

ANSWERS TO COMMON
QUESTIONS ABOUT

The Bible

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The Bible

H. Wayne House
Timothy J. Demy

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Answers to Common Questions About the Bible

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*From Wayne:
To Carrie House and Nathan House*

*From Tim:
To Glen Riddle,
lover of words and the Word,
books and the Book*

Contents

About This Series 11

Introduction 13

Part 1: The Origin of the Bible 15

1. When was the Bible written? 15
2. Who wrote the Bible? 19
3. Where were the biblical books written and to whom were they written? 20
4. In what languages was the Bible written? 21
5. What Bible did Jesus and the apostles use? 24
6. Why are there four gospels? 26

Part 2: The Organization of the Bible 29

7. Why are there two Testaments and what are they? 29
8. How are the Hebrew Scriptures organized and why? 31
9. How are the Greek Scriptures organized and why? 34
10. How is the English Bible organized and why? 35
11. Who divided the Bible into verses and chapters and when? 36

Part 3: The Uniqueness of the Bible 39

12. Why is there a Bible? 39
13. How did God communicate His revelation to humanity? 40

14. What is meant by the terms *inspiration*, *infallibility*, and *inerrancy* when referring to the Bible? 44
15. How reliable is the biblical teaching regarding history, theology, science, and ethics? 46
16. How is the Bible similar to and different from other religious texts? 51
17. How does one deal with alleged errors and problem passages in the Bible? 53
18. Is the Bible God's final revelation? 65
19. How did Jesus and the apostles view the Bible? 67
20. Is there extrabiblical support for the reliability of the biblical accounts? 69

Part 4: The Gospels and Acts 74

21. How reliable are the historical accounts in the Gospels and the book of Acts? 74
22. How reliable is eyewitness testimony? 77
23. What kind of literature is a gospel? 78
24. What is the Synoptic problem? 80

Part 5: The Canonicity of the Bible 83

25. Who determined which books to put in the Bible? 83
26. What criteria were used to include or exclude a book from the Bible? 84
27. Could more books properly be added to the Bible today? 88
28. Why do the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant Bibles have different books, and what are they? 89
29. What does the phrase "Canon of the Bible" mean? 89
30. When was the canonization of the Old Testament completed? 90
31. When was the canonization of the New Testament completed? 92

32. What are the pseudepigrapha? *95*
33. What are the Gnostic Gospels? *98*
34. What is the Apocrypha? *101*

Part 6: The Composition of the Bible 106

35. What was the physical process of writing the Bible? *106*
36. How did the authors use their sources in writing the Bible? *107*
37. How were scribes used in producing the books of the Bible? *108*
38. Did the authors write in different styles? *109*

Part 7: The Transcription and Transmission of the Bible 110

39. Why didn't God preserve the original text? *110*
40. What is textual criticism? *111*
41. What are the oldest copies of the Bible in existence? *114*
42. How close to the original manuscripts are those manuscripts used for our translations? *119*
43. What happened to the original manuscripts, and how long did the autographs remain in existence? *119*

Part 8: The Translation of the Bible 121

44. What is the Masoretic Text? *121*
45. What are the different translation theories? *123*
46. How close to the meaning of the original Hebrew and Greek are our translations? *125*
47. Why are there so many English versions and translations? *126*
48. What is the Septuagint? *127*
49. What is the Vulgate? *129*
50. What is the Peshitta? *132*
51. What are the Aramaic Targums? *133*
52. What is the Samaritan Pentateuch? *134*

Part 9: The Interpretation of the Bible 136

- 53. Is there more than one meaning in a biblical text? 136
- 54. What is figurative language? 138
- 55. What is meant by “literal interpretation”? 140

Part 10: Contemporary Challenges Regarding the Bible 142

- 56. Are books missing from the Bible today? 142
- 57. Does the Bible quote from other ancient writings? 143
- 58. What is the relationship of the Dead Sea Scrolls to the Bible? 146
- 59. How do early copies of the Bible compare with early copies of other ancient literature? 149
- 60. Is the Bible a sufficient guide for what we believe and how we live? 150

