

The Historical Books of the New Testament

Introduction

As previously mentioned, the New Testament falls into three categories based on their literary makeup—the historical, the epistolary, and the prophetic. The four Gospels make up about 46 percent and the book of Acts raises this to 60 percent. This means 60 percent of the New Testament is directly historical tracing the roots and historical development of Christianity. Christianity is based on historical facts. This is inherent in the very nature of the gospel. Christianity is the message of the gospel and what is a gospel? It is good news, information derived from the witness of others. It is history, the testimony of historical facts. “The gospel is news that something has happened—something that puts a different face upon life. What that something is is told us in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It is the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰ Following this four-fold account, Acts gives the historical account of the extension of the gospel message from Jerusalem, into Judea and Samaria, and to the farthest parts of the earth, into the Gentile world. It begins:

1:1 I wrote the former account (the Gospel of Luke), Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach **1:2** until the day he was taken up to heaven, after he had given orders by the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. **1:3** After his suffering he had also presented himself alive to these apostles by many convincing proofs. He was seen by them over a forty-day period and spoke about matters concerning the kingdom of God.

1:8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the farthest parts of the earth.

Luke is volume one and Acts is volume two of Dr. Luke's treatise about the historical life and ministry of the Savior as begun by the Lord Jesus. This was continued by the Savior through the Holy Spirit working in the life of His apostles following Christ's ascension into heaven. Acts thus provides the historical outline of the apostles' ministry in the life of the early church. This becomes crucial to our understanding of much of what we have in the epistles, which were historical letters written to living people in historical places. The New Testament, then, is a historical book of the Good News of the living God at work in human history, not just in the past, but in the living present and the future in light of the promises of God.

The Synoptic Gospels

Before beginning a survey of each of the Gospels, it might be well to say a bit about the use of the term, *The Synoptic Gospels*. Though each Gospel has its distinct emphasis and purpose, the first three are sometimes referred to as the Synoptic Gospels because they "see together," that is, they have the same point of view with regard to the life of Christ, agreeing in subject matter and order. Further, they also present the life of Christ in a way that complements the picture given in the Gospel of John. The following show a number of areas that are common to each of the first three Gospels:

1. The announcement of the Messiah by John the Baptist ([Matt. 3](#), [Mark 1](#), and [Luke 3](#)).
2. The baptism of Jesus ([Matt. 3](#), [Mark 1](#), and [Luke 3](#)).
3. The temptation of Jesus ([Matt. 4](#), [Mark 1](#), and [Luke 4](#)).
4. The teaching and miracles of Jesus (The major portion of each Gospel).
5. The transfiguration of Jesus ([Matt. 17](#), [Mark 9](#), and [Luke 9](#)).
6. The trial, death, and burial of Jesus ([Matt. 26-27](#), [Mark 14-15](#), [Luke 22-23](#)).
7. The resurrection of Jesus ([Matt. 28](#), [Mark 16](#), [Luke 24](#)).

The Purpose and Distinctive Focus of the Four Gospels

16:13 When Jesus came to the area of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” **16:14** They answered, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” **16:15** He said to them, “And who do you say that I am?” **16:16** Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

[Matthew 16:14](#) gives the four stock answers or schools of thought for a large number of people in Jesus’ day. Only a few at first, a believing remnant, recognized Him for who He really was, the Son of God. Thus, under the inspiration of the Spirit, the Gospel writers set about to reveal just who Jesus really was as to His person and work. In a four-fold way, each with their own distinctive focus, but in accounts that are complementary, the four Gospels answer the questions posed by the Lord to the disciples. They declare just exactly who Jesus is. They show Him to be the Messiah of Old Testament expectation, the Servant of the Lord, the Son of Man, the Son of God, and the one who is the Savior of the World. The Gospels give us God’s portrait of the person and work of Christ with four distinct pictures.

In Sidlow Baxter’s *Explore the Book*, he calls our attention to the interesting similarity between the vision in [Ezekiel 1:10](#) and the Gospels, though he does not suggest the four living creatures were a *type* of the Gospels. He writes:

Most of us, perhaps, are familiar with the parallel which has often been noted between the four Gospels and the four “living creatures” in the opening vision of the prophet Ezekiel. The four “living creatures,” or cherubim, are thus described in [Ezekiel 1:10](#): “As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion, on the right side; and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle.” The lion symbolizes supreme strength, kingship; the man, highest intelligence; the ox, lowly service; the eagle, heavenliness, mystery, Divinity.

