



Introduction to the New Testament

Between the Testaments; New Testament
Backgrounds and Documents

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Introduction

Before we start a study of the New Testament, it's helpful to understand something about the books themselves, their background and authorship, audiences, and documents. But first, we'll begin with a quick summary of what happened between the Old and New Testaments.

This introduction is only a summary of the issues; the interested reader is invited to pursue additional reading in the bibliography at the end.

Between the Testaments

Between the time of Malachi, the last prophet in the Old Testament, and John the Baptist, the first prophet in the New Testament, was roughly half a century. During that time, the Jews underwent dramatic changes in their culture, language, religion, and even holidays. The Jews of Malachi's day were very different from the ones we see Jesus interacting with in the gospels. What happened in between is what is briefly discussed below.

The main sources for knowing what went on in this period are:

- Josephus, a first century AD Jewish historian who wrote in detail about this period of time.
- Apocryphal and pseudepigraphal books written during this time.
- The Dead Sea scrolls.
- Some contemporary histories of Greeks, Romans, and others.

Alexander the Great and Hellenization

Born in 356 BC, Alexander was the son of Philip II of Macedon, who united the Greeks. His father's goal was to conquer Persia, who had twice conquered Greece, but Philip died in 336 BC before he could achieve that, so Alexander took up his father's goal. Through military and political genius, he more than exceeded it, conquering everything between Greece and India, including Egypt and Judah. In the midst of these great victories, he died of an illness in 323 BC. He was 33 years old.

His conquest brought about not only the end of the Persian empire, but also the spread of Greek culture throughout that entire part of the world. Called "Hellenization" (Hellas is the name for "Greece" in Greek), much of the world adopted Greek language, arts, philosophy, and military practices. This impacted even little Judah. Results included the splitting of Judaism into factions who supported or disdained Hellenism at various levels; many people in Judah learning to speak Greek; the translation of the scriptures into Greek; and a rebellion to throw off Greek rule and culture.

The Maccabees and Hasmoneans

Alexander's successors split his kingdom into four parts, two of which impacted Judah directly. The Seleucids ruled in Syria, north of Judah, and the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt. At first the Ptolemies ruled Judah, and many Jews flocked to Egypt to live, so much that there were soon over a million Jews just in Alexandria (many times more than in Judah itself). Because most of these Jews spoke Greek, not Hebrew, they translated the scriptures into Greek for their own use. Today called the Septuagint (see below), it included many writings not in the Hebrew Old Testament today. Today we call these writings the 'Apocrypha,' which means 'hidden writings.'

In 198 BC, Antiochus III took control of Judah from the Ptolemies. He was welcomed to the territory, granting them freedom to worship as they pleased. However, after he was killed in 187 BC, his successor, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (meaning ‘God manifest’) determined to stamp out the Jewish religion. He made it illegal to be a Jew, forced people to eat pork or die, and defiled the temple by offering pigs on the altar and turning it into a house of Zeus.

In response to these actions, a family under the leadership of Mattathias of Modiin, started a guerilla campaign against the Greeks to drive them out. In 167 BC, they first took control of Modiin, then gathered supporters and began fighting all across the land. When Mattathias died in about 165 BC, his son Judas, nicknamed Maccabaeus (meaning ‘hammer’), took over leadership and drove the Greeks from Jerusalem and the temple. They restored the temple and rededicated it in December 164 BC. Later the Jews celebrated that day by the Feast of Dedication, or Chanukkah, sometimes also called the Festival of Lights.

The family started a dynasty that lasted more than 100 years, and was named after their ancestor, Hasmoneus. They quickly moved away from their faithful Jewish stance into one of political intrigue and power, assuming both the offices of king and high priest. But their rule was the first independent Jewish rule since the days of Josiah (640 BC), and the last, as it turned out. Their story is told in the apocryphal books, 1 and 2 Maccabees.

The Romans and the Herods

During this time, a new nation in the west had been rising to power—Rome. The Maccabees had reached out and made an alliance with Rome in 164, 143, and 139 BC. Toward the end of the Hasmonean period, two brothers, Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II, struggled for control. Both called upon Rome, and Pompey came, having just taken over what was left of the Seleucid empire. Siding with Hyrcanus, Pompey’s army attacked Aristobulus’ followers in Jerusalem, killing thousands in the city and even the temple courtyards. In his victory, Pompey walked right into the temple itself, including the Holy of Holies. Disappointed to find it empty, he then ordered the priests to cleanse it and continue their sacrifices. But after that day (63 BC), the Jews were under Roman rule, and continued until Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70.

One of Hyrcanus’ advisors was Antipater, a wealthy Idumean. Idumea had been forcibly converted to Judaism under the Hasmonean rule about 120 BC, so Antipater was a Jew, but in name only. Antipater, with his Nabatean royal wife, had a son named Herod, who married a Hasmonean princess, Mariamne (he had 10 wives total). Due to his father’s influence, Herod was appointed governor in Galilee at the age of twenty-five. His leadership was admired by Jews and Romans alike. When his father was killed by an enemy, Herod established himself as indispensable to Hyrcanus. When attacked, Herod fled to Rome where Mark Anthony appointed him king of Judea. Returning to Judah, he established himself firmly by killing rivals, even in his own family, and putting down all rebellions. He launched a massive building campaign, not only remodeling and greatly enlarging the temple, but many other huge projects as well, including Masada, Ceasarea, Herodium, and a host of aqueducts, theaters, palaces, walls, and more.

It was Herod who met the wise men of Jesus’ infancy, just as he was dying of a horrible disease. His last act was to order the execution of Jewish leaders throughout the country so that people would actually mourn when he died. Fortunately, it was not carried out. His sons inherited his kingdom, one of which is the Herod mentioned during the time of Jesus.

Scriptures and Writings

One striking thing about this period of time which was only really appreciated in recent years, was the amount of flux in what was considered scripture by various groups of Jews. Many scriptural traditions have now come down to us, as well as many writings which may not have been considered scripture but which were significant to the time.

Septuagint

Legend has it that during the time of Ptolemy II (283-246 BC), he brought together seventy-two Jewish scholars to translate the Hebrew scriptures into Greek, the language spoken by most Jews in his Egyptian kingdom. Each of them miraculously produced identical translations of the Pentateuch (books of Moses). The resulting book is today called the Septuagint, which is Greek for 'seventy.'

The Septuagint (abbreviated LXX) contained the books that we have in our Old Testament today, plus a number of other books. These books are now called the Apocrypha by Protestants, though Catholics and Eastern Churches consider them scripture as much as the books in the western Old Testament.