Conclusion 153

Notes 155

Recommended Reading 169

About the Authors 175

About This Series

The Answers to Common Questions series is designed to provide readers a brief summary and overview of individual topics and issues in Christian theology. For quick reference and ease in studying, the works are written in a question and answer format. The questions follow a logical progression so that those reading straight through a work will receive a greater appreciation for the topic and the issues involved. The volumes are thorough, though not exhaustive, and can be used as a set or as single-volume studies. Each volume is fully documented and contains a bibliography for further reading for those who want to pursue the subject in greater detail.

The study of theology and the many issues within Christianity is an exciting and rewarding endeavor. For two thousand years, Christians have proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ and sought to accurately define and defend the doctrines of their faith as recorded in the Bible. In 2 Timothy 2:15, Christians are exhorted: “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.” The goal of these books is to help you in your diligence and accuracy as you study God’s Word and its influence in history and thought through the centuries.

Introduction

The Bible is the most important book in the history of the world. It has been studied, memorized, and burned. Politicians, pundits, and preachers routinely quote it. It has brought consolation to the weak and weary, insight to the pious and perplexed, and consolation to the distraught and dying. It is unique in its character, its content, its composition, and its influence. It has influenced individuals, groups, movements, and Western civilization far beyond what we can fully comprehend. Its influence on literature in the West is unsurpassed. A person who doesn't have some biblical literacy will be hard-pressed to understand Melville, Milton, or a host of other influential authors.

The Bible has been the best best-seller of all ages. It has been translated, paraphrased, visualized, and amplified. If you walk into any major bookstore and look at the display of Bibles, you will likely find one for any and every age group, and for readers desiring devotional Bibles, study Bibles, or theme Bibles. There are more than a dozen major translations in English (some more accurate than others), and you can find excellent Bibles on the Internet as well (e.g., the NET Bible).

The history of how we got the Bible, and of its subsequent transmission and publication, is an amazing story that fills many volumes. Not every language spoken in the world today has a corresponding Bible translation, but for the majority of people in the world,

the Bible is available in their language—and each translation has a unique history. Some people have argued that the Bible is filled with codes and that its history is full of conspiracies. We don't believe that. But we do believe that the content and history of the Bible are unlike any other book ever written. Join us as we look at some of the many questions that are frequently asked about the history of the Bible as a religious and literary text. It is an amazing subject!

The Origin of the Bible

1. When was the Bible written?

The Bible was written over the course of approximately 1,500 years (between 1440 B.C. and A.D. 100).¹ The period covered by biblical history is about 6,000 years, from the creation of Adam in the garden of Eden through the visions of St. John on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea at the end of the first century A.D. The recording of the people and events that precede and follow the Exodus of the Israelites, when Israel's history begins, was penned by the lawgiver-prophet-deliverer, Moses, in the fifteenth century B.C. between approximately 1440–1405 (or in the late to middle thirteenth century, according to some scholars), as the Israelites wandered in the desert of the Sinai Peninsula after leaving Egypt. Moses wrote almost the entire first five books of the Bible during this time, with someone else, such as Joshua, composing the last chapter of the book of Deuteronomy. The remainder of the Hebrew Bible (also called the Tanak by the Jews) was written over the next several hundred years by various prophets, kings, and other inspired persons and was finally completed around 400 B.C.

The dates of several Old Testament books are uncertain; they do not bear the names of their authors and sometimes record events far prior to the writing, so that the authors are not contemporary with those events. Moreover, scholars have little information about

some books, such as Job, so that their authors and dates remain unknown.

