

The Four Gospels

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General Introduction

In the middle of the 6th decade of the first century, Christianity had reached a crisis. Nero had begun his persecutions, and the Romans had begun to suppress the open rebellion of the zealot Jews in Palestine.

The church had been well established throughout the Roman Empire, and many doctrinal epistles had been written in support of the church.

Paul was in prison; many of the great believers of the eyewitness generation had died from natural causes and violent persecution.

It appeared as though the prophecy of Christ about the destruction of the Temple was about to come to pass due to the hopeless war in the Holy Land.

It was because of these intense adversities that God the Holy Spirit inspired three men in three different cities to write gospels - records of the life of Christ.

The three locations of writing were widely and evenly distributed.

Mark recorded Peter's gospel in Rome.

Luke wrote his gospel somewhere in Greece, probably in Achaia.

Matthew wrote from Antioch in Syria.

These three gospels were written for various reasons.

Matthew wrote to Jews, in order to convince them of the Messiahship of Jesus.

He hoped to convert them before the folly of the Zealot movement resulted in their persecution and destruction.

Already war was begun in Palestine.

Luke wrote to Greeks in order to provide an accurate history of the events of the incarnation. His second work, the book of Acts, is the accurate history of the early church.

Mark wrote to record the life of Christ as told by Peter. It is likely that Peter was in prison and close to martyrdom when he dictated the story of Christ's life. Peter no doubt thought it imperative that the story get out. The abbreviated nature of the narrative reveals both Peter's nature and that he was in a hurry.

These three gospels, although very similar in their record of events, arose from independent sources.

Peter told the story to Mark as he remembered it.

Luke had apparently interviewed a number of people over the years and put these materials together to form his gospel.

Matthew had already written quite a lot of material in Aramaic, which had to do with the prophecies concerning the life of Christ. He used this material to form the basis for a number of his passages, and filled in the rest from memory.

There was no written source on which these three are all based. The Q hypothesis is pure bunk, thought up by arrogant German scholars who had nothing better to do because they had rejected the inspired nature of the Word.

These three gospels are often called the synoptic gospels, because they have roughly the same record of events. Synoptic means to 'see together'.

These synoptic gospels were all written within a year or two from one another. It is therefore doubtful that they could have relied on one another. The times of writing are as follows (all dates approximate).

Mark - 65 A.D.

Matthew and Luke - 66 A.D.

Notice that in the time of crisis it was important from the Spirit's point of view to provide knowledge of the life of Christ! Remember, the Spirit chose when to inspire these works. The gospel of John is very similar in that it is inspired during a time of great adversity for the church. John wrote his gospel in the eighties, most likely the late eighties.

The problems of harmonizing the gospels

Critics of the gospels have been very skeptical about the accuracy of the gospel accounts because even the synoptic gospels do not appear (at least on the surface) to harmonize well.

However when the gospels are analyzed and then harmonized by those whose work goes beyond just a surface appraisal, things work out quite well. One such harmony is Dr. Thomas' *A Harmony of the Gospels*, which was written together with Dr. Gundry.

Dr. Thomas lists the following as problems with harmonization on page 302 of his book.

Accounts of Christ's words sometimes differ. One evangelist's report of the same conversation, saying, or discourse may be more less complete than another's. Differences may occur in grammatical construction. Synonyms may be substituted, verb voice or tense changed, or nouns replaced by pronouns. There may be differences in the order of discussion.

Sometimes the differences in details reported even involve what appear to be contradictions.

Occasionally, the same or similar statements will be found in contexts which appear to reflect different situations.

Somewhat similar events occur in different situations.

Sometimes what really appears to be the same event will be reported in a different order in another gospel.

Sometimes diverse descriptive details are given for what appears to be the same event; sometimes these details may have the appearance of discrepancy.

The gospel writers do not always report the same events.

The big issue is this: Do these problems undermine the historical integrity of the gospels? If they do, then they undermine the inspired nature of the word.

In the last century, the German scholars saw these problems and failed to account for them. Instead, they arrogantly denied the inspired nature of the Word, and the ministers and the people followed. The result was two world wars, both started by a nation full of people who called themselves Christians. We stand on the brink of the same possibility in our own nation.

Do not fear, however, for responsible scholarship more than accounts for these problems without compromising the historical integrity and inspired nature of these documents.

The general solutions are as follows:

Jesus spoke three languages: Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. The gospels were

all written in Greek. Therefore, by necessity many of the gospel accounts of Jesus' words are translations. In translation, there is plenty of room of variance without losing meaning.