For Christians, the greatest impact of the LXX was that it allowed the Jewish scriptures to be easily known among the Greek-speaking Gentile converts made by Paul and others. A comparison of the Hebrew text and the LXX shows that Paul nearly always quoted from the latter. Indeed, when the first Bibles were being compiled by Christians, they were all in Greek.

Dead Sea Scrolls

First discovered in 1947, this collection of hundreds of scrolls and scroll fragments are the oldest copies of the Hebrew scriptures in existence, pre-dating previous manuscripts by about 1,000 years. But many of the scrolls are not what we consider scripture today. Some of them talk about rebuilding a great temple, some cover the rules of their community, and some give directions to buried treasure (never found). Some of the scrolls are intact and nearly complete, such as the Great Isaiah Scroll or the Temple Scroll. Others are minute fragments, some smaller than a postage stamp. Scholars have painstakingly reassembled as many fragments as they can, and the translations of these scrolls into English is readily available.

The scrolls teach us much about the beliefs of many Jews just before and after the time of Christ, when they were written. They show better than anything the openness of the canon in those days, as the owners of the scrolls produced and valued what are today non-Biblical scrolls as much as the ones we treasure as scripture. They give us different textual traditions, such as a dramatically shorter book of Jeremiah, and many minor details and changes when compared to our present day Hebrew Bible. And the scrolls tell us much about the social and religious life of the people of that time.

Samaritan Pentateuch

The Samaritans rejected the full scriptures as accepted by most Jews. Instead, they focused on the five books of Moses, called by their Greek name *Pentateuch* ('five rolls'). Because their worship tradition shifted north to Samaria, their scriptures reflected that change, and the Samaritan books of Moses speak of worshipping on Mt. Gerizim and of the leadership of Manasseh and Ephraim (the dominant northern tribes). Samaritans still today offer animal sacrifices and keep the laws of Moses, as defined in their scriptures.

Other writings

Starting with Ezra, the custom of commenting on scriptures after reading them began. This activity, called *targum* which means 'translation,' became the basis for synagogue worship and Jewish teaching of the scriptures that has survived even to our day. After the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, rabbis began to write down these scriptural commentaries, and two books were born: the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud*, both collections of the interpretations of the scriptures and Jewish law by leading rabbis.

Pseudepigraphal ('falsely attributed writings') works in many forms come down to us from this intertestamental period of time. These are books like the Book of Enoch, the Testament of Levi, and many more. Many of these books were only found in translations, such as Ethiopic or Syriac, but then many were discovered in Hebrew among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

New Testament Organization

The books of the New Testament are grouped in a very logical order. First are the four gospels—the accounts of Jesus’ mortal life and ministry. A large portion of each of the four books recounts on the Passion narratives—Jesus’ trial, crucifixion, death—and his triumphant resurrection. We’ll discuss more about these four books below.

Next comes the Acts of the Apostles, which largely focuses on two: Peter and Paul. Traditionally attributed to Luke, this account is the best source on the early Church’s activities, struggles, and people.

Acts is followed by thirteen letters (epistles) ascribed to Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. Each of these letters is either written to a group of Church members in a city or local geography, or to an individual. The fourteenth letter in this group is Hebrews, whose authorship is unknown.

The fourth group of books is referred to as the General Epistles, because they are written to the Church as a whole and not to a specific congregation or audience. These includes James, both Peter books, the three books from John, and Jude.

Finally, is the book of Revelation, written by John on the isle of Patmos. This unique apocalyptic vision offers a vision of the actions of God and Christ among the Church member and the world from the time of John to our day and beyond.

As we study each of these books in the coming weeks, we’ll discuss the background, authorship, and other relevant details, as we understand them, about each. In this introductory lesson, we’ll look at some New Testament text and transmission issues, and give an overview of the four gospels to set the stage for a deeper study of these four books, which will occupy more than half of our class schedule.

New Testament Transmission

Joseph Smith had a high view of the Bible. He quoted from it frequently in his sermons and teachings, its language influenced the language of his own revelations dramatically, and he spent three years in a careful study of every word in the Bible, seeking by the Spirit for greater understanding to improve the text as we have it in the King James Version, used in the Joseph’s day and in the Church today. Still, the Prophet had a perspective on the Bible that was progressive for his time and reflects a keen understanding of Biblical transmission and translation issues.

In one of the articles of faith he wrote to John Wentworth in 1842, he stated that Latter-day Saints “believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly” (Article of Faith 8). Since he had produced his own translation of the Bible, he had labored with that issue, and had gained great insight into what was a good translation and what was not. He used his own translation in his sermons and teachings, and it substantially informed his own revelations and understanding of the gospel. Indeed, Joseph Smith’s effort to translate the Bible was in large measure his personal divine tutorial on how to be a prophet and lead the latter-day Church.¹

He also understood that there were transmission issues with Biblical texts and that what we have today were not the originals. Said he, “There is a grand distinction between the actual meaning of the prophets and the present translation.”² Getting back to the original text of the Bible was one of his goals: “I believe

¹ David A. LeFevre, “The Education of a Prophet: The Role of the New Translation of the Bible in the Life of Joseph Smith,” in Craig James Ostler, Michael Hubbard MacKay, and Barbara Morgan Gardner, *Foundations of the Restoration*. Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2016.

² Discourse, 8 April 1843, as Reported by William Clayton—B, 3; also TPJS, 291.

the Bible as it read when it came from the pen of the original writers; ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupts priests have committed many errors.”³

New Testament Manuscripts

The New Testament did not start as a book as we have it now but as individual writings by various authors who were writing for specific purposes and audiences. There are some important concepts to know about these manuscripts and how they led to the current text of the New Testament as we have it today.

The first concept is something that many don't think about: we have no autographs (original documents) from the New Testament (or the Old Testament, for that matter). We might like to think that somewhere, in a library or vault, we could go find a letter written by Paul or the original gospel from Matthew, but that just isn't the case. All we have are copies, and in many cases the oldest copies are decades or even centuries after the originals were written. A big part of Biblical scholarship is taking these copies and trying to get back to the original text, using various scholarly techniques, referred to overall as textual criticism.