Authorship and Dating of Old Testament Books²		
Book	Author	Approximate Date Written
Genesis	Moses	1445–1440 B.C.
Exodus	Moses	1440–1405 B.C.
Leviticus	Moses	1440–1405 B.C.
Numbers	Moses	1440–1405 B.C.
Deuteronomy	Moses (and possibly chapter 31 by Joshua)	1405 B.C.
Joshua	Joshua	1390 B.C.
Judges	Samuel?	1050–1020 B.C.
Ruth	Unknown	1020 B.C.
1 Samuel	Samuel?	1050–960 B.C.
2 Samuel	Samuel?	1050–960 B.C.
1 Kings	Jeremiah?	550 B.C.
2 Kings	Jeremiah?	550 B.C.
1 Chronicles	Ezra?	450–400 B.C.
2 Chronicles	Ezra?	450–400 B.C.
Ezra	Ezra	450–444 B.C.
Nehemiah	Nehemiah	450–444 B.C.
Esther	Unknown	470–465 B.C.
Job	Unknown	Unknown
Psalms	David, with specific psalms written by sons of Korah, Asaph, Heman, Ethan, Hezekiah, Solomon, and Moses	Primarily 1000 to 450–400 B.C.
Proverbs	Solomon and others	950–700 B.C.
Ecclesiastes	Solomon	935 B.C.
Song of Solomon	Solomon	971–931 B.C.
Isaiah	Isaiah	740–680 B.C.

Jeremiah	Jeremiah	627–585 B.C.
Lamentations	Jeremiah	586/85 B.C.
Ezekiel	Ezekiel	593–571 B.C.
Daniel	Daniel	537 B.C.
Hosea	Hosea	710 B.C.
Joel	Joel	835 B.C.
Amos	Amos	755 B.C.
Obadiah	Obadiah	841 B.C. or 586 B.C.
Jonah	Jonah	770–750 B.C.
Micah	Micah	700 B.C.
Nahum	Nahum	663–612 B.C.
Habakkuk	Habakkuk	606–604 B.C.
Zephaniah	Zephaniah	625 B.C.
Haggai	Haggai	520 B.C.
Zechariah	Zechariah	520–518 B.C.
Malachi	Malachi	450–400 B.C.

The New Testament writings record events that transpired from 6–4 B.C. (the birth of Jesus the Messiah) through the end of the first century A.D., with John’s writing of the Revelation of Jesus. Unlike many of the books of the Hebrew Scriptures, the authors and dates of the New Testament are easier to assign because the persons, events, and dates are in close proximity within a period of approximately sixty years, and the confirmation of these persons and dates occurs at the end of the first century by disciples of the apostles or those who associated with these disciples.

Those who organized the New Testament placed the Gospels in the order they believed them to have been written. Two of the gospel writers, Matthew and John, were disciples of the Lord. Mark was an associate of Peter and probably his secretary, recording Peter’s recollection (cf. 2 Peter 1:15). Luke never encountered the Lord or experienced the events he recorded, but he is known as a careful researcher, interviewing eyewitnesses of the actual events,

conversations, and addresses he writes in his gospel. With this information in view, we see that three of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—were written between A.D. 50–70, while John’s unique material (98 percent different) was written in the mid-80s.

The Acts of the Apostles is the only dedicated historical survey in the New Testament, largely focusing on the ministries of Peter and Paul but also explaining the beginning and growth of Christianity as it reached from Jerusalem to Rome. It was written after the completion of the three missionary journeys of Paul and ends with his first imprisonment in Rome, which occurred between A.D. 60–62. The letters of the apostles (other than John), apostolic associates, and half-brothers of the Lord Jesus are written from the late 40s. They begin with the letters of James, brother of the Lord and leader of the Jerusalem church, and with Paul’s letter to the Galatian Christians; and they end with the writing of the anonymous treatise of Hebrews sometime in the 60s before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The apostle John wrote the remainder of the New Testament in the 80s and 90s. Alongside his gospel in the mid-80s, John also wrote three letters; and approximately ten years later, sometime in the 90s, he penned the Apocalypse (meaning “Revelation”).

