixion and death. At the same time, this gospel shows Jesus at his most human: He is the Word made flesh who speaks at length of eating his flesh and drinking his blood and who retains the wounds of the crucifixion even in his resurrected body.

A pressing question about the Gospel of John is why it is so different from the other three gospels. While John provides additional teachings and events from Jesus' life, it also offers a different type of gospel, offering a theological interpretation to a community already familiar with the stories and actions of Jesus. For instance, all of the gospels share the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, but in John, we see a more robust development of the doctrine of the incarnation.

While John's Greek is regularly correct, it is rarely complex. This lack of linguistic complexity belies John's literary complexity. John uses several motifs such as light and dark, life and death, and descent and ascent.

Jesus does not use parables in John, but the narrative itself has several levels of meaning. This gospel makes use of a lot of complex symbolism, and nearly all events and people in the gospel point beyond themselves to something else. For instance, Martha is not only a historical figure but also a character who represents all believers; Thomas is not only a disciple but an allegory for all doubters.

ΛΟΓΟΣ

John identifies Jesus with God more explicitly than the other three gospels, such as with the "I am" statements. But it also emphasizes Jesus' humanity, as the divine Word becomes flesh.

Jewish festivals play a prominent role in John. While they serve the literal purpose of gathering people around Jesus, they figuratively show Jesus as the fullness of what these festivals represent. For example, John has Jesus' death occur simultaneously with the slaughter of the Passover lambs in order to identify Jesus clearly as the Lamb of God.