The oldest New Testament manuscripts are written in Greek on papyrus, usually in a very fragmented state, written in capital Greek letters (such as ΙΕΣΟΥΣ which is IESOUS or Jesus). Then next oldest are called uncials, which are typically in book form and written on parchment (animal skins) using a mixed case Greek (Ιεουου or Jesus). These earliest manuscripts are written without spaces or punctuation of any kind, like this:

INTHEBEGINNINGWASTHEWORDANDTHEWORDWASWITHGODANDTHEWORDWASGODTHESA
MEWASINTHEBEGINNINGWITHGODALLTHINGSWEREMADEBYHIMANDWITHOUTHIMWASNO
TANYTHINGMADETHATWASMADE

Later copies were made using the same script as the uncials but scribes started leaving the pen on the page between letters, linking them together, so this writing is known as cursive. The final set of manuscripts are called minuscules, not for the size of the books but because the Greek letters were written like the cursives but smaller. Cursives and minuscules are typically counted together.

New Testament Manuscripts

The situation with New Testament texts is quite amazing. There are over 5,800 Greek New Testament documents (with more being discovered every year), and *no two of them are alike*. That doesn't mean that there aren't many similarities and that most passages are without any variant readings, but it does mean that unlike the Old Testament, many verses in the New Testament have at least one variant, and often several. Let's look at some of the most significant manuscripts for New Testament study, and then we'll look at some variant readings.

The oldest texts are written on papyrus. There are just over 100 such manuscript fragments. Next are the uncials, which refers to the style of writing and are discussed more later, with just under 300. Finally, we have the minuscules, again referring to the type of writing used. They are very late but are by far the most numerous, over 2600.

NT Sources Compared

The story of the survival of the New Testament is a story of the hand of God. We have said that there are over 5,800 ancient New Testament manuscripts in existence, many dating within 100 or 200 years of the originals. If you compare that to some other ancient texts, it is really quite amazing:

Source	Date	Extant mss	Oldest mss
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³ History, 1838-1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843—30 April 1833], 1755; also TPJS, 327.

Tacitus' <i>Annals</i>	c. 59 B.C.	1	A.D. 900
Julius Caesar's <i>Gallic Wars</i>	A.D. 58-50	10	A.D. 900
Herodotus' <i>History</i>	488-428 B.C.	8 mss	A.D. 900
New Testament	A.D. 50-100	Over 5,800 mss	A.D. 125

The vast number of Greek New Testament manuscripts known today were discovered in the last 200 years. Over the centuries, copies were made by church members, scribes, monks, and others, and used for personal or liturgical purposes. These copies were sometimes hidden away in libraries, monasteries, or among family possessions. As they began to be discovered, scholars realized that the texts they were using were much more recent than these ancient copies, and an entire new effort of comparing the oldest texts to try and determine the 'original' reading came about—called New Testament textual criticism.

This effort was not without criticism at the beginning. Early attempts to document variant readings were met with even violent reactions, at times. The very idea that the text preserved by the Church might not be the original text written by the prophets and apostles—and thus by God himself—was something many preferred to fight without consideration to its truthfulness.

Papyri

Though papyrus manuscripts are scattered around the world in many locations, three of the most notable collections are the Chester Beatty, John Rylands, and Bodmer. The importance of these manuscripts lies in their age (as early as A.D. 125) and both their similarity to the later Greek texts on which our New Testament is based and their unique readings. In other words, they attest to a fairly accurate transmission of the text in general, in spite of the thousands of variants in later and more complete manuscripts, but also document how some of the later changes were not in the earliest texts. Their discovery forced many changes in scholarly attitudes about early New Testament texts.

Chester Beatty Collection: Housed in Dublin, Ireland, it contains fragments found in a Coptic graveyard in Egypt in 1931. For example, P45 has the gospels and Acts (including the oldest copy of Mark), while P46 includes some of Paul's letters.

John Rylands Library: A number of important Biblical manuscripts are in this library, located in Manchester, England. Perhaps the 'star' is P52, the oldest known New Testament manuscript. It is a fragment of the gospel of John (18:31-33, 37-38) dated to about A.D. 125, not long after John wrote the original. They also have a 2nd century copy of Titus, P32. Rylands is also the home to many of the Ben Ezra (Cairo) genizah fragments.

Bodmer Collection: In 1956, Martin Bodmer purchased some papyri, and housed them in his library, located near Geneva, Switzerland. This collection contains the earliest copies of Luke (P75, dated to 175-225), Jude, 1 and 2 Peter (P72), and very early copies of others, including a very complete book of John dated to about 200 (P66).

Uncials

Sinaiticus: 4th or 5th century, includes part of OT, Apocrypha, all of NT, Shepherd of Hermes and Epistle of Barnabas. Written on vellum, four columns per page, no breaks between words. Discovered by Tischendorf in mid-1800s at St. Catherine's Monastery, Mt. Sinai. Only known complete copy of NT in uncial Greek script.

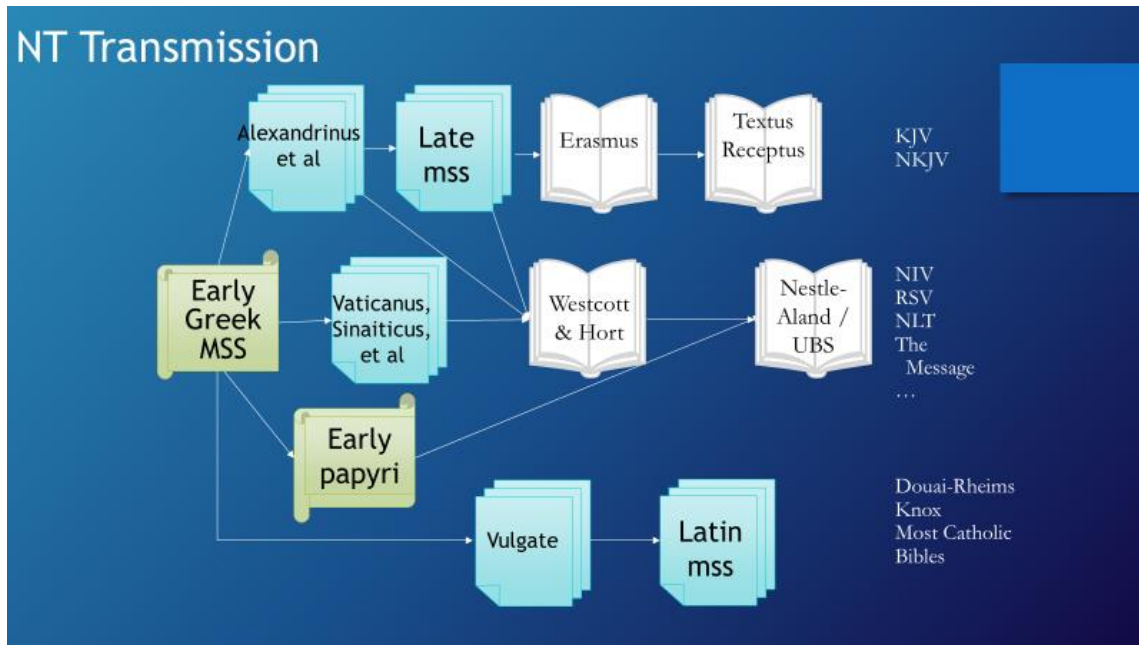
Alexandrinus: Mid 5th century, vellum mss was first great uncial discovered (why it was called A). Includes OT, 3 & 4 Maccabees, Psalm 151, Odes of Solomon, NT, and 2 epistles of Clement. Two columns per page, square uncial writing without breaks, many margin corrections in other hands. 1627 Cyril Lucar, patriarch of Constantinople, offered this to the English ambassador, Sir Thomas Roe, as a gift for King James. James died before it reached England so Charles I received it. In the British Museum today.