Sometimes the words are translated quite literally, but even so the use of synonyms is quite acceptable. Sometimes the words are translated more loosely in order to emphasize the impact of the words. This is also perfectly acceptable.

In modern language we have many punctuation marks to indicate what is a direct quote and what is not; what is a clarification by the author, and what is a clarification by the original speaker; even footnotes are employed to refer to source materials. None of these things were available to the ancient writer.

Because of this it is difficult to tell when the writer is doing one of these things in his translation of Jesus' words (even if he is translating). Suffice it to say that God the Holy Spirit is the supernatural director of all translations of Jesus' words, and He ensured their accuracy.

When there are differences in translation, we can use them to amplify all the translations.

Dr. Thomas summarizes this principle in this way: "What one does expect to be reproduced in ordinary discussion are the striking or important statements, the leading thoughts, the major divisions or topics, and the general drift of discussion including transitions from one topic to another. While different reports are expected to agree on these matters, it is also expected that there will be differences on details such as changes of person, substitution of pronouns for nouns or vice versa, changes in tense, voice, or mood of the verbs, and substitution of synonyms are too trivial to be taken as serious objections to a reporter's accuracy in ordinary discussion.

"While wording is important, meaning can be conveyed in a variety of ways. Verbal inspiration does not imply that truth can be accurately communicated in only one way. Rather, it means that the manner in which the Holy Spirit did speak through

the human agents is inspired and hence accurate, word for word.”.

The people of the ancient world, especially the Jewish people, had highly trained memories. They were often required to memorize long passages of the Old Testament, and even in a language that was not their native tongue.

This, together with the ministry of the Holy Spirit led to tremendous accuracy with reference to the meaning of the translation.

When a translation is direct from the Greek, we can expect greater accuracy in the quotation of Jesus' words, but even so, one writer for his own reason may add or subtract from the quotation without a violation of the principle of inspiration.

Also, Christ no doubt repeated many of His words over the course of His ministry; this does not mean that He said the exact same thing every time. Even during the same sermon it is likely that He repeated Himself. One gospel writer may have recorded one part, while another different parts with slightly different wording.

Differences in the details of what appear to be the same event may in fact be a record of two quite different occurrences.

Sometimes, a writer will arrange his material according to subject and therefore take things out of chronological order. This too is acceptable, and does not corrupt the inspired nature of the text.

The conclusion is this: that harmonizing the gospels presents no major problems with reference to inspiration. The accounts do harmonize well, and the problems that go with a harmony are easily and rationally accounted for.

The Gospel of Matthew

For each gospel, we will follow this order:

Author

Circumstances of writing

Target readership

Purpose of writing, and

Characteristics of the gospel.

The Author

Matthew - God used an outcast. His name is a transliteration of the Aramaic word which means “gift of God.”

In his own Gospel, Matthew uses his regular name. In other gospels, the name Levi is used. It is likely that Matthew became his name after his conversion.

Matthew was a Jewish tax collector. It is likely that he was fairly well off financially because of his profession. This makes his decision to follow Christ all the more remarkable, because he left it all behind - Luke 5:28. It is likely that he worked at the toll house in Capernaum.

When he decided to follow our Lord, he threw a big party, and invited all his friends. His decision to follow Christ was immediate.

As a tax collector, Matthew was an outcast in Jewish society. He apparently had no friends who were devout in the Jewish faith for at his party there were only other tax collectors and sinners.

The Roman tax collectors were hated by the Jews because the Roman taxes were in addition to the Jewish taxes.

They were also hated because they represented the occupying forces of the Roman Empire.

The tax collectors made their living by inflating the Roman taxes. They essentially worked on commission.

Tax collectors were wealthy, but hated by their own society. They had to live with a tremendous amount of prejudice.

Because of this prejudice their social options were severely limited. They could only socialize with others who were outcasts.

It was easy for Matthew to follow Christ, considering his personal circumstances. Social isolation does not make it easy to enjoy personal wealth. No doubt he knew of the supernatural essence of Christ's ministry, and he may have even heard Him speak. It is often the outcast that finds it easiest to follow Christ.

The Circumstances Surrounding the Writing of the Matthew

Of the circumstances of the writing of this gospel we know very little. What little we can draw comes from inside the book.

The Target Readership for Matthew

The target readership for Matthew's gospel was most likely Jewish believers in Palestine. A secondary audience may be found in Jewish audiences everywhere. His was the most read of all the

gospels in the first century. This popularity is a good testimony to its arrangement.

