

Symbols of the Four Evangelists



Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are known as the four Evangelists. Convention traditionally holds that the authors were two of the Twelve Apostles of Jesus, John and Matthew, as well as two "apostolic men", Mark and Luke, whom Orthodox Tradition records as members of the 70 Apostles (Luke 10):

They are called Evangelists, a word meaning "people who proclaim good news", because their books aim to tell the "good news" ("gospel") of Jesus.

Matthew – a former tax collector (Levi) who was called by Jesus to be one of the Twelve Apostles

Mark – a follower of Peter and so an "apostolic man"

Luke – a doctor who wrote what is now the book of Luke to Theophilus. Also known to have written the book of Acts (or Acts of the Apostles) and to have been a close friend of Paul of Tarsus

John – a disciple of Jesus and the youngest of his Twelve Apostles

The Evangelists often appear in Evangelist portraits derived from classical tradition, and are also frequently represented by the symbols which originate from the four "living creatures" that draw the throne-chariot of God in the vision in Ezekiel 1 and reflected in the Book of Revelation, referred to as the four 'Seraphim'.

Images normally, but not invariably, appear with wings like angels.

When the symbols of the Four Evangelists appear together, it is called a Tetramorph.

The meanings accruing to the symbols grew over centuries, with an early formulation by Jerome, and were fully expressed by Rabanus Maurus, who set out three layers of meaning for the beasts: representing first the Evangelists, second the nature of Christ, and third the virtues required of a Christian for salvation.

These animals may have originally been seen as representing the highest forms of the various types of animals: man, as the image of the Creator; the lion, as king of beasts of prey (meat-eating); the ox, as king of domesticated animals (grass-eating); the eagle, as king of birds.

Each of the symbols is depicted with wings, following the biblical sources first in Ezekiel 1–2, and in Revelation. The symbols are shown with, or in place of, the Evangelists in early medieval Gospel Books, and are the usual accompaniment to Christ in Majesty when portrayed during the same period, reflecting the vision in Revelation.

In St Patrick's the four Evangelists are represented on the Sacred Heart Altar. Originally, these mosaics adorned the stone pulpit which was sited in the nave of the Church.

When this pulpit was removed the mosaics were incorporated into the altar of the Sacred Heart so as not to lose their beauty. Above this altar is a cross representing Christ in Majesty.