

THY KINGDOM COME

1. Introduction to the New Testament

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**A Teaching Commentary
of the New Testament**

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1. Introduction

By the time the first century arrived, God had been reaching out to man for thousands of years. Nobody really knows the date and time when God first breathed life into Adam. Some Bible students have estimated that around 2000 years elapsed between the creation of Adam and the call of Abraham, and then another 2000 between the call of Abraham and the coming of Jesus. It is speculation at best. We do know that over the course of very many years, God had tried to reconcile fallen man to himself. He called Abraham into service. The descendants of Abraham, through Isaac and Jacob, were to be his chosen people, his nation of priests to the rest of the world. They were called to bear a message of love, devotion, and reconciliation to the fallen world around them. Unfortunately these chosen people would not live up to the task.

God revealed his standards to his people through Moses. The overriding theme of the law was

- (1) have single-hearted devotion to God, avoiding idols (i.e. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." Matthew 22:37) and
- (2) take care of your fellow man (i.e. "Love your neighbor as yourself." Matthew 22:39).

Once they had these standards, the people promptly began to pursue idol worship and to take advantage of one another.

Time and again, God tried to call the people back to a right relationship with him. He did this in a number of ways. Sometimes he would withdraw his presence (i.e. protection) from them and allow them to be harassed by their enemies. When things got painful they would cry to him for help. They would repent and turn to him. Other times he sent prophets to them – messengers who would faithfully declare his Word, even though it meant confronting the people's sin. The people had little tolerance for the message.

As time passed, the people received a full revelation of the nature of God, of his standards for us, and of how we are to relate to him and to each other. By the time of Malachi, they had volumes full of the Word of God. They had the Law. They had the writings of the prophets. They had the other writings, such as Psalms and Proverbs. They had no shortage of the Word. They just never really bent themselves to be obedient to it.

Thus, in the fullness of time, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) Philippians 2:6-7 tells us of Jesus, "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." Jesus, the Son of God, who participated in creation, took on the form of a creature. He voided himself of his divine nature for a time and took on human flesh so that he could relate to those of us confined to human flesh. He came so that one like us could lead the way to the Father.

Jesus brought fulfillment to all that had come before. The Old Testament pointed the way to the coming Messiah. Jesus fulfilled that expectation in every way. He won reconciliation for all that would follow him.

Preserved in the writings of the New Testament is the story of Jesus. The Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, tell the story of his life. Acts is the history of the early church, starting out under the leadership of Peter but then transitioning to a focus on the ministry of Paul. Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon are letters that Paul wrote to various

churches or individuals. They contain instructions given to the church and they explain the meaning of some of the events of Jesus' life and of some of his teachings. Hebrews is a similar letter, but the authorship of the letter is unknown. James is also a letter to the church, written by James, the half-brother of Jesus. Other letters to the church are 1 Peter and 2 Peter, written by the apostle Peter, 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John, written by the apostle John, and Jude, written by another half-brother of Jesus. Revelation is a record of a vision given to the apostle John, detailing end-time events. It gives us a glimpse of the final judgment of God, the final preservation of his faithful remnant, and the glory awaiting us in eternity.

The New Testament is a rooftop that stands on the structure of the Old Testament. Neither one is a complete revelation, taken in isolation. The New Testament does not make complete sense without the Old. The Old Testament is unfulfilled without the New. The reader is urged to become a student of both. The church today has a tendency to ignore the Old Testament somewhat and to concentrate on the teachings of the New Testament. The same God revealed both. His nature and his standards are consistent throughout. He has not changed. If you want to know him fully, listen to ALL that he has to say

1.1 The Governmental Backdrop of the New Testament

When the Old Testament closed, Palestine was under control of the Persian/Mede coalition. In 332 BC, the Greeks, under Alexander the Great conquered the area. Alexander died in 323 BC. At his death, his empire was divided among four of his generals, including Ptolemy and Seleucus. Palestine became part of a larger province that included Syria and Phoenicia. It came under control of the Ptolemies, who also ruled Egypt. Judea, which was the name given to the area predominantly inhabited by the Jews, was set up as a separate administrative unit. The Ptolemies allowed the high priest in Jerusalem to rule politically over Judea.

In time, war broke out between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids for control of Palestine. In 198 BC, the Seleucid ruler Antiochus III took control of Judea. His son, Antiochus IV Epiphanes succeeded him as ruler of the area. Antiochus Epiphanes was very intolerant of Judaism. He tried to force Hellenistic religion upon the people and he tried to forbid the practice of Judaism. His activities included such things as slaughtering a pig on the altar of the temple in Jerusalem.

The intolerance of Antiochus touched off a revolt among the Jews. Led by a man named Judas Maccabee, this revolt broke off Seleucid rule. By 140 BC, the Seleucids had been driven away. For the first time since Judah fell to Babylon, the Jews had independence in their own land. Judas Maccabee was a member of the Hashmon family. This period in Jewish history is called the Hasmonean period.

Things were not perfect under the Hasmoneans. The Hasmonean leaders were heavily influenced by Hellenism, which caused problems for the more conservative Jewish leaders, particularly the Pharisees. The Hasmoneans set out on a policy of territorial expansion. They pushed their boundaries to the Mediterranean and into the Negev. When they conquered a new area, they forced the residents to convert to Judaism. Among those forced into Judaism were the Idumeans.

