

those who read his Gospel to know that before any important decision, we too should pray to God.

No doubt the other three Gospel-writers believed in prayer too; but they never stress it so much as Luke.

4

The Four Gospels

Matthew

1 One of the twelve disciples?

Matthew clearly longed to persuade Jews to accept the teachings of Jesus and to agree that Jesus was the long-expected king of the Jews. He wrote as a Christian Jew for his fellow-Jews. A very early tradition says that this Gospel-writer was one of Jesus's twelve closest apostles — a former tax-collector who lived in Capernaum — and that the Gospel was written in Aramaic (which was Jesus's own language).

Aramaic or
Greek?

If this is so, our present Gospel is a translation of this Aramaic original, since it has come down to us in Greek. This is something we simply cannot be sure about. If, as most modern scholars believe, Matthew copied part of his Gospel from Mark, it is hard to accept that he was one of the twelve disciples. Why should a man who had been with Jesus almost from the beginning use the evidence of a writer who had never seen Jesus face-to-face? So we can't be certain who Matthew was.

2 Defending Christianity

We can see that he committed himself strongly to the early church. Since some Jews at this time had turned against the Christians, Matthew seems to have longed for an equally strong organisation to defend Christianity against those who were increasingly attacking it. (Chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel sets out rules for dealing with a fellow-Christian who is straying. The section Matthew chapter 18, verses 15 to 20 is one of only two in the four Gospels which actually uses the

The church



St Matthew
from Butler's
*Lives of the
Saints*

Organised
church

word church. The other is two chapters earlier — in the section Matthew chapter 16, verses 13 to 20. Both these sections can be read to give the flavour of Matthew's thinking.) He wants a morally stern church, with a properly agreed organisation. At the same time he wishes Christians to treat each other with great gentleness, even when one has offended another. And he finds suitable stories from the life of Jesus to support his attitude.

3 The Old Testament prophecies fulfilled

Writing for
fellow Jews

Old
Testament

Jews wanted
political leader

In his desire to convince the Jews that Jesus is the promised saviour as proclaimed in the Old Testament, Matthew refers to the Old Testament more than 130 times and explicitly quotes it 43 times. Many events which seem to happen by chance are explained by Matthew as mysteriously developing out of something predicted in the Old Testament (for example, when the enemies of Jesus — seeing that their ally, the former disciple Judas, has hanged himself — take back their bribe of thirty pieces of silver, Matthew in chapter 27, verses 9 and 10, says they used the money to bring about a prophecy of the Old Testament writer Jeremiah). For Matthew, the Old Testament foretells the New.

Matthew's close concern with the Old Testament becomes extremely important when he sets about showing who Jesus really was. A good many Jews at this time were looking for a Messiah (the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word 'Christ') who would take on the Romans in battle on their behalf. They wanted a political leader. Matthew continually insists that Jesus is come as ruler of the *kingdom of heaven*. He records many parables in which Jesus describes what this kingdom of heaven is like (see, for example, chapter 20, verses 1 to 16, and chapter 22, verses 1 to 14). But when his disciple Peter wishes to fight to defend Jesus against those who come to capture him, Jesus makes him put his sword away. Matthew has Jesus insist that what is happening, including his arrest and imminent death, is all to fulfil the Old Testament prophecies.

4 Matthew writes like a Jewish rabbi

Patterns

The rabbis taught often by suggesting groups of ideas — in threes or sevens — and so does Matthew. He even presents Jesus as a teacher, gathering together five great lessons, each one in the form of a powerful lecture:

- 1 The Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5 to 7)
- 2 Teaching for the disciples who are to go to preach to others (chapter 10)
- 3 Teaching by means of seven parables about the kingdom of heaven (chapter 13, verses 1 to 52)
- 4 Teaching about the rules for the church (chapter 18)

5 Teaching about the final coming of the kingdom of heaven (chapters 24 and 25)

Matthew also loved patterns in his writing. Consider the name he gives to Jesus in his first chapter (verse 23): Emmanuel, which means God with us. For twenty-eight more chapters Matthew never refers explicitly to the idea that Jesus brings God to us. Then, in the very last verse of his Gospel he quotes Jesus as saying, 'Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the world.'