In Matthew we see the Messiah-King (the lion).

In Mark we see Jehovah’s Servant (the ox).

In Luke we see the Son of Man (the man).

In John we see the Son of God (the eagle).

It needs all four aspects to give the full truth. As Sovereign He comes to reign and rule. As Servant He comes to serve and suffer. As Son of man He comes to share and sympathise. As Son of God He comes to reveal and redeem.

Wonderful fourfold blending—*sovereignty and humility; humanity and deity!*

11

Matthew addresses his Gospel primarily to the Jews to convince them that Jesus of Nazareth is their Messiah, the King of the Jews. With the genealogy of Jesus, Matthew also uses ten fulfillment quotations by which he seeks to show that this Jesus, though rejected and crucified, is the long-awaited Messiah of the Old Testament ([Matt. 1:23](#); [2:15](#); [2:18](#); [2:23](#); [4:15](#); [8:15](#); [12:18-21](#); [13:35](#); [21:5](#); [27:9-10](#)). But though rejected by the nation as a whole and crucified, the King left an empty tomb.

Mark seems to be addressed to the Romans, a people of action but of few words, and presents Jesus as *the Servant of the Lord* who came “to give His life a ransom for many.” In keeping with this, Mark, the shortest of the Gospels, is vivid, active or lively, and presents a very clear eyewitness account, especially of the last week of Jesus’ life on earth. “A full 37 percent of this Gospel is devoted to the events of His last and most important week.”¹²

Luke, the doctor historian, presents Jesus as the perfect *Son of Man* who came “to seek and to save that which was lost” ([Luke 19:10](#)). Luke strongly stresses the true humanity of Christ while also declaring His deity. Some believe that Luke particularly had the Greeks in mind because of their keen interest in human philosophy.

John immediately (1:1-2) focuses the reader on the deity of Christ by presenting Jesus as the *eternal Son of God* who gives eternal and abundant life to all who would receive Him by believing in Him ([John 1:12](#); [3:16-18](#),

36; 10:10). Though written to all mankind, John's Gospel is especially written to the church. Five chapters record the farewell discourses of Jesus to His disciples to comfort them just a few hours before His death. In addition, seven miraculous signs of Jesus are set forth to demonstrate that Jesus is the Savior and to encourage people everywhere to believe in Him that they might have life ([John 20:30-31](#)).

Matthew

1. AUTHOR AND TITLE:

Each of the Gospels receives its name from the human author who wrote it. Though this first Gospel, as with each of the Gospels, never names its author, the universal testimony of the early church is that the apostle Matthew wrote it, and our earliest textual witnesses attribute it to him by giving it the title, "According to Matthew" (*Kata Matthaion*). Matthew, who was one of the original disciples of Jesus, was a Jew writing to Jews about the One who was their own Messiah. His original name was Levi, the son of Alphaeus. Matthew worked as a publican collecting taxes in Palestine for the Romans until he was called by the Lord to follow Him ([Matt. 9:9, 10](#); [Mark 2:14-15](#)). His quick response may suggest his heart had already been stirred by the ministry of Jesus.

At an early date this gospel was given the title *Kata Matthaion*, "According to Matthew." As this title suggests, other gospel accounts were known at that time (the word *gospel* was added later) ...[13](#)

1. DATE: A.D. 50S OR 60S

Suggestions for the dating of Matthew range from A.D. 40 to A.D. 140, but "the fact that the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 is viewed as an event yet future (24:2) seems to require an earlier date. Some feel that this was the first of the Gospels to be written (about A.D. 50), while others think it was not the first and that it was written in the 60s."[14](#)

1. THEME AND PURPOSE:

As evident in the questions Jesus asked His disciples in 16:14f., Matthew wrote to Jews to answer their questions about Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus had plainly declared that He was their Messiah. Was He really the Old Testament Messiah predicted by the prophets? If so, why did the religious leaders fail to receive Him and why didn't He establish the promised kingdom? Will it ever be established, and if so, when? Thus, Matthew is addressed primarily to a Jewish audience to show them that this Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. This is seen in Jesus' genealogy (1:1-17); the visit of the Magi (2:1-12); His entry into Jerusalem (21:5); the judgment of the nations (25:31-46); the often mentioning of the "kingdom of heaven" as is common with the other Gospels, and in the Old Testament fulfillment quotations mentioned previously.