Vaticanus: 4th century, originally had whole Bible but some missing today. Known in 1475 but the Vatican did not allow study. Napoleon took it to France when he conquered Rome but in 1815 it was returned. Tischendorf applied and received permission to see it, copied enough to publish it in 1867. In 1868 the Vatican responded with a better copy in print, and in 1889 a photographic facsimile was published. Some believe that this and Sinaiticus were among the 50 copies of scripture ordered made by Constantine when he ‘converted’ to Christianity.

Ephraemi: 5th century palimpsest, vellum and one column per page. Includes part of OT and all of NT except 2 Thess and 2 John. Reused in 12th century to record sermons of Ephraem, a Syrian Church leader. Was owned by Catherine de Medici for a time. Tischendorf deciphered the underlying text and published it in 1845. Later, technology was used and showed T. did a remarkable job.

Bezae: 5th or 6th century, bilingual with Greek on the left and Latin on the right. Includes gospels, Acts, and part of 3 John. Discovered in 1562 at Lyons by Theodore Beza who gave it to Cambridge. An expanded text with more variations than any other mss, it orders the gospels Mt, J, L, Mk and is the principal representative of the Western text. One example addition, inserted after Mt 20:28: “But seek to increase from that which is small, and to become less from that which is greater. When you enter into a house and are summoned to dine, do not sit down at the prominent places, lest perchance a man more honorable than you come in afterwards, and he who invited you come and say to you, ‘Go down lower’; and you shall be ashamed. But if you sit down in the inferior place, and one inferior to you come in, then he that invited you will say to you, ‘Go up higher’; and this will be advantageous to you.” (Note: this is similar to L 14:9-10 but only in Luke in other mss.)

NT Transmission



The slide shows in a general way how the various texts were transmitted and used over the years. The key thing to note is that the King James Version we use in the Church today came from a specific manuscript ‘family’ that today is not considered one of the best sets of manuscripts, which is why the KJV text is sometimes different from the Bibles your friends and neighbors might be reading.

The Gospels

The Synoptics and John

As anyone knows who has read them, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are quite similar. They share many of the same stories and events of Jesus' life, and often use the exact same words and phrases. Because of these similarities, scholars have labeled these three books the "Synoptics," from a Greek word which means to 'see alike.' This is especially noticeable compared to John's record, which is very different from the other three.

Mark is the least unique of the four gospels. The substance of 606 of Mark's 661 verses appears in Matthew, and 380 of Mark's verses are found in Luke with minor changes. Many are the same verses but not all, so in the end, only 31 verses in Mark are not found in either Matt or Luke. In percentage format, we can see it like this:

Gospel	Exclusive	Common
Mark	7%	93%
Matt	42%	58%
Luke	59%	41%
John	92%	8%

One important point about all four gospels: they are anonymous. We ascribe authorship to them based on early church writings and tradition, but the books themselves do not say who wrote them, nor do they say when or where they were written or to whom (except Luke, below). This is not to say that the authors are not the men whose names are on the books, but we need to recognize that those titles were added much later and could possibly be wrong. It doesn't make them of any less value as witnesses of Jesus' life, ministry, and atoning sacrifice, but it does mean that if something were to be discovered that confirmed authorship by a different person, we should be okay with that, since the books themselves don't say.

"Q"

There are some interesting considerations relative to the three synoptic gospels, somethings scholars often refer to as the "synoptic problem." Most scholars believe in Markan primacy—that is, that Mark was written first. There are a number of evidences for this and though it's not a certainty, the indications are strong. When you then look at the relationships between the three books, you see that there are many stories and passages in all three gospels—teachings of Jesus, miracles, parables, travels, and much of the Passion narrative (Jesus' suffering at the end). These passages are referred to as the "Triple Tradition." Then there is another group of texts that are in both Matthew and Luke but not in Mark. These are called the "Double Tradition." The 'problem' is in explaining how the Double Tradition texts came to be, because in many cases, they are word for word identical in the Greek, and other times very close in wording. You don't get identical texts by accident; it means one (or both) are copying. *What* they are copying is the crux of the debate. Many believe in a theoretical document nicknamed "Q" after the German word for 'source,' Quelle. Scholars postulate that "Q" is the source for the double tradition texts, which Mark is the source for the triple tradition content. However, another theory exists, saying that Matthew only copied Mark, but Luke copied both, so there is no "Q," just the texts we have. Both sides have strong arguments, and both cannot be correct, but at this time it's impossible to know, so the debate goes on.

This is important because it impacts how we view the message and stories each writer picks. It helps us see how each author structured the stories of Jesus to fit his own message and audience, and helps us appreciate both the differences between the gospels and the things that end up being the same or even identical, because we can see the origins and influences each gospel had on the other.

Mark

As mentioned already, Mark is the least unique of the gospels. That might make you think that a discussion of Mark would be very short—after all, we could read all 31 verses in a few minutes and be done with it. But the numbers don't reflect the real story of what makes Mark unique.

Mark is probably John Mark, missionary companion of Paul and Barnabus in Acts 12:25. Mark apparently came from a wealthy family in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12) and was Barnabus' relative (Colossians 4:10). Though he left Paul and Barnabus in the middle of a mission, generating some hard feelings from Paul (Acts 13:5, 13), he continued laboring with Barnabus and went to Cyprus (Acts 15:37-39). He and Paul clearly reconciled, because he was Paul's companion again for a time (Colossians 4:10; Philemon 1:24), and with Paul's close friend, Timothy (2 Timothy 4:11). He was also with Peter in Rome (1 Peter 5:13), and tradition is that he wrote his gospel in Rome when he was there. Two ancient writers discussed this.