Not surprisingly, we can spot such a pattern running through the whole of Matthew's Gospel. A prologue reveals the mystery of Jesus (chapters 1 and 2). Why do three mysterious wise men from the east bring gifts to an obscure baby in Bethlehem? How can such a baby, born of a virgin, be descended from Abraham, the father of the Jews?

Seven stages

In seven stages, the rest of the Gospel answers these questions:

- 1 God announces that this baby is his son — a son whom Satan fails to corrupt (chapters 3 and 4).
- 2 Jesus, by miracles which follow his Sermon on the Mount, himself announces that God's kingdom has arrived (chapters 5 to 9).
- 3 First Jesus's disciples and then Jesus himself announce to the Jewish world the good news of the kingdom (chapters 10 to 12); Jesus himself is bringing that kingdom to men and women on earth.
- 4 Men and women must respond to all this: do they accept that Jesus is the son of God and the longed-for successor of Abraham? Jesus speaks of this in seven parables and then Peter, his chief disciple, declares that Jesus is 'the Christ, the son of the living God'. Jesus now describes Peter as the first of all those who shall follow him (chapter 13 to chapter 16, verse 20).
- 5 Jesus teaches his disciples about suffering as the way to bring about his kingdom. He proclaims his own death (chapter 16, verse 21, to the end of chapter 17).
- 6 The kingdom of God is revealed as the church (chapters 18 to 23).
- 7 Jesus decisively brings into being the kingdom of heaven by submitting himself to death at the hands of wicked men

and women. After rising from death, he commands his disciples to persuade men and women throughout the world to follow him (chapters 24 to 28).

QUESTIONS

- 1 The story of the wise men worshipping the infant Jesus is found only in Gospel.
- 2 The Lord's Prayer is found only in the Gospels of and
- 3 Only the Gospel of sets out Jesus's Sermon on the Mount.
- 4 Give three examples of how Matthew in his Gospel tried to persuade the Jews to accept the teachings of Jesus.
- 5 Using three examples, illustrate how Matthew tried to convince the Jews that Jesus was the promised saviour as proclaimed in the Old Testament.
- 6 Make a plan, setting out the stages of Matthew's Gospel.

Mark

1 An exciting story

Mark's Gospel, as a British scholar (William Neil) once observed, 'has a notably staccato effect. Few words are wasted.' He starts off immediately by presenting his readers with what he regards as the most important information they shall ever be given. The very first verse of the Gospel describes Jesus as the Christ, the son of God, adding that this is the start of good news for mankind.

This staccato effect continues throughout the whole Gospel. As a result Mark is an exciting read, a fast read (and sometimes a frightening read). Mark is a brilliant story-teller. In a few words he can sum up a character and what that person is feeling. (Read, for example, in Mark chapter 5, verses 25 to 34, the story of the woman too scared to ask Jesus to cure her illness. Imagine all the different emotions she feels in such a short time.)

Everything moves at a sparkling pace in Mark. His is the shortest of the four Gospels. He does not bother to give many details of how times passes. He tells us that Jesus did something 'immediately' or 'after some days'. Mark does not

Powerful writing

expect his readers to care how much time elapsed between the extraordinary things Jesus did and said.

2 Where did Mark obtain his information?

He did not get it from the other Gospels, since his was written first. About the year AD 135 a writer named Papias asserted that Mark was the interpreter of Jesus's leading disciple Peter. This could very well be true. In the Acts of the Apostles we read about a Mark whose mother had a house in Jerusalem used by the first Christians, including Peter. The first letter of Peter also describes a certain Mark as a loving friend.

Peter's interpreter?

Peter probably was crucified in Rome, and Mark's Gospel certainly betrays a Roman origin. Writing for a non-Jewish community, he translates Jewish words; but he also translates Roman terms, since his readers were Greeks. So, as well as the stories Peter told him, Mark could also draw on the memories of Christians in Rome who had learned about Jesus (or even known him).

Roman Christians as source

In addition Mark drew on stories about Jesus already written down. We can see this because he sometimes tells the same story twice. Look at the following two sequences side by side.

