

The Synoptic Gospels and John

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are known as the “Synoptic Gospels” because they share a common view point. These three books focus on Christ’s Galilean ministry, while John focuses on his ministry in Judea. Matthew writes to a Jewish audience explaining that Jesus is Israel’s long-awaited Messiah, the king. Matthew’s genealogy presents the proof of Jesus’ kingly Davidic line both through Mary and Joseph. Unlike Matthew, Mark targeted a Roman-Gentile audience which showed Jesus as the humble Servant (Mark 10:45) offering salvation to any who believe. Mark’s gospel is compact and full of rapid moving events. Luke’s audience is mainly Gentile but is much more detailed than Mark’s account. Luke, the educated physician, investigated and wrote a chronological account from eyewitnesses. He says in Luke 1:1 “undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.”

Lastly, we note that John’s Gospel isn’t chronological, but theological. Jesus asserts His deity so that believers are strengthened to call unbelievers to “believe” in Christ. Eight signs are marked in the gospel of John which you will be noting as you read them. You will also mark each of the famous “I AM” statements of Jesus equating Himself to be God. These are characteristic only to Johannine writings.

The gospels are not biographies in the modern sense of the word because they do not intend to form a complete life picture of Jesus (John 20:30 and 21:25). In fact, very little about Jesus’ childhood is given except for the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke. While Jesus’ public ministry lasted close to 3 years, most of the information in the four Gospels focuses on the last week of His life. In the Gospel of John alone, chapters 12-20 are devoted to the last week of our Lord’s earthly life.

“Though they are completely accurate historically, and present important biographical details of Jesus’ life, the primary purposes of the Gospels are theological and apologetic (John 20:31). They provide authoritative answers to questions about Jesus’ life and ministry, and they strengthen believers’ assurance regarding the reality of their faith (Luke 1:4)”

Mac Arthur Bible Commentary

Background on the Author, the Apostle John

John was the son of Zebedee and Salome (Mark 1:19; 16:1-2 and Matthew 27:56; John 19:25). He was probably the younger brother of James (because the older brother is usually listed first) and they were given the name “Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17). One story of the “Sons of Thunder” (Luke 9:54) accounts how they wanted to bring fire from heaven to consume the Samaritans who would not receive Jesus into their village when Jesus was traveling to Jerusalem. I guess “Sons of Lightning” might have been a good name for them also!

James and John were disciples of John the Baptist before following Jesus (John 1:39). After being a disciple, John became an Apostle in Luke 6:12-16/Matthew 10:2 and one of the three most intimate with Jesus. Only Peter, James and John were with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration and spoken to by God concerning His Son (Matthew 17:1). John is identified often with Peter in the Book of Acts (Acts 3:1; 4:13 and 8:14). We still see these three, John with James and Peter in Jerusalem (Galatians 2:8-9). Paul writes:

(for He who effectually worked for Peter in *his* apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), ⁹ and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas [Peter] and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we *might go* to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

Despite his fiery personality, his humility is put on display in the Gospel of John because he never refers to himself by name but only, “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (five different times). The Synoptic Gospels mention John’s name 29 times (Mac Arthur Bible Commentary, page 1338), while John’s Gospel never mentions himself by name, thus making the strong case for John’s authorship.