The first is Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*, 3.1.1), who said that Mark wrote after Peter's death, thus dating the gospel to about AD 64 in Rome (where by tradition, Peter was killed).

Second, Eusebius, in his book *Church History* (6.14.6-7), quoted an early Church leader, Clement of Alexandria, saying:

When, by the Spirit, Peter had publicly proclaimed the Gospel in Rome, his many hearers urged Mark, as one who had followed him for years and remembered what was said, to put it all in writing. This he did and gave copies to all who asked. When Peter learned of it, he neither objected nor promoted it.

Mark thus likely wrote some things while he was there with Peter, just before Peter was killed (AD 64-65), then perhaps finished his work shortly after Peter's demise. Eusebius also quotes Papias, an early Church leader from about AD 120-140, saying:

Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote down accurately, but not in order, all that [Peter] remembered of the things said and done by the Lord. For [Mark] had not heard the Lord or been one of his followers, but later, as I said, a follower of Peter. Peter used to teach as the occasion demanded, without giving systematic arrangement to the Lord's sayings (Eusebius, *Church History*, 3.39.15-16).

Date and Place

We don't know exactly when Mark wrote his gospel, but modern scholars tend to date all the gospels later than people did in the past. LDS scholars, such as S. Kent Brown, argue for an early date of Mark (about AD 64). For Latter-day Saints and others who believe in the ability of Jesus and prophets to predict the future, this especially makes sense. Scholars who don't believe in prophecy (and there are many today) feel compelled to date New Testament books well after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 simply because Jesus is recorded to have spoken of it. Their thinking is that he could not have given such accurate details before the event (or more accurately, that his disciples who wrote the gospels could not have recorded them so accurately before it happened), so it must have been written after AD 70. Because we believe that Jesus indeed could and did predict the future, his disciples could have written it down well before the event with great precision. So if Matthew and Luke are written before AD 70, Mark, which was probably written first, must be written well before that date as well. Such an earlier dating of Mark also agrees with the ancient sources already mentioned about how and when Mark wrote it.

Audience and Message

Mark's audience is probably Gentile, because he gives and interprets Aramaic phrases (e.g., [5:41](#); [15:34](#)). He also explains Jewish customs, such as in [7:3-4](#). Mark teaches that Jesus was misunderstood, even by

those closest to him, and that even though he died a humiliating death, he finally triumphed over all things. Mark emphasizes what Jesus did more than what he taught, though teachings are certainly recorded. It is a fast-paced book—indeed, the Greek word for “immediately” is used 40 times in recounting Jesus’ deeds. His followers have a sense of wonder about Jesus, even as they don’t fully understand who he is. A third of his story is about the *Passion* of Jesus, meaning the events leading up to and including his suffering and crucifixion.

Most scholars believe that Mark’s gospel was the first written. Thus in a sense, it was completely unique at the beginning—it may have been the only written account of the atonement of Christ available. But then both Matthew and Luke used Mark as their foundation, adding additional information and changing some of the things Mark wrote for their own purposes.

Intercalation (Bracketing)

Though sometimes Mark’s gospel’s is noted for its poor grammar in Greek (Matthew and Luke often tell the same story, correcting Mark’s Greek), a careful study also reveals that it is a complex and thoughtfully constructed work. In fact, the way he wove together the stories of Jesus’ ministry is what makes Mark most unique among the synoptics. He uses ‘bracketing’ which puts related events at the beginning and ending of sections to group what is in between together as a theme. He also uses ‘intercalation’ which means inserting one story in the middle of another, letting the outer story help interpret the inner one. Let’s explore some of this artistry in composition.

Cleansing the temple

A good example of intercalation (putting one story inside of another) is the cleansing of the temple. In Matthew, while returning to Jerusalem, Jesus sees a fig tree, but discovering it has no fruit, curses it. The results are immediately presented—the tree withers in the same verse in which it was cursed. Matthew uses it as an illustration of what faith can do (Matthew 21:18-22). Mark tells the same story but with an entirely different purpose: he uses it to interpret the event of the cleansing of the temple. First, Jesus cursed the tree in the hearing of his disciples (11:12-14). Next Jesus entered the temple and, seeing the moneychangers, cast them out, angering the Jewish leaders (11:15-17). After this statement of authority over the leadership, the group left the city. The next morning, they saw the withered tree (11:20). When Peter pointed out the tree, Jesus counseled them to have faith, as in Matthew (11:22-24).

In Mark, the story of the fig tree wraps around the temple cleansing, binding them together, and representing both the corruptness of the Jewish leadership and their system of worship. The fig tree is cursed because it has the outward appearance of being a fruitful tree, but it is not—it bears no fruit. Likewise, the Jewish temple has the outward appearance of adhering to the Law of Moses, but in reality, it bears no fruit either. The withering of the tree is a witness to the truth of Jesus’ words about the corruptness of the temple. In the end, the two incidents combined give Jesus the opportunity to teach about true worship—faith, prayer, repentance, and forgiveness.

Rejection and mighty words and deeds

A good example of bracketing involves a longer section. It opens with two scenes of rejection that are actually intercalated but together serve as the opening bracket. First, Jesus’ friends (or better translated—his kinsmen, his family) try to stop him because they believe he is insane (3:21). Mark then shows the scribes rejecting him because they believe he is possessed (3:22, 30). Finally, to tie it to the previous family rejection, his family comes to seek him, and he leaves them cooling outside, while he declares that his family are those who follow him (3:31-35). The end of the bracket is when the people of Nazareth also reject him (6:1-5). They are intrigued by his doings and sayings, but point out that Jesus’ family is right there—he’s just an ordinary guy. The two rejections and the two references to his family at both ends are the brackets.

In the middle are four parables and four miraculous deeds:

- 1) The sower (4:3-20)
- 2) The candlestick (4:21-25)
- 3) The growing seed (4:26-29)
- 4) The mustard seed (4:30-32)

These parables have a common theme—God does miraculous things and man has little impact on the outcome. The sower sows ordinary seeds but gets 100-fold return; the person that has little will get much more; the man casts seeds into the ground and does nothing else, but gets a great harvest; and the small mustard seed grows into a huge tree. These parables collectively illustrate the grace of God and his amazing gifts to us, where our meager efforts are richly blessed.