Written sources

Mark chapter 6, verse 34, to chapter 7, verse 37:	Mark chapter 8, verses 1 to 26:
Jesus feeds five thousand people (Jesus walks on water)	Jesus feeds four thousand people
Jesus crosses a lake	Jesus crosses a lake
Jesus argues with Pharisees	Jesus argues with Pharisees
(Jesus meets a Syro-Phoenician woman)	
Jesus heals a deaf-mute	Jesus heals a blind man

Here is the same sequence of events in Jesus's life, used twice by Mark. He must have found them already written down in two separate documents and incorporated both in his Gospel.

3 The first Gospel

Taking all these elements:

Peter's memories,
stories about Jesus learned from others,
written sources,

Mark wove them into the first Gospel of the Christian church. If we study chapter 13 we can guess almost exactly *when* he wrote. Between AD 66 and 70 Jewish heroes took to the hills and began to fight against their Roman masters. In AD 70 the Romans destroyed the Jerusalem Temple.

Mark makes Jesus foresee all this. Perhaps Jesus did foresee it; but Mark's detailed descriptions of the horrors of the Jewish wars and the destruction of the Temple suggest that he knew exactly what had happened. (Read especially chapter 13, verse 14: 'But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.') So we assume that Mark wrote this first Gospel around the year AD 70, since he refers to events happening then.

Written around AD 70

The other three Gospels are longer than Mark's. He omits: *at the beginning*, any account of Jesus as a baby or young man; *at the end*, any account of an appearance of the risen Jesus to his followers.

No appearance of risen Christ

This is very startling — until one realises that Mark puts the first followers of Jesus into our own position: they have to believe in the resurrection of Jesus without having seen him bodily. A Gallup Poll in 1984 asked members of the Church of England the following:

'Some people have believed and still believe, that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead, three days after his crucifixion. Others have suggested that after the crucifixion Jesus was not raised bodily from the dead, but made his personality and presence known to his disciples in a spiritual but not bodily way. Which if either of these two views comes closest to your own, or have you got no views on these topics?'

No more than 52 per cent of Anglican lay members said they believed Jesus rose bodily from the dead. Nearly a third replied that in their view Jesus was not raised bodily, but

made his personality and presence known to his disciples only spiritually.

Clearly some Christians do not need believe in a bodily resurrection. Mark's Gospel gives us no evidence that there was one.

4 Mark has several special themes

He emphasises these themes throughout his Gospel. First he wrestles with the question: why did people not recognise that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah? He decides that Jesus deliberately concealed the truth from people who were not worthy to receive it. When Jesus spoke in parables, Mark says this was not to open people's eyes to a new truth. The parables were spoken to conceal the truth from the foolish. Only those who were closest to Jesus could understand them. And when in Mark chapter 8 Peter declares that he believes Jesus to be the Christ, Jesus orders his disciples to tell nobody this. We call all this deliberate concealment of the truth about Jesus the Messianic secret.

Messianic
secret

Next Mark asks why Jesus should have suffered so much. God sent him to save men and women from their fears, their faults, their sins. Did it all go wrong? Mark tries to show that God often uses apparent failure to produce wonderful results. The prophet Isaiah (in chapter 53) wrote of a servant of God who would be despised and rejected by men. Mark sees Jesus as such a suffering servant. In chapter 8 he tells us that Jesus began to teach his disciples that the son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

The suffering
servant

Mark also knew that Christians in his day were suffering persecution. The Emperor Nero had killed many of them. Mark showed how Jesus had suffered in his day just as Christians were now suffering. He reminded Christians that Jesus warned them they would suffer too. He also wrote down Jesus's promises that those who were willing to put up with such treatment would find their reward in heaven. (Read on this Mark chapter 8, verses 34 to 38, and chapter 10, verses 28 to 30.)