1. KEY WORDS OR CONCEPT:

Jesus, the Messiah, the King of the Jews.

1. KEY VERSES:

2. 1:20-23. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. 21 And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins." 22 Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, 23 "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD, AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US."
3. 16:15-19. He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 And Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18 And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it. 19 I will give

you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

4. 28:18-20. And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

5. KEY CHAPTERS:

6. Chapter 1 is key in that it introduces the genealogy and birth of Jesus as son of David, son of Abraham, and as one born by the miraculous work of the Spirit, with Joseph being the legal father by adoption, but not the physical father.
7. Chapter 12 is key because in this chapter we see the turning point when the religious leaders formally reject Jesus as their Messiah by attributing His miraculous power to Satan. At this point Jesus began to speak in parables to hide truth from the unresponsive. From this point on more time is given to His disciples.

8. CHRIST AS SEEN IN MATTHEW:

As previously stressed, Matthew’s goal is to demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah of Old Testament expectation. He is the son of Abraham and David. Thus He is the King who comes offering the kingdom. The phrase “the king of heaven” occurs some thirty-two times in this Gospel. Further, to show that this Jesus fulfills expectations of the Old Testament, ten times he specifically stresses that what happened in the life of Jesus fulfills the Old Testament. Further, he uses more Old Testament quotations and allusions than any other book of the New Testament, some 130 times.

1. OUTLINE:

Matthew naturally falls into nine discernible sections:

I.	The Person and Presentation of the King (1:1-4:25)
II.	The Proclamation or Preaching of the King (5:1-7:29)
III.	The Power of the King (8:1-11:1)
IV.	The Program and Progressive Rejection of the King (11:2-16:12)
V.	The Pedagogy and Preparation of the King's Disciples (16:13-20:28)
VI.	The Presentation of the King (20:29-23:39)
VII.	The Predictions or Prophecies of the King (24:1-25:46)
VIII.	The Passion or Rejection of the King (26:1-27:66)
IX.	The Proof of the King (28:1-20)

Mark

1. AUTHOR AND TITLE:

Mark's Gospel is actually anonymous since it does not name its author. The Greek title, *Kata Markon*, "According to Mark" was added later by a scribe sometime before A.D. 125, but there is strong and clear evidence (external and internal) that Mark was its author. "The unanimous testimony of the early church fathers is that Mark, an associate of the apostle Peter, was the author."¹⁵ In A.D. 112, Papias cited Mark as "the interpreter of Peter." Dunnett points out, "A comparison of Peter's sermon in [Acts 10:36-43](#) with

Mark's Gospel shows the former to be an outline of the life of Jesus which Mark has given in much greater detail."¹⁶

Though Mark was not one of the original disciples of Christ, he was the son of Mary, a woman of wealth and position in Jerusalem ([Acts 12:12](#)), a companion of Peter ([1 Pet. 5:13](#)), and the cousin of Barnabas ([Col. 4:10](#)). These associations, especially his association with Peter who was evidently Mark's source of information, gave apostolic authority to Mark's Gospel. Since Peter spoke of him as "Mark, my son," ([1 Pet. 5:13](#)), Peter may have been the one who led Mark to Christ.

In addition, he was also a close associate of Paul. Ryrie writes:

He had the rare privilege of accompanying Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey but failed to stay with them through the entire trip. Because of this, Paul refused to take him on the second journey, so he went with Barnabas to Cyprus ([Acts 15:38-40](#)). About a dozen years later he was again with Paul ([Col. 4:10](#); [Philem. 24](#)), and just before Paul's execution he was sent for by the apostle ([2 Tim. 4:11](#)). His biography proves that one failure in life does not mean the end of usefulness.¹⁷

1. DATE: A.D. 50S OR 60S

The dating of Mark is somewhat difficult, though many scholars believe this Gospel was the first of the four Gospels. Unless one rejects the element of predictive prophecy, [13:2](#) clearly shows that Mark was written before A.D. 70 and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Ryrie points out:

In fact, if Acts must be dated about A.D. 61, and if Luke, the companion volume, preceded it, then Mark must be even earlier, since Luke apparently used Mark in writing his gospel. This points to a date in the 50s for Mark. However, many scholars believe that Mark was not written until after Peter died; i.e., after 67 but before 70.¹⁸

1. THEME AND PURPOSE:

The theme of Mark is ‘Christ the Servant.’ This thrust is brought in 10:45, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give His life a ransom for many.” A careful reading of Mark shows how the two themes of this verse, *service* and *sacrifice*, are unfolded by Mark. Mark is addressed primarily to the Roman or Gentile reader. As a result, the genealogy of Jesus is omitted along with the Sermon on the Mount and the condemnations by the religious leaders receive less attention. Also, since Mark presents Jesus as the Worker, the Servant of the Lord, the book focuses on the activity of Christ as a faithful Servant effectively going about His work. This focus seems evident by Mark’s style as seen in his use of the Greek *euqus*, “immediately, at once,” or “then, so then,” which occurs some 42 times in this Gospel. Its meaning varies from the sense of immediacy as in 1:10, to that of logical order (“in due course, then”; cf. 1:21 [“when”]; 11:3 [“shortly”]).¹⁹ Another illustration of this active focus is Mark’s prominent use of the historic present to describe a past event, which was evidently done for vividness.

1. KEY WORD:

Servant, Servant of the Lord.

1. KEY VERSES:

2. 8:34-37. Then Jesus called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “If anyone wants to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and the gospel will save it. What advantage is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? What can a person give in exchange for his soul?”
3. 10:43-45. “But it is not this way among you. But whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

4. KEY CHAPTERS:

5. Chapter 8 forms a key chapter in Mark, much like chapter 12 in Matthew, because here there is a change in both the content and course of the ministry of Jesus. The pivotal event that brings about the change is the confession of Peter, “You are the Christ (the Messiah)” (8:29). This is followed immediately by a warning that they should tell no one, the revelation of His death, the call to discipleship, and the transfiguration.

That faith-inspired response triggers a new phase in both the content and the course of Jesus’ ministry. Until this point He has sought to validate His claims as Messiah. But now He begins to fortify His men for His forthcoming suffering and death at the hands of the religious leaders. Jesus’ steps begin to take Him daily closer to Jerusalem—the place where the Perfect Servant will demonstrate the full extent of His servanthood.²⁰

1. CHRIST AS SEEN IN MARK:

Of course, Mark’s contribution especially centers on presenting the Savior as the Sacrificing Servant who gives His life obediently for the ransom of many. The focus is clearly on His ministry to the physical and spiritual needs of others always putting them before His own needs. This emphasis on the Savior’s servant activity is seen in the following:

Only eighteen out of Christ’s seventy parables are found in Mark—some of these are only one sentence in length—but he lists over half of Christ’s thirty-five miracles, the highest proportion in the Gospels.²¹

1. OUTLINE:

With the theme of the book being that of *Christ the Servant*. The key verse, 10:45, provides the key for two natural divisions of the Gospel: the Servant’s *service* (1:1-10:52) and the Servant’s *sacrifice* (11:1-16:20). We can divide this into five simple sections:

I.	The Preparation of the Servant for Service (1:1-13)
II.	The Preaching of the Servant in Galilee (1:14-9:50)
III.	The Preaching of the Servant in Perea (10:1-52)
IV.	The Passion of the Servant in Jerusalem (11:1-15:47)
V.	The Prosperity of the Servant in Resurrection (16:1-20)

Luke

1. AUTHOR AND TITLE:

Both Luke and Acts, which are addressed to Theophilus as a two-volume work, are attributed to Luke, and while Luke is nowhere named as the author of either, a great deal of evidence points to Luke, “the beloved physician” ([Col. 4:14](#)) as the author of both books. Significantly, these two books make up about 28 percent of the Greek New Testament. The only places where we find his name in the New Testament are [Colossians 4:14](#); [2 Timothy 4:11](#); and [Philemon 24](#). It is also believed that Luke referred to himself in the “we” sections of Acts (16:10-17; 20:5-21:18; 27:1-28:16). These “we” sections of Acts show that the author was a close associate and traveling companion of Paul. Since all but two of Paul’s associates are named in the third person, the list can be narrowed to Titus and Luke.