Authorship and Dating of New Testament Books

Book	Author	Approximate Date Written
Matthew	Matthew	A.D. 50–60
Mark	Mark (for Peter)	A.D. 60
Luke	Luke	A.D. 58–60
John	John	A.D. 85–90
Acts	Luke	A.D. 61–62
Romans	Paul	A.D. 56/57 OR 58*
1 Corinthians	Paul	Spring A.D. 56
2 Corinthians	Paul	Fall A.D. 56
Galatians	Paul	A.D. 48 or Fall A.D. 49

Ephesians	Paul	A.D. 60
Philippians	Paul	A.D. 61 or Spring A.D. 62*
Colossians	Paul	A.D. 60 or Fall A.D. 61*
1 Thessalonians	Paul	A.D. 51
2 Thessalonians	Paul	A.D. 51
1 Timothy	Paul	Fall A.D. 62
2 Timothy	Paul	Fall A.D. 67
Titus	Paul	A.D. 64 or Summer A.D. 66*
Philemon	Paul	A.D. 60 or Fall A.D. 61*
Hebrews	Unknown	A.D. 64–68
James	James the brother of Jesus	A.D. 45–50
1 Peter	Peter	A.D. 63–67
2 Peter	Peter	A.D. 63–67
1 John	John	A.D. 90
2 John	John	A.D. 90
3 John	John	A.D. 90
Jude	Jude the brother of Jesus	A.D. 60s or 70s
Revelation	John	A.D. 90s
<p>* Dates followed by an asterisk (*) are based on the calculations of New Testament scholar and author Harold W. Hoehner. A complete chronology of his calculations of the apostolic age can be found in H. Wayne House, <i>Chronological and Background Charts of the New Testament</i>, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 129–32.</p> <p>© 2011 H. Wayne House and Timothy J. Demy. All rights reserved.</p>		

The Bible is a marvelous work written by forty authors on three continents in three languages, using various forms of literature, over a period of 1,500 years—all the while maintaining a consistent message of a monotheistic God who has revealed Himself and His plan for the human race.

2. Who wrote the Bible?

The Bible is the joint effort of prophets and apostles of God and God Himself. The Bible has forty human authors, including farmers, shepherds, kings, prophets, and fishermen among others.

Regardless of their background, those who wrote the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures were literate men. We have witness in the New Testament that Paul and Luke wrote Scripture. Peter identifies letters from Paul as being among the Scriptures (2 Peter 3:15–16), and Paul quotes a statement by Luke (either from his book or possibly an oral statement) as Scripture (cf. Luke 10:7 with 1 Tim. 5:18).

Most important is that God wrote the Bible through these human agents. The apostle Paul said that the Scripture (written word of God) is breathed out by God (2 Tim. 3:16), and Peter says that men of God spoke from God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21).

3. Where were the biblical books written and to whom were they written?

Prophets of God largely wrote the books of the Old Testament within the country of Israel to its resident Israelites. Books such as Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon were written to the kingdom of Israel before it split into the northern and southern kingdoms.

Before the Babylonian captivity, the prophets wrote to either the northern or the southern kingdom. For example, Hosea, Amos, and Isaiah wrote to the northern kingdom, whereas Jeremiah, Joel, Micah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Obadiah, Nahum, and Zechariah wrote to Judah, the southern kingdom. Hosea wrote to both the northern and southern kingdoms, though predominantly to the north; and Jonah wrote to both kingdoms regarding Nineveh.

Ezekiel and Daniel wrote to the captives in Babylon. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Malachi, and Chronicles are postexilic and so were written to the restored kingdom of Israel after the beginning of the Persian conquest. We are uncertain as to the destination of books like Job.

The New Testament books were written from a variety of places by a number of different people. Matthew probably wrote his gospel from Antioch of Syria to the important church residing there.

John Mark wrote Peter's recollection of the gospel, possibly to the Christians in Alexandria. Luke, while he was with Paul in Israel, collected the information in his gospel from eyewitnesses of the words and events in the life of Jesus. Luke's gospel and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, were addressed to a noble Gentile by the name of Theophilus.