QUESTIONS

- 1 Write down the name of the Gospel which, in the opinion of most scholars, was the first to be written. What is its approximate date?
- 2 One Gospel-writer claimed to be the specially beloved disciple of Jesus. Who was he?
- 3 The Sermon on the Mount is to be found in Gospel. (Write down the Gospel's name.)
- 4 Why do the writers of the four Gospels not present their accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus in the same order?
- 5 Which Gospel-writer was fascinated by prayer?
- 6 Write down five points you have learned about Matthew.
- 7 Make a plan which sets out the stages of Matthew's Gospel.
- 8 Which is the shortest of the four Gospels?
- 9 Mark sometimes tells the same story twice, though in slightly different ways. Give three examples of this.
- 10 The other three Gospels are longer than Mark's. What important parts of the life and teaching of Jesus does Mark omit?
- 11 Mark was brilliant at telling stories. Illustrate the truth of this, using three stories from his Gospel.
- 12 What did Mark write about:
 - 1 parables?
 - 2 why Jesus suffered?
 - 3 why people failed to spot that Jesus claimed to be the Christ?

Luke

1 The Greek companion of the Apostle Paul

Luke, whose Gospel stands third in the books of our present New Testament, was the best educated, most cultivated of the four Gospel-writers. He is also the only writer of a New Testament book who was not a Jew.

Luke was a Greek. He was a companion of Paul the Apostle on several missionary journeys, and he wrote about these as well as writing his Gospel. The Acts of the Apostles, his second book, in fact follows immediately on the Gospel, taking up the story after Jesus had ascended to heaven. Many New Testament writers faced up to the problem that

Best educated
Gospel-writer



St Luke from the Lindisfarne Gospels

while the earliest Christians had expected Jesus to come back again almost immediately, this didn't happen. Luke believed that in a sense he had come back. His Holy Spirit inspired his followers, showed them what to do, strengthened them in any difficulty or disaster. Luke's Gospel is far more interested in the work of this Holy Spirit (which is God's spirit as well as Jesus's) than are Matthew, Mark or John. The Holy Spirit, he says, 'came upon' the Virgin Mary when she conceived Jesus. John the Baptist's mother Elizabeth was 'filled with the Holy Spirit'. Eventually (in his Acts of the Apostles), after Jesus had gone to heaven all his

Interest in the Holy Spirit

disciples sat together in a room in Jerusalem and 'were all filled with the Holy Spirit'. The Holy Spirit, in Luke's view, continued Jesus's work on earth.

Doctor

St Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, calls Luke the beloved doctor. There is an entertaining confirmation of this in his Gospel. We have already looked at Mark's story of a woman who was healed by touching the hem of Jesus's clothing (Mark chapter 5, verses 25 to 34). Mark says she 'had suffered a great deal under many doctors, and had spent all her money on them, and was no better but rather grew worse'. Luke tells all this story, which he copies from Mark; but he obviously did not like this criticism of his own profession, and at this point all he says is that the woman had suffered for twelve years 'and could not be healed by anyone' (Luke chapter 8, verses 43 to 48).

2 The historian

Curiously enough, unlike Matthew, Mark and John, Luke does not claim to be writing a 'Gospel', that is giving the 'good news' about Jesus. He sets out instead to be an historian. Like other historians of his time, he dedicates his book to an important person (Luke calls him 'most excellent Theophilus'; Theophilus means 'lover of God'). At the beginning of his Gospel, Luke writes that he knows many others have compiled a 'narrative' of what has happened in Palestine as a result of the coming of Jesus. They have done so using the evidence of those who saw it for themselves. Now Luke says he wishes to do the same.

Concern for facts and dates

Again and again he mentions what is happening in world affairs, in order to date what Jesus did. John the Baptist began to teach and preach, he says:

- 1 when Tiberius Caesar had reigned for fifteen years;
- 2 when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea;
- 3 when Herod ruled in Galilee;
- 4 when Herod's brother Philip ruled in the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis;
- 5 when Lysanias ruled over Abilene;
- 6 when Annas and Caiaphas were high priests in Jerusalem.

(Luke chapter 3, verses 1 to 2)

Here is a Gospel-writer extremely careful that his facts and dates are correct.

3 A Gospel for all people

As a non-Jew Luke wants to stress that Jesus came for the whole world, not just for his own people. He likes to quote words of Jesus which praise non-Jews (read chapter 4, verses 25 to 27). At the end of his Gospel Luke tells us that Jesus said that 'repentance and forgiveness should be preached to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem'. So his is a Gospel for all people.