The Purpose of the Gospel of Matthew

The purpose of this gospel was generally to awaken and establish faith in Jesus Christ.

That this gospel was written primarily with a Jewish audience in mind brings a more specific purpose: To establish Christ as the Messiah and to answer the attacks of Jewish critics on the issue of the person of Christ.

It was also intended as a tool for use in evangelism for other believers.

Finally, it was probably intended as a last ditch effort to stem the tide of destruction which was descending upon the Jews in Palestine.

The Jews were their own worst enemies. They were extremely self-destructive, and especially so since their rejection of Christ as Messiah.

Their self-destructive tendencies culminated in a great number of them choosing the way of the zealot - armed resistance without virtue.

The way of the zealot could only result in the destruction of the Jews in the land, and of Jerusalem. The Romans' method of warfare was far superior to that of the zealots. Anyone with common sense could see the inevitable destruction of the Jewish armies.

Therefore, Matthew wrote his gospel as a last-ditch effort to stem the tide of destruction that had welled up among the Jews in Palestine.

Matthew wrote just as the zealots began their armed revolt in 66 A.D.

General Characteristics of Matthew

The most striking of the characteristics of this gospel is its emphasis on Christ as the Messianic King promised by the Old Testament prophets. Time and again Matthew points out some event in Christ's life, or one of His characteristics as being a fulfillment of a prophecy. He especially concentrates on Christ as the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant.

Matthew also concentrates on the kingdom of the Messianic king. He uses the term, "the kingdom of heaven" 32 times, but it is not mentioned elsewhere in Scripture. He stresses both the spiritual and political aspects of the kingdom. Matthew records ten parables about the kingdom which are found

in none of the other gospels. His is the gospel of the New Covenant for Israel.

Matthew's gospel has a very Jewish flavor, yet at the same time he often takes the opportunity to denounce the Pharisees and their incorrect practices and perceptions of the Messiah. The latter is probably due to Matthew's social isolation. No doubt he was often victimized by the Pharisees for being a tax collector. Like so many who are the victims of prejudice, Matthew has special insight into those who perpetuate such sins.

However, Matthew does not exclude the Gentiles. Matthew was emotionally a Gentile because of his social isolation. He makes sure his readers understand that once the Jews have completely rejected Christ, the kingdom would be transferred to the Gentiles.

Matthew is the one who arranges his material by subject, and aside from the passion week he does not follow the chronological order of events. Matthew, more than any other gospel writer, has an ax to grind. It is a righteous ax, and so he arranges his material to suit the grinding.

In spite of Matthew's choice of arrangement, his gospel retains a great unity and order. This reveals the mind of a tax collector. The order of numbers and accounts lead naturally to literary order. There is great continuity in the order of the subjects, and excellent literary transition.

The Gospel of Mark

The Author(s) - Mark and Peter.

There are really two persons behind the writing of this gospel. The one who gave dictation, Peter, and the one who received it, Mark.

The following is an extraordinary statement: Mark was there when both Paul and Peter died. It is extraordinary because Mark began life as a coward, and was for while in great disfavor among the other disciples. This is a testimony to the grace of God.

Mark was Jewish, and grew up in Jerusalem. No doubt he was aware of the person of Christ and the events of His life. There is even some speculation that he was the young man of Mark 14:51-52. The actions of that young man are certainly commensurate with his character flaw of cowardice which he expressed about 20 years later.

His mother's name was Mary, and he was a relative of Barnabas. When Paul and Barnabas took Mark along on the first journey, he left for home before

their ascent of the Taurus mountain range on their way to the interior of Asia Minor, Acts 13:5.

This desertion set Paul's heart against Mark. When Barnabas and Paul decided on a later missionary journey, Paul refused to take Mark along on the basis of his former desertion, Acts 15:36-39. In fact, Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement over the issue, and they parted ways at that point. Barnabas believed in Mark.

Whatever transpired in the next 10 or 15 years (AD 49 to AD 62), Mark had won himself over to Paul. During Paul's first imprisonment, Mark was there with him, Col. 4:10; Philemon 24. In Philemon (62 AD) Paul calls Mark a fellow worker. In Colossians, Paul reminds the Colossians to welcome Mark if he comes that way. Paul is restoring Mark's reputation to others.

Mark was with Peter in Rome (called Babylon by Peter) 1 Pet. 5:13, and sent his greeting along with Peter's letter. Peter affectionately calls Mark his son.