By process of elimination, Paul’s “dear friend Luke, the doctor” ([Col 4:14](#)), and “fellow worker” ([Phm 24](#)) becomes the most likely candidate. His authorship is supported by the uniform testimony of early Christian writings (e.g., the Muratorian Canon, A.D. 170, and the works of Irenaeus, c. 180).²²

It seems evident from [Colossians 4:10-14](#) that Luke was a Gentile for there Paul differentiates him from the Jews. Here the apostle states that, of his fellow-workers, Aristarchus, Mark, and John were the only ones who were Jews. This suggest that Epaphras, Luke, and Demas, also mentioned in these verses, were Gentiles, not Jews. “Luke’s obvious skill with the Greek language and his phrase “their own language” in [Acts 1:19](#) also imply that he was not Jewish.”²³

We know nothing about his early life or conversion except that he was not an eyewitness of the life of Jesus Christ ([Luke 1:2](#)). Though a physician by profession, he was primarily an evangelist, writing this gospel and the book of Acts and accompanying Paul in missionary work ... He was with Paul at the time of the apostle’s martyrdom ([2 Tim. 4:11](#)), but of his later life we have no certain facts.²⁴

1. DATE: A.D. 60

Two commonly suggested periods for dating the Gospel of Luke are: (1) A.D. 59-63, and (2) the 70s or the 80s, but the conclusion of Acts shows us that Paul was in Rome, and since Luke is the former treatise, written before Acts ([Acts 1:1](#)), the Gospel of Luke must have been written in the earlier period, around A.D. 60. However, suggesting that Luke’s Gospel received its final form in Greece and not in Rome, some have suggested A.D. 70.

1. THEME AND PURPOSE:

The purpose of Luke is clearly stated in the prologue of his Gospel.

1:1-4 Now many have undertaken to compile an account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, **1:2** like the accounts passed on to us by those who were eyewitnesses and servants of the word from the beginning. **1:3** So it seemed good to me as well, because I have followed all things carefully from the beginning, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, **1:4** so that you may have certainty regarding the things you were taught.

Several things need to be noticed regarding his approach to presenting the gospel:

Luke states that his own work was stimulated by the work of others (1:1), that he consulted eyewitnesses (1:2), and that he sifted and arranged the information (1:3) under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to instruct Theophilus in the historical reliability of the faith (1:4). This is a carefully researched and documented writing.²⁵

As a Gentile, Luke must have felt responsible to write his two-volume account of the life of Christ so it would be available to Gentile readers. This seems evident from the fact that Luke “translates Aramaic terms with Greek words and explains Jewish customs and geography to make his Gospel more intelligible to his original Greek readership.”²⁶

Luke, written by the “the beloved physician,” is the most comprehensive and longest of the Gospels. It presents the Savior as the Son of Man, the Perfect Man who came to seek and save the lost (19:10). In Matthew we see Jesus as Son of David, Israel’s King; in Mark we see Him as the Lord’s Servant, serving others; in Luke we see Him as the Son of Man, meeting man’s needs, a perfect man among men, chosen from men, tested among men, and supremely qualified to be the Savior and High Priest. In Matthew we see groupings of significant events, in Mark we see the snapshots of significant events, but in Luke we see more details of these events by the physician/historian.

His perfect human nature as the Son of Man, yet also Son of God, is brought out by the following:

1. His physical birth with his genealogy traced all the way back to Adam (3:38) (Matthew goes back only to Abraham).
2. His mental development is stressed in 2:40-52.

3. His moral and spiritual perfection is also stressed as evidenced at His baptism by the voice of the Father from heaven and by the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

So in Jesus we have One who is perfect manhood—physically, mentally, and spiritually.

1. KEY WORD:

Jesus, the Son of Man.

1. KEY VERSES:

2. 1:1-4 Now many have undertaken to compile an account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, 1:2 like the accounts passed on to us by those who were eyewitnesses and servants of the word from the beginning. 1:3 So it seemed good to me as well, because I have followed all things carefully from the beginning, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 1:4 so that you may have certainty regarding the things you were taught.
3. 19:10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

4. KEY CHAPTERS:

Chapter 15. In view of the theme stressed in 19:10, the emphasis on ‘seeking’ in the three parables of chapter 15 (the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son) makes this a key chapter in Luke’s Gospel.