Paul's epistles were sent to a number of churches or individuals: Romans to the Christians at Rome; 1 and 2 Corinthians to the church at Corinth; Galatians to the Roman province in Galatia (southern Asia Minor); Ephesians to the church at Ephesus, though it may have been a circular letter to several churches in southwestern Asia Minor; Philippians to the church at Philippi (Macedonia); Colossians to the church at Colossae in Asia Minor (near Laodicea and Hierapolis); 1 and 2 Thessalonians to the church at Thessalonica. Paul wrote 1 and 2 Timothy to the pastor of the church at Ephesus; Titus to the pastor of the church in Crete; and Philemon to a slave owner who lived in Colossae.

Hebrews was written to the church in either Rome or Jerusalem, determined by the author's reference of "those from Italy greet you" (Heb. 13:24), which could refer to either. James, possibly the earlier New Testament book, addressed the Jewish Christians of the Diaspora. The letters 1 and 2 Peter went to Christians in the northern regions of Asia Minor. As for the letters of John, 1 John was written to a general Christian audience, possibly Asia Minor; 2 John was probably to either a local church or a woman in Asia Minor; and 3 John was to a Gentile believer, probably in Asia. Jude was written to unidentified Jewish Christians in a Gentile area; and Revelation was written to seven churches in southwestern Asia Minor.

4. In what languages was the Bible written?

Three languages were used by the human authors of the biblical text: Hebrew and Aramaic in the Old Testament, and Greek in the New Testament. Though like any language, these have changed

through the centuries, each is still spoken, written, and read by contemporary users. Greek is spoken in Cyprus and Greece, and Hebrew is the national language of Israel. Dialects of Aramaic are spoken in small areas of Turkey, Syria, Israel, Iraq, and Azerbaijan.

The geographic regions and societies of the ancient Near East of the Old Testament, and of the eastern Mediterranean of the New Testament, were rich in linguistic history. The books of the Bible, written over the course of more than 1,400 years, reflect that heritage. The world of the Old Testament encompassed languages such as Akkadian, Aramaic, Egyptian, Hebrew, Sumerian, and Ugaritic. Centuries later, the world of the New Testament included Aramaic, Greek, Sahidic Coptic, and Latin.

Hebrew

Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, the language of the Israelites (usually designated as either classical Hebrew or biblical Hebrew as opposed to later forms). The Hebrew alphabet has twenty-two letters (these can be seen in the acrostic Psalms such as Psalms 25 and 119). In 2 Kings 18:26–28 and Nehemiah 13:24, the language is called “the language of Judah,” and in Isaiah 19:18, it is called “the language of Canaan.” The Hebrew of the Old Testament as we know it covers the period of the first millennium B.C. and is a dialect of the earlier Old Canaanite. Since Moses lived before this time, it is sometimes asked what language he used in writing. Proto-Semitic inscriptions have been found that date to 1800 B.C. or earlier, so it is not implausible that Moses, who lived about 400 years later, could have used something similar to write the first five books of the Bible.³

Two different scripts of biblical Hebrew were used during the centuries in which the Old Testament books were written. The earlier script is known as paleo-Hebrew, and the later script is called Square script or Assyrian script.⁴ Over the centuries, the Square script was adopted as Hebrew was written and read, but during the four hundred years of the intertestamental period between the era

of the Old Testament and the era of the New Testament, Aramaic became the daily language of the Jews.

Aramaic

Although most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, five passages were written in Aramaic, which is very close to Hebrew and also has a twenty-two letter alphabet. The passages are Genesis 31:47, Jeremiah 10:11, Daniel 2:4–7:28, Ezra 4:8–6:18, and Ezra 7:12–26. Aramaic was widely used in the ancient Near East as the language of government, commerce, and trade, especially by the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians. It was the *lingua franca*, the common language, of the region until superseded by Greek during the era of the conquests of Alexander the Great. Jesus and the disciples spoke Aramaic, and there are occasional instances of Aramaic words or phrases in the New Testament, such as Jesus' cry from the cross in which he quoted Psalm 22:1: "About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?' that is, 'MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?'" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34).