A non-Jewish view

It is also a Gospel for the downtrodden and the outcast. In Jesus's time shepherds were considered very lowly people. It is no accident that whereas Matthew tells us about wise men from the east who came to worship the infant Jesus, in Luke these are replaced by shepherds — the first to hear that the saviour has been born.

Concern for downtrodden

Shepherds replace wise men

Women too in Jesus's time were often despised. Luke makes a special effort to show their devotion to Jesus and Jesus's care for them. The sinner Mary Magdalene; a widow who could scarcely find enough money to pay the Temple collection; Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus; women who come to Jesus's tomb: all these are painted with great tenderness by Luke.

Concern for women

His Gospel is also, he writes, one addressed to the poor. Mary, learning that she is to be the mother of Jesus, sings a song in Luke, chapter 1, which proclaims:

Concern for poor

God 'has put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted those of low degree;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.'

The Holy Spirit anoints Jesus 'to preach good news to the poor' (Luke chapter 4, verse 18). Jesus tells John the Baptist that he is preaching 'good news to the poor'.

This love for the poor is found in parables recorded by Luke. Read chapter 14, verses 7 to 14. The conclusion of this parable is:

'When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or your rich neighbours, in the hope that they will invite you in return and you will be repaid. Instead, when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.'

The rich man and poor Lazarus

Luke alone tells Jesus's parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus (chapter 16, verses 19 to 31). Lazarus lies outside the gates of the rich man's dwelling. He is covered in ulcerating sores. All he has to eat are crumbs which fall from the rich man's table. The rich man never notices him until — after death and tormented in hell — he sees poor Lazarus, now in paradise, comforted by Abraham. Luke stresses that we cannot be the friend of God and at the same time love material things. The poor have no such temptations. The poor, Luke says (quoting Jesus), are blessed.

Below: Christ in the house of Martha and Mary by Jan Vermeer



4 The five stages of the Gospel

Five stages

As with Matthew (pages 19–20) and Mark (pages 9–10), we can make a plan setting out the various stages of Luke's Gospel. The Gospel falls into five parts:

- 1 A short introduction, saying why Luke wrote his Gospel and how he found his sources (chapter 1, verses 1 to 4)
- 2 The birth and boyhood of Jesus (chapter 1, verse 5, to chapter 2, verse 52. NB no other Gospel-writer tells us about Jesus as a boy)
- 3 Jesus in Galilee (chapter 4, verse 14, to chapter 9, verse 50. NB this includes the Sermon on the Plain — Luke's equivalent of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount)
- 4 Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God (chapter 9, verse 51, to chapter 18, verse 30)
- 5 Holy Week — the last eight days of Jesus's life on earth (chapter 18, verse 31, to chapter 24, verse 53)

Acts continues the story

Remember, however, that Luke's story does not end here. The history he is recounting continues in the Acts of the Apostles. Here Luke tells us that Jesus, after his resurrection, spent another forty days with his disciples, before ascending into heaven.

5 Luke's special teaching

4 parables only in Luke

Section 4 of the plan above contains Luke's special teaching. Other sections of his Gospel, as we have seen, have their own special traits. But in the nine or so chapters that form section 4 Luke tells us much about Jesus's teaching that is not stressed elsewhere in the Gospels. The section contains, for instance, four parables found only in Luke's Gospel:

- 1 The parable of the good Samaritan
Jesus here transforms the notion of a 'neighbour'. This parable reveals Jesus ignoring any barriers of race or belief, in the interests of simply doing good to a person in need.

(Luke chapter 10, verses 30 to 37)

- 2 The parable of the prodigal son

Luke's special material tells us that Jesus believed there was more joy in heaven when one wayward person came to his senses than over ninety-nine 'good' people, who looked down on the sinner because they had never fallen into such straits.

(Luke chapter 15, verses 11 to 32)

- 3 The parable of the rich man and Lazarus
This shows God's attitude to the selfish rich and to the poor.
(Luke chapter 16, verses 19 to 31)
- 4 The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector
Another parable told by Jesus (Luke says) 'to some who trusted in themselves and despised others'. The Pharisee prays in the Temple simply to praise himself — foolishly to tell God how good his servant has been. The tax collector can think of nothing to say in defence of himself. The conclusion of the parable is that the tax collector leaves the Temple in greater favour with God than the Pharisee, 'for (Jesus said) every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.'