The four deeds then apply this concept to Jesus’ actions:

- 1) Jesus stills a storm, showing power over nature (4:35-41)
- 2) He heals a demonic, showing power over spiritual matters and things beyond this world (5:1-20)
- 3) He heals the woman with the issue of blood, showing power over illness (5:25-34).
- 4) He raises Jairus’ daughter from the dead, showing power over death (5:22-24, 35-43)

The brackets of the two rejection stories show how people rejected Jesus in spite of the many signs and miracles that he presented (words and deeds) to show God’s grace and his power to dispense that grace. It emphasizes Mark’s theme that people did not understand Jesus during his ministry—not until he was resurrected did they “get it.”

Note also that in the middle of the miracles is another mini-intercalation. Jesus is requested to come heal Jairus’ daughter and leaves to do that, but while en route is interrupted by the woman with an issue of blood. He heals her, but during the delay, they learn that the daughter has died. Jesus continues anyway and raises her from death. This story and order is not unique to Mark but does serve to escalate the situation to show Jesus’ full power to heal us today, just as he did these two women.

Blindness

A significant bracketing section begins and ends with Jesus healing two blind men, which was already mentioned as having unique Markan elements. The first is the blind man healed in stages, where he first sees “men as trees, walking,” then with a second administration is fully healed (8:22-26). The second is Bartimaeus (meaning, son of Timaeus), on the highway leading out of Jericho, who cries out for mercy and throws off his garment (perhaps his only possession) to go to Jesus, receives his sight, and immediately follows after Jesus (10:46-52). Between these accounts are three efforts by Jesus to teach his disciples who he is and what his true mission will be, but they do not understand. Thus the healings of the blind men illustrate how the disciples were blind to Jesus’ mission, foreshadowing both their ability to only understand partially his mission at first (like the man healed in stages) and only once fully enlightened to completely commit to him (like Bartimaeus).

Reference	Prophecy	Failure to understand	Discipleship	Jesus’ nature
8:31 – 9:8	8:31, he will suffer and be killed	8:32-33, Peter rebukes him for saying this	8:34-38, Take up the cross and follow him	9:1-8, transfiguration
9:30-41	9:31, men will kill him but he will rise the third day	9:32, they understood not	9:33-37, be the servant of all	9:38-41, men do miracles in his name
10:32-45	<u>10:32-34</u> , Jewish leaders will condemn and kill him, he will be	10:35-40, James and John ask for privileges, but	10:41-44, the greatest needs to be the minister and servant to all	<u>10:45</u> , Jesus gives his life as a ransom for others

scourged and spit upon, but he will rise the third day	they don't know what they ask
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With the brackets of blindness, Mark also shows deliberate organization through his use of the three passion predictions, or prophecies about Jesus' suffering and death (8:31-9:8; 9:30-41; 10:33-45). Each one follows a similar pattern: 1) a prophecy; 2) a failure to understand; 3) a teaching about discipleship; and, 4) an indication of Jesus' exceptional nature. The three prophecies are arranged climactically, starting with more general statements and ending with very specific declarations (10:32-34 for specific things on the crucifixion; 10:45 for how Jesus gives of himself for us). The reactions also change, from a stern rebuke of Jesus in the first one, to not understanding in the second, to stunned silence in the third.

Matthew

Matthew was for centuries considered the most important and earliest of the four gospels. It was the favorite of the Catholic Church because it uses the word "church" and because of the special commission to Peter, on which they based their papal succession. It's also the most quoted of the four gospels generally.

It's fascinating to note that possibly not more than 30 days of Christ's three-year ministry are recorded in the gospels, with an intense focus on the last few days in all four books. Matthew has most of those days in his book, but there are entire sections that cover only a single day, something that is easy to overlook if you are only reading small parts or from a harmony-version.

In the Joseph Smith Translation, the title of the eyewitness Matthew's work is changed to "The Testimony of Matthew." John gets the same title, but not Mark or Luke, who get their content second hand.

Matthew is also known as Levi in the New Testament (9:9; cf Mark 2:14). He was a tax collector at Capernaum, probably working for Herod Antipas. He exhibits a great knowledge of the scriptures—even though as a publican he would not have been allowed into the synagogue. As a tax collector, Matt/Levi was probably well-educated, with the ability to read and write, do arithmetic, and probably speak Greek.

The gospel with his name today was attributed to Matthew as early as Papias (c. 140) and certainly by Irenaeus (c. 185). Said Papias (according to Eusebius):

"Matthew composed his history in the Hebrew [Aramaic] dialect, and everyone translated [or, 'interpreted,' according to *ANF* 1:155] it as he was able" (*Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.16).

Irenaeus stated:

"Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect [Aramaic], while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome" (*Against Heresies*, 3.1.2).

Matthew may well have written down some of the sayings and events of Jesus' life at the time they happened—hence the comment that he first composed his work in Hebrew/Aramaic. The only early versions we have of Matthew are in Greek.

Matthew was probably written after Mark, thus AD 65-70.

The JST version of 1:18 indicates that Matthew was drawing on at least one written source for his infancy narratives, though his is the only source we have today with that information.

There are three common themes in Matthew:

- 1) ***The importance of the Church and Kingdom of God.*** Matthew is the only gospel to use the word “church” (*ekklesia*), such as 16:13-19.
 - a. Matthew 18 is a unique chapter about regulating the church, including conversion (1-5), removing harmful elements (12-14), resolving differences (15-17), and genuine forgiveness (21-35). D&C 42:84-92 is similar in content and concludes by quoting Matthew 18:17. This is heightened in the JST by emphasizing commandments (5:50; 6:29-30; 9:35-36; 16:25-29) and ordinances (5:1-4; 18:10-11).
 - b. Jesus as King and Messiah are both emphasized as well, starting with the genealogy (1:1-17) which is the royal line, which emphasizes the number 14 (the number for the name of “David” in Hebrew; d=4 + v=6 + d=4). This is demonstrated by: the wise men searching for the king and Herod’s alarm over it (2:1-16); parables of the kingdom (13:1-52), the triumphal entry (21:1-11), and the inscription above Jesus’ head at the crucifixion (27:37). The Greek phrase “kingdom of heaven” occurs 33 times in Matthew, and “kingdom of God” 4 more.
- 2) ***Jesus’ condemnation of first-century Judaism and traditions.*** In Matthew, Jesus attacks the formalism and hypocrisy of the Jews more than in the other gospels. This comes out even more strongly in the JST (adding to the uniqueness of Matthew), such as 9:15-16, where it is expanded to talk about the deadness of the Pharisee’s baptism. In the JST version of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches the disciples to call the hypocritical Jews to repentance (Matt 7:6-7).
- 3) ***Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.*** Matthew, like Jacob (7:11) saw Jesus’ mission as the fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies. He did not come to destroy but to fulfill (5:17). Scholars have identified at least 60 Old Testament quotations in Matthew. Eleven of these are in chapters 26-27, the “Passion” chapters of Matthew. More specifically, Matthew cites 14 specific scriptures as being fulfilled by Jesus, 8 of which come from Isaiah. These citations take the form, ‘Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet’ or something similar. The list is:

<u>Matthew</u>	<u>OT Scripture</u>
1:22-23	Isaiah 7:14
2:5b-6	Micah 5:1 and 2 Samuel 5:2
2:15b	Hosea 11:1
2:17-18	Jeremiah 31:15
2:23b	Isaiah 4:3 (perhaps) and Judges 16:17
3:3	Isaiah 40:3
4:14-16	Isaiah 8:23-9:1
8:17	Isaiah 53:4
12:17-21	Isaiah 42:1-4
13:14-15	Isaiah 6:9-10
13:35	Psalms 78:2 (though Matt says Isaiah)
21:4-5	Isaiah 62:11 and Zechariah 9:9
26:56	formula without citation (cf Mark 14:49)
27:9-10	Zechariah 11:12-13 (also Jeremiah 18:2-3; 32:6-15)

Some of these relate to the minutiae of Jesus’ life, showing to the early Christians that Jesus was the fulfillment of scripture in every detail of his life.

Other scriptures that are just cited but not called out include: 2:5-6; 3:3; 4:4, 6-7, 10; 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43; 9:13; 10:35; 11:10; 12:7, 40; 13:14-15; 15:4, 7-9; 18:16; 19:4-5, 7; 19:18-19; 21:9, 13, 16, 42; 22:24, 32, 37-38, 43-44; 23:39; 24:30; 26:31, 64; and 27:45.

Audience

It is likely that Matthew was written for a Jewish audience because he gives some of the same events and words as Mark but without the explanation (cf. Mark 7:1-4 with 15:1-2; see also 1:1-7 which is a royal Davidic line; 5:22; 23:5; and 27:6).

Matthew's audience is further indicated by several factors, leading us to believe it is Jewish Christians dealing with integrating Gentiles into the church: 1) He speaks of the synagogue in the second or third person ("their" or sometimes "your", 4:23; 9:35; 12:9; 13:54; 23:34); 2) He speaks of the scribes in the third person ("their scribes", 7:29). 3) He alludes to a time of tension between Jewish and Gentile converts, solely mentioning Jesus' admonition to only take the gospel to the Jews (10:5-6; 15:24), but he also lists Gentile women in Jesus' genealogy (1:3-6), has Gentile wise men (2:1), and emphasizes the faith of two Gentiles (8:10-12; 15:28). He also includes the great commission to teach all nations (28:19), showing that his message is to accept Gentiles into the Church.

Audience examples

Thinking of his Jewish audience, Matthew portrays Jesus as the new Moses:

- 1) He came out of Egypt (2:13-23).
- 2) He gave a new law on the mountain (5:1).
- 3) He gave five sermons that match Moses' five books (5-7; 10; 13; 18; 24-25).
- 4) He ends each sermon with the same wording (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1) except the last which ties them all together (26:1). These phrases are unique in Matthew and in fact unique in the entire New Testament.

In addition, Matthew uses Jewish titles that reflect the Messianic expectation, such as "Christ," "anointed one," "Son of Man," "King of the Jews," and "Son of God." A particular example is in his baptism, where Matthew refers to him as 'the coming one' (*ho erxomenos* in Greek; KJV says "he that cometh"), though Mark and Luke do not use that phrase (Matt 3:11; Mark 1:7; Luke 3:16). John's disciples later asked if Jesus was the coming one (11:3). The answer is provided in the previous chapters, from 4:23 to 9:35, a chiasm/bracketing that portrays Jesus as the healing and preaching Messiah.

Luke

Luke is the longest of the four gospels, and the book called Luke is only the first half of his work—Acts being the second half. We break them apart because of how the New Testament was put together but Luke intended them to be read together.

The final version of Luke should be dated after Mark wrote his work, but internal evidence suggests it may have been at least started while he and Paul were at Caesarea in 57-58 (Acts 23-26) and continued when they were in Rome together (Acts 28).

Luke was perhaps a physician (Colossians 4:14; Philemon 1:24; 2 Timothy 4:11; and Muratorian Canon) and Paul's missionary companion (at least during the "we" chapters in Acts). Unlike modern society, being a physician was considered a lowly position in society. This is due to the fact that many physicians were slaves or former slaves. It is possible that Luke was thus a former slave, but someone of good heart whom Paul would have been comfortable making his friend and companion. Luke's services may have also been valuable to Paul as he traveled and labored under the difficulties of the road (and his many persecutions and challenging circumstances).

Luke is a gifted storyteller. His Greek is very good, using Greek dictions and rhetorical conventions. He quotes the Torah, tells striking vignettes and parables. It is complex and sophisticated account.

Audience

He wrote to a Gentile audience, as shown by his genealogy going back to Adam (not just Abraham as Matthew did) and his exclusion of Jewish traditions and names/titles that are found in Mark in the same stories. He uses Judea for the larger area of Palestine, not just the area around Jerusalem as a Jew would do.

Specifically, Luke addresses his writings to a person named Theophilis, which means ‘friend of God’ in Greek (1:1-4; Acts 1:1; JST Luke 3:13). Some have supposed, based on the name, which it is a title for Jesus’ followers, but he seems to be a real person, based on the language Luke uses.

Themes in Luke

The temple plays an important role in Luke. The record starts in the temple with Zacharias (1:5-22); Jesus’ life starts in the temple with his dedication and the blessings of witnesses there (2:22-38). Jesus comes to the temple at 12 to teach and enlighten (2:42-48). At the conclusion of the temptations, Jesus ends up at the temple (4:9-12), whereas in Matt he ends on a high mountain (4:8-10). And Luke ends in the temple, with the disciples daily worshipping there (24:53).

Related to that, Jerusalem is at the heart of Luke’s story. The Transfiguration prepares them for the final trip to Jerusalem, which is announced as he “set his face” to go there (9:51). The journey takes several chapters but Luke consistently reminds us of that destination (13:22, 33-34; 17:11; 18:31; 19:11, 28). The resurrection appearances in chapter 24 are in Jerusalem, and the disciples are instructed to stay there (24:49). (The movement in Acts is the opposite—away from Jerusalem and toward Rome, though each journey circles back to Jerusalem at the end.)