Greek

Although Jesus, the disciples, and most early Christians spoke Aramaic (and possibly also Hebrew), the books of the New Testament were written in Greek.

Before his early death, Alexander III of Macedon (356–323 B.C.), commonly known as Alexander the Great, created one of the largest empires of the ancient world through his military conquests. Alexander's empire stretched from Greece through Persia and into India. Through the use of Greek, he unified his government, and Greek became the international language of trade and the vernacular of the Mediterranean region.

Eventually, the regional dialects of Greek gave way to Hellenistic, or *koine* ("common"), Greek. This style of Greek reflected simple, popular language and became the universal dialect of the ancient

world from ca. 300 B.C. to A.D. 300. It is the language in which the New Testament was written.

Even after Alexander's empire fell and the Roman Empire emerged, Greek remained the daily language for many people. Although Latin was the official language of the Roman Empire, it was used mainly by the government and military, and in administrative documents. Thus, the writers of the New Testament, such as Paul, were able to write their documents in Greek, knowing that they could be circulated throughout the empire with relative ease and without language barriers. Greek was a cosmopolitan language, easily adaptable to the then-worldwide culture. In much the same sense that English is an international language of commerce and communication today, so was Greek in the first-century world of Jesus. The vocabulary, grammar, and style of *koine* Greek were also integral to the history of the Bible and Bible translation, especially the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint (LXX), dating from about 250–100 B.C.

5. What Bible did Jesus and the apostles use?

The books of the New Testament were yet to be written during the life and ministry of Jesus on earth. It was the Hebrew Scriptures—known to Jews as the Tanak and to Christians today as the Old Testament—that were the Bible of Jesus' day. These were the Scriptures that were in use in the temple and synagogues.

Unlike today when many people own Bibles, personal copies of the Scriptures, in the form of scrolls, were rarely owned by individuals, except for perhaps the extremely wealthy. There were no personal Bibles, only the ones studied and used in the synagogues. Meticulous and accurate memorization of Scripture was common, and it was essential among the illiterate. Thus, the Bible of daily use would have been either the memorized Scriptures or the physical scroll used in the synagogue.⁵ The scrolls and Scriptures were highly regarded.

Although Greek was spoken throughout the Roman Empire

in the first century, nevertheless in Jerusalem and the surrounding area where Jesus lived and ministered, Aramaic was the daily language, and Hebrew was the language of the Scriptures read in the temple and synagogues. When Jesus read from the Scriptures in the synagogue in Nazareth, for example (cf. Luke 4:16–20), He read from a Hebrew text and then likely paraphrased in Aramaic. (Such paraphrases and translations, both verbal and written and often accompanied with commentary, were known as *targums*. An example is the category of manuscripts known as the Aramaic Targums.)⁶

A different issue involves quotes from the Old Testament by Jesus and others as recorded in the New Testament. Many of these quotes—especially those found in the gospels of Mark and Luke, which were written for broader audiences than Matthew’s primarily Jewish readers—reflect knowledge and usage of the Septuagint. The Septuagint, also known as the LXX, was the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and it was used widely outside of Palestine. Of its use, biblical scholars Gleason L. Archer and G. C. Chirichigno write:

The very reason for using the LXX was rooted in the missionary outreach of the evangelists and apostles of the early church. The LXX translation of the Old Testament had already found its way into every city of the Roman Empire to which the Jews of the Diaspora had gone. It was virtually the only form of the Old Testament in the hands of Jewish believers outside Palestine, and it was certainly the only available form for Gentile converts to the Jewish or Christian faiths.⁷

On the other hand, the special Hebrew Christian readers whom the evangelist Matthew addressed—and even more notably, the recipients of the epistle to the Hebrews—did not require the constant adherence to the LXX that was necessary for Gentile readers.