1. CHRIST AS SEEN IN LUKE:

The humanity and compassion of Jesus are repeatedly stressed in Luke’s Gospel. Luke gives the most complete account of Christ’s ancestry, birth, and development. He is the ideal Son of Man who identified with the sorrow and plight of sinful man in order to carry our sorrows and offer us the priceless gift of salvation. Jesus alone fulfills the Greek ideal of human perfection.²⁷

1. OUTLINE:

I.	The Prologue: The Method and Purpose of Writing (1:1-4)
II.	The Identification of the Son of Man with Men (1:1-4:13)
III.	The Ministry of the Son of Man to Men (4:14-9:50)
IV.	The Rejection of the Son of Man by Men (9:51-19:44)
V.	The Suffering of the Son of Man for Men (19:45-23:56)
VI.	The Authentication (by resurrection) of the Son of Man Before Men (24:1-53)

John

1. AUTHOR AND TITLE:

From early in the second century, church tradition has attributed the fourth Gospel to John the apostle, son of Zebedee and brother of James. Jesus named John and James, “Sons of Thunder” ([Mark 3:17](#)). Salome, his mother, served Jesus in Galilee and was present at His crucifixion ([Mark 15:40-41](#)). He was not only close to Jesus as one of the Twelve, but he is usually identified as “the beloved disciple” (13:23; 18:15, 16; 19:26-27), was one of the inner circle and one of three Christ took with Him to the Mount of Transfiguration ([Matt. 17:1](#)). He was also closely associated with Peter. After the ascension of Christ, John became one whom Paul identified as the “pillars” of the church ([Gal. 2:9](#)).

In the strict sense of the term, the fourth Gospel is anonymous. No name of its author is given in the text. This is not surprising because a gospel differs in

literary form from an epistle (letter). The letters of Paul each begin with his name, which was the normal custom of letter writers in the ancient world. None of the human authors of the four Gospels identified himself by name. But that does not mean one cannot know who the authors were. An author may indirectly reveal himself within the writing, or his work may be well known in tradition as coming from him.

Internal evidence supplies the following chain of connections regarding the author of the Fourth Gospel. (1) In [John 21:24](#) the word “them” refers to the whole Gospel, not to just the last chapter. (2) “The disciple” in 21:24 was “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (21:7). (3) From 21:7 it is certain that the disciple whom Jesus loved was one of seven persons mentioned in 21:2 (Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, the two sons of Zebedee, and two unnamed disciples). (4) “The disciple whom Jesus loved” was seated next to the Lord at the Last Supper, and Peter motioned to him (13:23-24). (5) He must have been one of the Twelve since only they were with the Lord at the Last Supper (cf. [Mark 14:17](#); [Luke 22:14](#)). (6) In the Gospel, John was closely related to Peter and thus appears to be one of the inner three (cf. [John 20:2-10](#); [Mark 5:37-38](#); [9:2-3](#); [14:33](#)). Since James, John’s brother, died in the year A.D. 44, he was not the author ([Acts 12:2](#)). (7) “The other disciple” ([John 18:15-16](#)) seems to refer to the “disciple whom Jesus loved” since he is called this in 20:2. (8) The “disciple whom Jesus loved” was at the cross (19:26), and 19:35 seems to refer to him. (9) The author’s claim, “We have seen His glory” (1:14), was the claim of someone who was an eyewitness (cf. [1 John 1:1-4](#)).

Putting all of these facts together makes a good case for the author of the Fourth Gospel having been John, one of the sons of a fisherman named Zebedee.²⁸

1. DATE: A.D. 85-90

Some critics have sought to place the dating of John well into the second century (about A.D. 150), but a number of factors have proven this false.

Archeological finds supporting the authenticity of the text of John (e.g., [John 4:11](#); [5:2-3](#)), word studies (e.g., [synchronai](#), [4:9](#)), manuscript discoveries (e.g., [P52](#)), and the Dead Sea Scrolls have given powerful support to an early dating for John. So it is common today to find nonconservative scholars arguing for a date as early as A.D. 45-66. An early date is possible. But this Gospel has been known in the church as the “Fourth” one, and the early church fathers believed that it was written when John was an old man. Therefore a date between 85 and 95 is best. [John 21:18, 23](#) require the passing of some time, with Peter becoming old and John outliving him.²⁹