For Luke, Jesus is the universal Savior. In fact, only Luke uses the term Savior (except for John 4:42). Luke uniquely refers to Jesus as “Lord” before his resurrection. Jesus is concerned for the poor and outcast. He sends for the Seventy (10:1-12), representative of all nations (compare Genesis 10 which has seventy nations coming from Noah and his sons) and takes the gospel to the whole world (Acts 1:8).

It is the Spirit that demonstrates God’s will in Luke’s writings; especially the early characters are filled with the Holy Ghost—John the Baptist (1:15,35); Elizabeth (1:41); Zacharias (1:67); Simeon (2:25-27); Jesus (3:16, 22).

Luke tells the stories of women—Mary (1:26-38), Elizabeth (1:39-45), Anna (2:36-38), and faithful female disciples who supported Jesus (8:1-3). Mary, sister of Martha is praised in Luke (10:42), and faithful women stayed with him on the cross (23:49) and were the first to see the resurrected Jesus (23:55-56; 24:1-10).

Unique examples from Luke: Preparation for the Ministry

Luke provides very precise dating for the start of John’s ministry (3:1-2), bringing together six separate points of reference. This places John’s message in AD 29.

In Luke, the Baptist gives unique sayings to the crowd—(3:10-14) sharing, justice, and kindness—reflect what Jesus will say later. Then he alludes to John’s fate by telling that Herod will put him in prison for his words. John is implied but not mentioned in the baptismal scene, perhaps to minimize John and bring Jesus to the forefront alone.

Luke’s genealogy takes it back to Adam (3:23-38), emphasizing the universal appeal of his mission. He gives it after the baptism but before the ministry, likely because Moses’ genealogy was also given at the start of his formal ministry (Exodus 6:14-26).

In Luke's account of the temptations (4:1-13), the order is different than Matthew and Mark, ending in the temple (as mentioned above). It is also noticeable that there are no angels come to help Jesus, as in Mark and Matthew. Instead in Luke, Satan comes back in chapter 22 at the critical time (22:3, 31, 53), and then an angel strengthens him (22:43).

John

The book of John is likely written by John the **apostle**, or John the **Revelator** as he is known later. In the gospel, he is merely known as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (13:23). He was one of the first disciples Jesus called to follow him and was an eyewitness to the events of Jesus' ministry. He was a fisherman by trade, with father and his brother James, and his business partners Peter and Andrew. Like the other eyewitness, Matthew, John's gospel receives the title “The Testimony of John” in the Joseph Smith Translation.

The date of John is difficult to determine, and many scholars place it between AD 80 and 110. It cannot be later than about AD 125 because of P⁵², a papyrus fragment of part of John 8 which dates to that time and which is the oldest New Testament manuscript found. P⁵² is a copy and not the original John, therefore the writing must have been long enough before that for copies to be in circulation. But parts of it may be even earlier, such as John 1 which appears to be John the Baptist's testimony (and John was one of his disciples)—in other words, the version we have is edited and is no later than about 110. John is not explicitly called out as the author (except in a late addition, 21:0-24), but early Christians and most today identify him with the disciple whom Jesus loved (13:23).

Verifications

Some early leaders in the second-century church rejected John as authentic (Eusebius 3:28; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1; Dionysius, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 6:82), mainly because the Gnostics liked it so much. But today many details of John's work have been verified by modern scholarship and the book is considered genuine. These details include:

- 1) The discovery of the pool of Bethesda (house of mercy or grace) in Jerusalem with its five porches (5:1-2).
- 2) John's use of light and darkness also found in the (older) Dead Sea Scrolls (1:5; 3:19; 12:35-36), originally thought to be a late Gnostic doctrine only.
- 3) His knowledge of Samaritan beliefs, worship on Mt. Gerizim, and the site of Jacob's well.

Clement of Alexandria said that John, “aware that the external details had been recorded in the Gospels, was urged by his disciples, and divinely moved by the Spirit, to compose a spiritual gospel” (Eusebius, *Church History*, 6.14.7; see also Muratorian Canon, 9-16).

Audience

John appears to be writing to members of the Church in Greece and Asia (Turkey) who already had a testimony of Jesus Christ. He was probably very familiar with the other gospels, and set as his goal to bring Saints to a “profound understanding of and appreciation for the redeeming mission of Jesus” (Griggs, *Studies in Scripture, vol. 5: The Gospels*, 111).

As an example of this, turning the water into wine at the Cana wedding, the loaves and fishes feeding 5,000 men, and the Bread of Life sermon enhance our understanding of the sacrament but do not teach the basic principles of it. In fact, John does not give an account of the Sacrament at the Last Supper like Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Themes

1) Jesus is the Word of God. Introduced in John 1, this theme is carried through in several conversations (Mary, 2:1-4; Nicodemus, 3:1-13; the Samaritan woman, 4:7-25; the Pharisees, 8:12-59), where he teaches mortals who he is and how he speaks and acts the words and deeds of the Father (8:40; 14:10, 24; 4:34; 5:30; 6:38). D&C 93:8, 19 teach that the Word is the messenger of salvation because he reveals the Father to us (cf. John 6:40).

2) John contrasts light and darkness, starting in 1:4-5. Jesus is the light (and the life) while Satan is darkness and death. When Nicodemus comes by night (3:2; 7:50), it says something about Nicodemus at that time (later he is a disciple and supporter). When Judas goes out to betray Jesus, he goes out into the night (19:39). See also 3:19. In contrast, Jesus is the light of the world (8:12; 12:35-36, 46). With this contrast comes conflict—light versus darkness, starting with 1:5, which should be translated, ‘And the light shines in darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it’ (KJV “comprehend” is *katalambanō*, meaning overcome or seize).

3) John portrays Jesus not only in pre-existent terms as the Word, but in OT terms as “I am.” He tells the Jews that “Before Abraham was, I am [*egō eimi*]” (8:39-58). This is the same name God gave to Moses in Exodus 3:11-14, so Jesus is claiming to be the same God. He says this at other times, too, but the KJV translation doesn’t make it obvious. To the Samaritan woman at the well, the *egō eimi* is hidden in the English text but not the Greek (4:26). When he walked on the water, he also said it (6:20). He also says “I am” with other things, such as the bread of life (6:35); the light of the world (8:12; 9:5); the door (10:7, 9); the good shepherd (10:11); the resurrection and the life (11:25); the way and the truth and the life (14:5); and the true vine (15:1). There is no messianic secret in John.

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