Hence, Matthew and Hebrews often quote from the Old Testament in a non-LXX form, normally one that is closer to the wording of the Hebrew original.

Jesus, the disciples, and the apostles certainly knew of the Septuagint, but the Scriptures in Hebrew would have been the ones they used. Interestingly, the Dead Sea Scrolls and writings from the Qumran community dating from about 130 B.C. to A.D. 68–73 are in Hebrew, showing the prominent usage of Hebrew during the time of Jesus.

6. Why are there four gospels?

The reader of the New Testament soon notices that the four gospels regarding the life and work of Jesus contain many similarities. However, each gospel also possesses special material not present in the others. This is particularly true of John's gospel, which is 98 percent unique.

The question that naturally arises is, why are there four gospels instead of one (or three, or five)? The question is impossible to answer since there is no practical or theological requirement for a certain number. All of the words and events recorded among the four gospels could certainly have been contained in just one writing. This is evident from both Church history and recent time. During the second century, in the Syrian branch of the church, a theologian by the name of Tatian blended all four gospels into one account called the Diatessaron (Greek for "through four"). He made all accounts to harmonize, removing any differences among the accounts. This *harmony* ("seeing as one") is different from a *synopsis* (from the Greek, "seeing together"), which describes the canonical gospels. In the Syrian church, Tatian's Diatessaron lasted until the fifth century, until it was finally replaced by the four Gospels in the Syrian Peshitta.

Johnston M. Cheney, in *The Life of Christ in Stereo*, made a more recent attempt at creating a single, unified account.⁸ While such attempts furnish an easy and continuous flow of the life of

Christ and to some degree remove difficulties in the text, the four Gospels have provided a critical service in the development of Christianity from the mid-first century A.D. until the present. The four approaches to Christ's words and works provided accounts that resonated with readers of the Jewish, Roman, and Greek worlds, presenting aspects of Jesus that made sense to them in their distinct cultural settings. These were not contradictory presentations, but views of Jesus that portrayed the many sides of Jesus' full-orbed person.

We see this first in Matthew's gospel. It was most likely addressed to Jews in Antioch of Syria, who understood the link between Jesus the Messiah and Jesus the hope of Israel as Son of Abraham and Son of David. These Jews no doubt had questions regarding the anticipated future of Israel that would occur when Messiah came. Since this future had not yet arrived, Matthew broadened his readers' understanding to realize that Messiah's coming, death, and resurrection also embraced the Gentiles, culminating with the Great Commission to disciple the non-Jewish world.

Mark's gospel was for the Roman, who would hardly have understood or appreciated the beginning of Matthew with its genealogy. Instead, Mark presented Jesus as the servant of God who came to serve humanity and redeem all people. The fast pace of the book would have appealed to the Roman mentality.

The gospel of Luke revealed a real man, a perfect man, and a Savior. The physician Luke was interested in Jesus as a person of compassion who cared for the poor, the sick, the disenfranchised, and women. Jesus was a man worth following and emulating.

John's gospel, as indicated earlier, was almost entirely different from the others. Why is this so? John wrote his gospel possibly thirty to forty years after the other gospels. Those gospels, or the oral traditions on which they were built, had traveled throughout much of the Roman world. So in writing his own gospel, why would John have simply repeated what others had already said? In chapter twenty, John indicated that Jesus did many other

things—presumably such as found in the other gospels—that John did not include in his writing. Rather, John provided much new material, especially discourses of Jesus, which the other gospel writers did not mention.

Moreover, John painted a picture of Jesus as the Son of God, the Savior of all humanity. The person Jesus was both God and man. He was eternal with the Father, yet He tabernacled among humans to show them the way to God the Father through Himself.

Through the Gospels, God chose to reveal His Son in four ways: as Messiah King, as Suffering Servant, as Perfect Man, and as God in the flesh. Only with this full-orbed view of Jesus do we really come to understand who He is, and the four Gospels give us such a view.