1. THEME AND PURPOSE:

Probably more than any other book of the Bible, John clearly states the theme and purpose of his Gospel. Significantly, this statement of purpose follows Thomas’ encounter with the resurrected Savior. If you recall, Thomas had doubted the reality of the resurrection ([John 20:24-25](#)). Immediately after this the Lord appeared to the disciples and addressed Thomas with these words, “Put your finger here, and examine my hands. Extend your hand and put it into my side. Do not continue in your unbelief, but believe.” Thomas then declared, “My Lord and my God!” The Lord then said to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are the people who have not seen and yet have believed.” It is following this exchange and the focus on the need of believing in Jesus that John gives us the theme and statement of purpose:

20:30 Now Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples that are not recorded in this book. **20:31** But these are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

In keeping with this statement of purpose, John selected seven sign-miracles to reveal the person and mission of Christ that it might bring people to believe in Jesus as Savior. The term used of these miracles is *shmeion*, “a sign, a distinguishing mark,” and then “a sign consisting of a miracle, a wonder, something contrary to nature.” John always refers to Jesus’ miracles by this term because *shmeion* emphasized the significance of the action rather

than the miracle (see, e.g., 4:54; 6:14; 9:16; 11:47). These signs revealed Jesus' glory (see 1:14; cf. [Isa 35:1-2](#); [Joel 3:18](#); [Am 9:13](#)). These seven signs consisted of the following: (1) the turning of water into wine (2:1-11); (2) the cure of the nobleman's son (4:46-54); (3) the cure of the paralytic (5:1-18); (4) the feeding of the multitude (6:6-13); (5) the walking on the water (6:16-21); (6) the giving of sight to the blind (9:1-7); and (7) the raising of Lazarus (11:1-45).

John's special theme and purpose is also easily discerned by the distinctive nature of his Gospel when compared to Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

When one compares the Gospel of John with the other three Gospels, he is struck by the distinctiveness of John's presentation. John does not include Jesus' genealogy, birth, baptism, temptation, casting out of demons, parables, transfiguration, instituting of the Lord's Supper, His agony in Gethsemane, or His Ascension. John's presentation of Jesus stresses His ministry in Jerusalem, the feasts of the Jewish nation, Jesus' contacts with individuals in private conversations (e.g., chaps. 3-4; 18:28-19:16), and His ministry to His disciples (chaps. 13-17). The major body of the Gospel is contained in a "Book of Signs" (2:1-12:50) which embraces seven miracles or "signs" which proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. This "Book of Signs" also contains great discourses of Jesus which explain and proclaim the significance of the signs. For example, following the feeding of the 5,000 (6:1-15), Jesus revealed Himself as the Bread of Life which the heavenly Father gives for the life of the world (6:25-35). Another notable and exclusive feature of the Fourth Gospel is the series of "I am" statements that were made by Jesus (cf. 6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5).

The distinctiveness of this Gospel must be kept in perspective. The Gospels were not intended as biographies. Each Gospel writer selected from a much larger pool of information the material which would serve his purpose. It has been estimated that if all the words from the lips of Jesus cited in Matthew, Mark, and Luke were read aloud, the amount of time taken would be only about three hours ...[30](#)

1. KEY WORDS:

The key concept in John is *Jesus, the Son of God*, the one who is the *Logos*, the very revelation of God ([John 1:1, 14, 18](#)). But there are a number of other key words in the presentation of Christ like *truth, light, darkness, word, knowledge, believe, abide, love, world, witness*, and *judgment*. The verb *believe* (Greek, *pisteuw*) occurs 98 times in this Gospel. The noun, “faith” (Greek, *pistis*) does not occur.

1. KEY VERSES:

2. 1:11-13. He came to what was his own, but his own people did not receive him. But to all who have received him—those who believe in his name—he has given the right to become God’s children—children not born by human parents or by human desire or a husband’s decision, but by God.
3. 1:14. Now the Word became flesh and took up residence among us. We saw his glory—the glory of the one and only full of grace and truth, who came from the Father.
4. 3:16. For this is the way God loved the world: he gave his one and only Son that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
5. 20:30-31. Now Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples that are not recorded in this book. But these are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

6. KEY CHAPTERS:

7. It is difficult to choose a key chapter in John’s Gospel, but surely the Lord’s conversation with Nicodemus in chapter 3 rates as one of the key chapters. [John 3:16](#) is perhaps quoted more than any other verse in the Bible. Also important in this chapter are the words of the Savior regarding the need to be born again or from above (see 3:3-6).
8. Other key chapters are [John 4](#), the encounter with the woman at the well, the discourses with the disciples preparing them for His absence, [John 13-16](#), and the Lord’s prayer to the Father in [John 17](#).