Mark apparently left Rome shortly after Peter's first epistle (@65 AD), because when Paul is imprisoned a second time at Rome, he calls for Mark, who is with Timothy at Ephesus, 2 Tim. 4:11. Paul calls Mark 'well useful for service'. He considers Mark the deacon type, and finds great favor with him in this role. The word for well useful is *euchrestos*, a very positive and complimentary word.

If Mark obeyed Paul's command, and it is likely he did, then he was present when Paul was executed.

If Mark was there for Paul's execution, then it is equally likely that he was there for Peter's, because they were both martyred at about the same time, and both in Rome.

Mark watched the deaths of these two great believers. He faced death with courage this time, a changed man because of the truth residing in his soul. This is the man who ran at the arrest of Jesus, and who ran in the face of the unknown at the base of the Taurus mountains. Mark was a man who feared, and yet by the grace of God who grew, and then endured. It is extraordinary that he is the one chosen by God the Holy Spirit to put down in writing the gospel as told by Peter, probably just before or just after Peter's death.

Remember Mark next time that you fail! And remember him the next time that you are ready to write someone off!

Peter - Peter's name was also Simon. The testimony of Peter always stands behind the writing of Mark in this epistle.

If there is one character trait of Peter which rises above all others, it is his emotionalism. Peter often let his emotions rule his thinking, much to his detriment and regret.

Peter is enthusiastic, emotional, swift to speak without thinking, full of love and anger, sometimes legalistic and snobbish, and Jewish in a prejudicial way. He is one of the independent, rebellious Galileans. He loves Christ so much, yet he cannot muster the spiritual resources to remain with Him in His arrest, trial, and death.

He is the second to the tomb on the third day, and enters first. He is the first of the disciples to see Christ after the resurrection. He is unsure of his standing with Christ immediately after the resurrection. Peter is a leader and very much a preacher, though not careful about what he says. He makes mistakes, he broods, and then he seeks and needs forgiveness in a desperate emotional way. In the end, he writes two epistles about suffering, and speaks his remembrances of Christ in a brief, but humble manner.

The gospel includes those incidents which place Peter in an unflattering light. In these he is brutally honest about his mistakes.

It excludes those incidents which place Peter in a flattering light.

Peter is an early leader in the church, but fades from the limelight in about 50 AD. Nothing is heard from him until he writes his epistles in the early 60's, and then dictates his gospel story to Mark in the mid-60's.

Probably the best analogy to Peter's early character is a politician on the campaign trail. Always promising, always in the limelight, but never following through.

Circumstances Surrounding the Writing of Mark

The place is Rome, the situation the persecutions of Nero. Paul and Peter are in prison, soon to die at the command of Nero himself.

Mark is there with them. Peter is anxious to tell the story of Christ before he dies, and he does so, dictating to Mark.

It is not clear whether Mark actually composed this gospel before or after Peter's death. It is not im-

portant. This was a really hard time for believers in Jesus Christ, and especially so in Rome.

The Intended Readers of Mark's gospel.

It is most likely that Peter (and Mark) had a Gentile audience in mind. This is especially interesting since Peter began with a prejudice against the Gentiles, and one which was difficult for him to leave behind. It apparently took him more than 20 years to do so. His gospel is devoid of anything that would be offensive to a Gentile, and it does not presuppose an extensive knowledge of the Old Testament.

Also, the Roman audience would have taken priority, since it was the closest.

The purpose of the Gospel of Mark

Mark was written to win converts to Christianity. Mark portrays Christ as a suffering servant. This image fits well the Christians in Rome, and so the Romans would have been well acquainted with it.

To encourage those in Rome who were enduring persecution. Peter always had a heart for those who were suffering. He mentions the persecution of Christ often to encourage those who endured similar sufferings.

The greatest testimony and greatest encouragement for those who suffer is that of Christ.

The greatest testimony for those who are in unbelief is the suffering of Christ.

Remember, this gospel goes out to the very hotbed of the Neronian persecution. It is a voice that rises above the cacophony of persecution and says, "but it is true".

Characteristics of Mark's Gospel

Brevity - it is easily the shortest of the gospels, and conspicuous among the missing are the nativity, the genealogy, and most of Christ's longer discourses.

Action - Peter tells the story as he lived his own life. The story moves at a very fast pace, and its transitions force the narrative into a bang-bang story. The crowds are always pressing, the demons always attacking, miracles constantly being performed. Peter includes action and excludes doctrine. Mark has been called the camera man of the gospel writers for his vivid portrayal of the life of Christ.