(Luke chapter 18, verses 9 to 14)

6 The compassionate Gospel

Jesus's care for lost sinners

Luke's Gospel, then, is a humane one. He presents an extremely compassionate Jesus. A tiny parable, found only in Luke, emphasises Jesus's care for the lost sinner, the person who has gone astray, whom God still loves and wishes to reclaim:

'Is there a woman who possesses ten silver coins, loses one and does not light a lamp and sweep everywhere in her house and look with the utmost care until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls all her friends and neighbours together and cries, "Be happy with me: I have found the coin I had lost." Just so, I tell you, the angels of God rejoice over one sinner who repents.'

(Luke chapter 15, verses 8 to 10)

Enemies of Jesus

Jesus, Luke says, told this parable when the Pharisees and scribes were criticising him for showing friendship to sinners and even eating with them. Of course his words greatly angered them. Shortly after this section of Luke's Gospel we are not surprised to read (chapter 19, verse 47) that 'the chief

priests and the scribes sought to destroy him'. At that moment the people who loved Jesus prevented this. But soon his enemies succeeded in crucifying him.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Luke was a and a companion of on several missionary journeys. (Fill in the missing words.)
- 2 Give two reasons why we think that Luke was a doctor of medicine.
- 3 As a historian Luke was especially interested in world affairs at the time of Jesus. Give three examples of this interest, taken from his Gospel.
- 4 In his writings, Luke shows women as especially devoted to Jesus. Give two examples of this.
- 5 Tell one story showing Luke's attitude to prayer.
- 6 Luke's Gospel falls into five parts. Name them.
- 7 Luke presents a Jesus designed to appeal to non-Jewish readers. Illustrate this statement by using three examples from his Gospel.

John

1 When was it written?

John's Gospel is so different from the other three Gospels of the Bible that for many years scholars assumed that it must have been written many many years later. Twentieth-century discoveries proved them wrong.

In 1935 an ancient fragment of the Gospel was published. It is now in the John Rylands Library, Manchester. Although it only contains tiny sections of John's Gospel (on one side chapter 18, verses 31 to 33; on the other side chapter 18, verses 37 and 38), undoubtedly this is part of the whole Gospel. Scientists can without any doubt date this fragment around the year AD 150, if not slightly earlier. The fragment was found in Egypt. So we must conclude that if a Gospel about events in Palestine could have reached Egypt by 150 AD at the latest, it must have been written maybe even fifty years earlier. John's Gospel, we now think, was written between AD 90 and 100.

Fragment found

More evidence for early date

Another reason — alongside the evidence of this early fragment from Egypt — has been offered to support the notion that John's Gospel was written before the end of the first century AD. Some passages in the Gospel — which we now have in Greek — are quite obscure. They make sense if we see them as an imperfect translation from Aramaic. If the Gospel was first written in Aramaic and then translated into Greek, that must have been quite early in the history of Christianity: for Greek soon became the language of every Christian writing.

2 Different from the other Gospels

Spiritual Gospel

Yet John is still very different from the other three Gospels. Eusebius called it a spiritual Gospel. He meant that, while the other three give the physical events of Jesus's life, John shows their hidden meaning. This is unfair to Matthew, Mark and Luke. All three want to show the hidden depths of Jesus's life and teaching. But John does explicitly state (chapter 16, verses 12 and 13) that Jesus had many things to tell his disciples that they were not yet ready for. The Holy Spirit would teach them these things. John clearly implies

Below: A fragment of St John's Gospel



New
revelations

that he is now telling his readers some of these new revelations.

Long
discourses

John is notable for long discourses by Jesus, none of which are found in any other Gospel. Indeed, nothing like them is found in any other Gospel. You can read these discourses in the following sections of John's Gospel:

- 1 Chapter 13, verse 31, to chapter 14, verse 31, where Jesus tells his disciples about his own 'glorification' and about the Holy Spirit
- 2 Chapters 15 to 17, where Jesus talks about how we should live in his love and where he prays for his disciples

It is of course possible that Jesus spoke to his disciples in these ways. But how did John write them down seventy or more years later? Was anyone sitting at Jesus's feet taking it all down? This seems unlikely.