9. CHRIST AS SEEN IN JOHN:

While the deity of Christ is a prominent theme in the Bible in many places, there is no book that presents a more powerful case for the deity of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God than does this Gospel. The fact is that one who is identified as “The man called Jesus” (9:11) is also called “God, the One and Only” (1:18 NIV), “Christ, the Son of the Living God” (6:69 KJV) or “the Holy One of God” (6:69 NIV, NASB, NET).

This declaration of the deity of Jesus Christ is further developed by seven “I AM” statements made by Jesus and recorded in John’s Gospel. These seven statements are: I am the bread of life (6:35), I am the light of the world (8:12), I am the gate (10:7, 9), I am the good shepherd (10:11, 14), I am the resurrection and the life (11:25), I am the way, the truth, and the life (14:6), I am the true vine (15:1, 5).

Another distinctive of John’s Gospel, again focusing on the person of Christ, are the five witnesses that witness to Jesus as the Son of God. In [John 5:31f.](#), Jesus is responding to the arguments of His opponents. They were claiming that His witness was without other witnesses to corroborate His testimony, but Jesus shows that is not true and proceeds to remind them that there are other witnesses to the validity of His claims: there is His Father (vv. 32, 37), there is John the Baptist (v. 33), His miracles (v. 36), the Scriptures (v. 39), and Moses (v. 46). Later, in 8:14 He declares that His witness is indeed true.

... On certain occasions, Jesus equates Himself with the Old Testament “I AM,” or Yahweh (see 4:25-26; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5-6, 8). Some of the most crucial affirmations of His deity are found here (1:1; 8:58; 10:30; 14:9; 20:28).[31](#)

1. OUTLINE:

I. The Prologue: The Incarnation of the Son of God (1:1-18)

1. A. The Deity of Christ (1:1-2)

B. The Preincarnate Work of Christ (1:3-5)

C. The Forerunner of Christ (1:6-8)

D. The Rejection of Christ (1:9-11)

E. The Acceptance of Christ (1:12-13)

F. The Incarnation of Christ (1:14-18)

2. II. The Presentation of the Son of God (1:19-4:54)

1. A. By John the Baptist (1:19-34)

B. To John's Disciples (1:35-51)

C. At the Wedding in Cana (2:1-11)

D. At the Temple in Jerusalem (2:12-25)

E. To Nicodemus (3:1-21)

F. By John the Baptist (3:22-36)

G. To the Samaritan Woman (4:1-42)

H. To an Official of Capernaum (4:43-54)

3. III. The Opposition to the Son of God (5:1-12:50)

1. A. At the Feast in Jerusalem (5:1-47)

B. During the Time of the Passover in Galilee (6:1-71)

C. At the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem (7:1-10:21)

D. At the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem (10:22-42)

E. At Bethany (11:1-12:11)

F. At Jerusalem (12:12-50)

4. IV. The Instruction by the Son of God (13:1-16:33)

1. A. Concerning Forgiveness (13:1-20)

B. Concerning His Betrayal (13:21-30)

C. Concerning His Departure (13:31-38)

D. Concerning Heaven (14:1-14)

E. Concerning the Holy Spirit (14:15-26)

F. Concerning Peace (14:27-31)

G. Concerning Fruitfulness (15:1-17)

H. Concerning the World (15:18-16:6)

I. Concerning the Holy Spirit (16:7-15)

J. Concerning His Return (16:16-33)

5. V. The Intercession of the Son of God (17:1-26)

VI. The Crucifixion of the Son of God (18:1-19:42)

VII. The Resurrection of the Son of God (20:1-31)

1. A. The Empty Tomb (20:1-9)

B. The Appearances of the Risen Lord (20:10-31)

6. VIII. The Epilogue: The Appearance by the Lake (21:1-25)

1. A. The Appearance to the Seven Disciples (21:1-14)

B. The Words to Peter (21:15-23)

C. The Conclusion of the Gospel (21:24-25)