Believability - the story is told in simple and even rough language. Peter's Greek lacks perfection, but

it gives the gospel a nice 'I was there' touch that makes it quite vivid and easy to believe. Many minor details are included about Christ and His person. Even the bad things are left in the story.

Centered on Christ as the Son of God and as the servant of man. This would have been a good combination for his Gentile audience. The distinction of servanthood would have been especially appropriate since their Gods were ones who demanded service instead of those who would give it. The contrast would be striking.

Chronological - Apparently, Mark's gospel follows closely the actual chronological order of events in the life of Christ.

The Gospel of Luke

The Author - Luke

God used a Gentile doctor. Luke is mentioned only three times in all of the New Testament, yet he is responsible for 28% of it, for he wrote both his gospel and the book of Acts.

Luke is the only Gentile writer of the New Testament, and probably the only second-generation Christian writer. He was not present at the incarnation.

Luke is most likely Greek. He is an excellent writer and historian. In fact, he is the greatest of the historians of antiquity. He is objective, detailed, and well-informed. He writes clearly and keeps things very well ordered.

Paul calls Luke the beloved physician in Colossians 4:14.

Although there were many charlatans in the ancient world, there were also a number of good and skilled physicians.

Medicine did not go much beyond advanced first aid in the ancient world, but such a service was very valuable.

Luke was probably behind Paul's advice for Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach.

At one point, Luke was the only one with Paul during his imprisonment, 2 Tim 4:11.

Luke would have been a valuable addition to a missionary team, considering the hazards of travel in the ancient world. Considering the number of times that Christians were beaten, stoned, or otherwise injured because of their faith, Luke got to practice his profession often.

Luke was not only the team physician, but he was often active in the evangelistic efforts, Acts 16:13. That Luke was a Gentile meant that he would have been valuable in ministering to other Gentiles. Remember, most of the missionary teams were Jewish, and Paul's ministry at first concentrated on teaching at synagogues.

Circumstances and Target Readership.

Luke wrote in about 66-67 AD He wrote his gospel, and later the Acts of the Apostles, to a man by the name of Theophilus. He probably wrote from somewhere in Greece, maybe even Athens. Little else is known about the circumstances of writing.

Luke addresses Theophilus as "most excellent". This title was often used of those who were in prominent social or political positions. Theophilus was likely such a man. By accepting a book dedicated to him, Theophilus would have followed the ancient tradition of taking responsibility for its publication. We owe our thanks to Theophilus for the preservation of this great gospel.

Luke wanted to produce a gospel for Gentile readers, and it is easy on the Hebraisms and explains Jewish customs and localities. He usually quotes the Old Testament when it is contained in a saying of Christ, but not otherwise. There is little emphasis on the fulfillment of prophecy.

Purpose of the Gospel of Luke

Luke comes right out and says it in chapter 1:4: "so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught."

It is Luke's intent to be precise, and to more fully explain the subjects of which he has already spoken.

Verses 1-3 in the first chapter reveal Luke's motive and method: "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word have handed them down to us, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus,"

Luke wrote for Theophilus, but with the intent that Theophilus would publish this work, and pass it along to many others. Luke's purpose is broad in its scope.

It is apparent that there were many falsehoods and distortions going around about the person and life

of Christ. Luke wants to set the record straight with an exact narrative of the events.

Of course, by getting the record straight, Luke's desire is for evangelism. He wants people to know the truth, and to identify Christ as their savior. Luke has a great emphasis on the cross, and the end of the life of Christ. This reveals his designs for evangelism.

Characteristics of Luke's Gospel

Luke's gospel is much more comprehensive than the others. It begins many months before the other synoptic gospels, and it ends after the ascension. Many details are included here which are not in the others. Luke is a diligent and thorough historian.

Luke concentrates on praise and worship more so than the other gospels. He records the four great nativity songs - Mary's, Zacharias', that of the angels, and Simeon's.

Luke emphasizes the humanity of Christ, and the perfection of that humanity.

Luke stresses that Christ makes salvation available to all men, and not just to Jews. He clearly shows the impact of Christ on the lives of many men, women, and children. Both the rich and poor, the Jew, the Samaritan, and the Gentile are included. Luke often shows this impact as occurring right inside people's homes.

Luke records seven prayers of Jesus Christ which are not mentioned elsewhere.

Luke is literary. He has a remarkably large vocabulary, and uses many different writing styles to fit the situation at hand. His is the best written of the gospels from a literary standpoint. There are 800 words in Luke and Acts which do not occur elsewhere in the New Testament.