Perhaps these are John's own meditations on the life and teaching of Jesus. They contain some of the most remarkable sayings of Jesus:

'Do not let your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my father's house are many rooms. If this were not true, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?'

'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father but by me.'

'I am the vine; you are the branches. Live in me and I will live in you.'

'This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.'

Notice how some of these sayings begin with the words 'I am'. John knew that in the Old Testament is the story of God revealing his name to Moses. God said to Moses: 'I AM WHO I AM'. God also said to Moses, 'say this to the people of Israel, "I AM has sent me to you."'

It is a deliberate identification with God when John tells us that Jesus says 'I am'. Jesus is showing us — through himself — more of God's character. He is really claiming to be akin

I am

Heightened
language

to God. He says: 'Before Abraham was, I am,' (chapter 8, verse 58); and (two chapters later), 'I and the father are one.'

But we still have to ask: did Jesus really say these things? Nothing like them occurs in the other three Gospels.

3 The poet

Many Christians have decided that John was a kind of poet. A poet, looking back on the life of someone he or she loved, uses heightened language to describe that person. Walter de la Mare once wrote an epitaph on a beautiful lady:

Here lies a most beautiful lady:
Light of step and heart was she;
I think she was the most beautiful lady
That ever was in the West Country.

Now many other equally beautiful ladies must once have lived in the West Country. Walter de la Mare knew that with part of his mind. But his special lady was, to him, more beautiful than any other. He is not misleading us to say so.

Secondly, the poet pretends that his epitaph is found on a real tombstone. The poem has four more lines:

But beauty vanishes; beauty passes;
However rare — rare it be;
And when I crumble, who will remember
This lady of the West Country?

Again, Walter de la Mare is not tricking anybody by writing about an imaginary gravestone. He is not lying. He is writing poetry.

The idea of a gravestone crumbling (as human beings also crumble into dust when they die) expresses all he wants to say about how even the most beautiful people die and can be forgotten. This is the best way he can think of to bring home this truth to us. The gravestone is a poetic image.

John, writing about Jesus, uses poetic images like this. In John's Gospel we find Jesus using these images about himself. Jesus says:

'I am the light of the world'
'I am the bread of life'
'I am the good shepherd'
'I am the door for the sheep'
'I am the true vine'

Poetic images



Now we know that Jesus was not a shepherd, for instance. He was a carpenter. Obviously he wasn't a door, or a light, or a vine or bread.

But John, in writing these words down, is not tricking us or having Jesus tell lies. These are all poetic images. They are the best way John can find of bringing home to us who Jesus was.

Let us briefly look at two of them. First, in chapter 10, Jesus talks of the dangers to sheep — from robbers, from wolves, from shepherds who don't care about looking after the sheep. So sheep need to know where they can rest in safety. Jesus suggests that he can lead them to safety:

* 'I am the door,' he says, 'if anyone enters by me, he will go in and out and find pasture.'

(chapter 10, verse 9)

Next, sheep need a shepherd they can trust, someone who loves sheep, not someone who will let them stray and who is doing the work just for the pay.

* 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'

(chapter 10, verse 11)

Below: *The Good Shepherd*, a mosaic in Ravenna, Italy



All we need to ask now is 'Who are the sheep?' Is the answer 'Lost human beings, in search of a leader they can trust'?

4 Who was John?

The beloved disciple

Who would dare present this wholly original picture of Jesus? The author of this fourth Gospel describes himself as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved.' At the Last Supper Jesus's disciple John lay closest to him. This man was the brother of a disciple called James. He worked with Peter and Andrew, two of the first disciples chosen by Jesus. Jesus had a nickname for John and James: 'the sons of thunder'. One so close to his master might have dared put words into Jesus's mouth.

John at Ephesus

Early in the second century AD a bishop of Ephesus wrote that John, the beloved disciple, lay buried at Ephesus in Asia Minor. This could give us a clue about where the Gospel was written. About fifty years later Irenaeus, who was Bishop of Lyons in France, definitely stated that John wrote this Gospel at Ephesus.