Luke is detailed, but not to the point of boring his readers to death. He has a knack for including what is pertinent to the narrative, and leaving behind what is extraneous. Perhaps the powers of observation and diagnosis he developed as a doctor come into play in this regard.

Luke concentrates on the death of Christ. From chapter 9 forward he keeps the thread of Christ's death in the fabric of his narrative.

The Gospel of John

The Author - John

God used a zealot. He was a cousin "according to the flesh" of Jesus Christ. Brother of James (not

the epistle writer). A native of Galilee. John's mother Salome was a follower of Jesus, and ministered to Him of her own means.

John was a fisherman of the Sea of Galilee, his life was hard work, but apparently it had paid off for his family, because they had servants, and were able to support the ministry of Jesus Christ. Galilee was a region somewhat analogous to the U.S. South not too long ago. It is conservative to a fault, and more than a little rebellious in character. The fires of rebellion flamed openly in this region. In reality a lot of senseless violence took place in the name of the zealot movement, but there was very little virtue. This time was somewhat analogous to that of Northern Ireland today.

John had great humility. When John the Baptist points out Jesus as the Messiah, John follows without delay. He never mentions own name in own Gospel.

He was nicknamed, with brother James as the "Sons of Thunder", a reference to their manner in Word and Deed, Mk 3:17. It is likely that they had a fair amount of Zealot ideals in their heads.

He was outspoken about his faith from the start. He was "The disciple whom Jesus loved" - was the closest to Jesus of the inner circle of Peter, James, and John.

He was the only eyewitness to the cross among the disciples, and he was eyewitness to the resurrection, Jn 20.

He was one of the "Pillars of the Church", Gal 2:9. Paul had a high regard for him. He took over as chief of Apostles some time in the late 70's.

His writing reflects the 50+ years of careful thought about the life of Christ and the Christian life.

Under his ministry, Ephesus became the center of the pivot which gave the Roman Empire its greatest time of prosperity under the Antonine Caesars, 98-180 AD

He used very basic Greek grammar to express incredibly deep theological ideas.

He was the key figure in the transition from the pre-canon period to the post canon period.

Circumstances of Writing the Gospel.

John wrote about 20 years after the completion of the synoptic gospels.

The synoptic gospels were written during the Neronian persecutions; John's gospel is written in the

aftermath. The Neronian persecution set the attitude in the Roman Empire. The average Roman at least publicly viewed Christianity and Christians with disdain.

This unpopularity was worse for Christianity than the original persecution. Peer pressure was more effective in weakening Christianity than capital punishment. Martyrs make good PR figures.

At the time of writing, Christianity was much weaker than it had been some twenty years before.

John probably wrote from Ephesus, the place of his later ministry. He had formerly ministered in Jerusalem, but was apparently driven out by Jewish persecution.

John was the last eyewitness to the life of Christ, and he has a desire to retell the story in his own words.

John wrote in a time of transition to the post-canon era of the church age. The temporary spiritual gifts, with all their fantastic abilities, are being left behind.

The Target Audience

If John's Epistles are any indication of the readers of his gospel, he wrote to a crowd that needed to understand the basics of Christianity.

The Christian church had fallen into great disrepair in just twenty years' time. The average Christian did not understand even how to confess his or her sins.

The suffering of the Neronian persecution, and the relentless peer pressure of the pagan Roman citizens had led many believers to seek alternate philosophies which bore the name of Christianity, but which were anything but.

John has an very tough uphill battle to fight with regard to heresy and the truth. The situation was not unlike what we encounter in our nation today.

The Purpose of the Gospel

In John 20:30-31, John communicates his purpose: "Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in his name."

John wants his readers to believe if they are unbelievers, and to grow to maturity if they are believers.

In order to do so, he attempts to establish Jesus as the Son of God and the Messiah (Christ), and re-establish the Word of God as the authority and the Truth.

The Characteristics of the Gospel.

The gospel is very simple in the use of the Greek language and writing style.

John writes about some extremely profound concepts, and he uses many symbols to do so.

John records at least six miracles which are recorded nowhere else in the gospels. He always

designates these as signs.

John's gospel concentrates on events which are not recorded elsewhere. He records Christ's early Galilean ministry, and his upper room discourse.

John concentrates on the words of Christ Himself.

John develops in a fair amount of detail the relationship between the Father and the Son.

John's gospel is like a commentary - he inserts his comments on the narrative many times - interpreting and illuminating the events as they occur.