But none of this really affects the fact that here we can read one of the most original minds ever to brood about and then write about the life and teaching of Jesus. Towards the end of his life a brilliant theologian (C H Dodd) declared:

'the gospel is so original and creative that a search for its "sources" or even for the "influences" by which it may have been affected, may easily lead us astray. Whatever influences may have been present have been masterfully controlled by a powerful and independent mind. There is no book, either in the New Testament or outside it, which is really *like* the Fourth Gospel.'

(*The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge University Press)

5 The seven miracle-signs

Seven signs

As with the other three Gospels, we can make a plan of John's. He bases his Gospel on seven miracles of Jesus. But — very significantly — he does not call them miracles. For John they are all *signs*.

A signpost points towards something. If you are in Devonshire and come across a signpost with the name of

Water into wine

(say) 'Totnes', you know you haven't reached that town. The signpost points you towards Totnes.

Now John did not agree with people who simply wanted to see miracles and marvel at them. He wanted us to see where Jesus's miracles were pointing. At a wedding the guests ran out of wine. Jesus turned water into wine for them. John says, 'Jesus did this, his first sign, at Cana in Galilee, and showed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.' (chapter 2, verse 11)

Not everyone saw where the sign of turning water into wine was pointing. Only his disciples understood. Jesus was 'showing his glory'. He was also making wonderful the most ordinary things: turning water into wine, and ordinary people into saints.

The other six miracle-signs in John's Gospel are:

- 1 Healing a sick boy (chapter 4, verses 46 to 54). Verse 54 reads: 'This was the second sign that Jesus did, when he had left Judea and come into Galilee.'
- 2 Feeding five thousand people (chapter 6, verses 1 to 14)
- 3 Walking on water (chapter 6, verses 16 to 21)
- 4 Healing a blind man (chapter 9, verses 1 to 7). In the previous chapter Jesus says, 'I am the light of the world,' and this sign points to this claim.
- 5 Jesus raises Lazarus from death (chapter 11, verses 1 to 44). In verse 25 Jesus says 'I am resurrection and life.' Again the sign points to this claim.
- 6 Jesus himself is raised from death (chapter 20 and chapter 21).

6 'I am the bread of life'

John has another special interest — found in the other three Gospels but very much dwelt on in his: the Eucharist (or Holy Communion). As we shall see, Jesus at his last meal on earth with the disciples before his crucifixion told them to continue meeting together to break bread and share wine, in memory of him. Of the bread he said, 'This is my body,' of the wine he said, 'This is my blood'.

You can read this story of the Last Supper in the other three Gospels (or in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11, verses 23 to 26). John does not tell us the story. He assumed that all of his readers knew it, and that they met

The Eucharist

The Last Supper

Another sign

Feeding the 5000

each week for what they called the Eucharist, that is, to share this bread and wine.

For John this meal is another kind of sign, pointing to what Jesus means for us. John seems to have the meal in his mind nearly all through his Gospel, and especially when Jesus fed five thousand people at once. At that time, according to John, Jesus spoke about being 'the bread of life'. He said:

'I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live for ever. The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

(chapter 6, verse 51)

The Eucharist points to Jesus as the bread of life. Jesus promises to give us eternal life. But he knows he is going to be crucified first.

All this John puts into the poetic image, 'I am the bread of life'.



1 Fill in the word missing from this quotation:

'This deed at Cana-in-Galilee is the first of the by which Jesus revealed his glory and led his disciples to believe in him.'

(John chapter 2, verse 11)

- 2 When do we think John's Gospel was written: AD 70–80, AD 90–100, or AD 120–150?
- 3 Why is John's Gospel called a 'spiritual' Gospel?
- 4 John quotes several 'I am' sayings by Jesus. Give *three* examples.
- 5 'The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.' Who are 'the sheep'?
- 6 John describes seven miracles or signs. Write about *three* of them.
- 7 Explain how the Eucharist is for John a sign, mentioning especially words and actions of Jesus which John describes in his Gospel.
- 8 Make a plan of the way John's Gospel proceeds from beginning to end.