The Hasmonean kingdom reached its greatest size under the ruler Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 BC). He was a cruel leader who came into a great deal of conflict with the Pharisees. When he died, his widow, Salome Alexandra took over. She was received more favorably than had been her husband.

Salome Alexandra died in 67 BC. At her death, her two sons, Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, fought over the throne. Different parties formed around the two sons. Hyrcanus had a strong supporter

in an Idumean named Antipater. The struggle between the Hyrcanus and Aristobulus resulted in civil war, which lasted until the Romans came in 63 BC. Under Pompey, the Romans took control of Palestine at this time.

Rome did not get heavily involved in the administration of Roman provinces. They divided their conquered areas into various administrative districts and appointed people to rule over these districts. There are different sorts of titles that go along with these positions. Some were called kings. Others were called tetrarchs, ethnarchs, procurators, proconsuls or praefectus. There was a certain status implied in which title one bore, but each of them was a governor, subject to the emperor in Rome. When a man was given control of a district, that control was fairly absolute. He could rule it as he saw fit. He oversaw the military there. He administered justice. As long as he maintained order and sent his due taxes to Rome, they left him alone. About the only exception to this applied to Roman citizens. A Roman citizen had the right to appeal to Caesar rather than accept a sentence from his governor.

When Pompey took Palestine, he divided it up into various administrative districts. Only those areas with significant Jewish populations were left as part of Judea. He set up Judea as a state, subject to Rome. Leadership was divided between Hyrcanus, who was made ethnarch and high priest, and the Idumean Antipater, who became proconsul. Antipater appointed his son, Phasael, as governor of Jerusalem and his other son, Herod, as the governor of Galilee.

In 40 BC, the Parthians invaded Judea. Hyrcanus was removed as high priest. His nephew, Antigonus (son of Aristobulus) was put in his place. He remained in office only three years.

When the Parthian invasion occurred, Herod fled to Rome. He convinced the emperor to make him king of Judea. He returned with the Roman army in 37 BC and defeated the Parthians. He also took Idumea, Samaria, and Galilee. Herod was in control and the remnant of the Hasmonean dynasty was gone.

Herod lived a very colorful life. He managed to stay in power even though there was intrigue in high places in the empire. He lived and retained his power through the assassination of Julius Caesar. He managed to switch loyalties at just the right time when Octavius defeated Mark Antony. He was at constant political odds with Cleopatra of Egypt. His own life was a tangled web of intrigue, as evidenced by the fact that he executed his favorite wife, his brother-in-law, his mother-in-law, and several of his sons because he suspected them of wanting to take his position.

When Herod died, his kingdom was divided among his three surviving sons. Archelaus was given Judea. Herod Antipas received Galilee. Philip received the territory in the northeastern part of the kingdom.

Archelaus ruled only ten years. In AD 6, he was exiled and Rome began to rule Judea directly. Governors were sent directly from Rome to oversee affairs. The best known of these was Pontius Pilate.

The Jews really had a great deal of autonomy under this arrangement. The Sanhedrin existed as a ruling body for the Jews. The Sanhedrin was the Jewish supreme court. They were subject to Roman authority but Rome took a very hands-off approach to their affairs. As long as peace prevailed, the Romans were satisfied. Technically the Sanhedrin did not have the authority to administer capital punishment, but Rome often seemed to turn its eyes on that as well. We see in the case of Jesus that the Sanhedrin brought Jesus to Rome for execution, but in the case of Stephen they took matters into their own hands.

This arrangement lasted until AD 37. At that time, the emperor Caligula appointed Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great, to be king over Judea, as well as over the territories previously served by his uncles Philip and Herod Antipas. He ruled until AD 44. He was very tolerant of his subjects and did a great deal to prevent Roman interference with their religious practices. When he died, however, a series of very corrupt Roman governors followed. This resulted in Jewish resentment, which culminated in the Jewish revolt of AD 66 to 70. The Jews tried to break off Roman rule. In the spring of AD 70, the Roman general Titus led his troops into Jerusalem and destroyed the city, including Herod's temple.

1.2 The Herodian Dynasty

The family of Herod the Great made an indelible mark upon the events of the New Testament. The following chart gives information about the descendants of Herod.

- Herod the Great, King of Palestine 37 - 4 BC. Mentioned in Matthew 2, Luke 1:5.
 - Antipater
 - Alexander
 - Herod Aristobulus
 - Herod of Chalcis
 - Herod Agrippa I, King of Palestine AD 37 - 44. In Acts 12 he killed James and put Peter in prison. Mentioned in Acts 12:1-23.
 - Herod Agrippa II, served as tetrarch in the north AD 50 - 70. Paul was on trial before him in Acts 25. Mentioned in Acts 25:13 - 26:32.
 - Drusilla, wife of Felix, procurator of Judea, AD 52 - 59. Paul was tried before Felix in Acts 23-24.
 - Bernice, married her uncle, Herod of Chalcis. She was present with her brother, Herod Agrippa II at Paul's trial in Acts 25. Mentioned in Acts 25:13 - 26:32.
 - Herodias, first married her uncle, Philip, and then later married her other uncle, Herod Antipas. This set the stage for conflict between Herod Antipas and John the Baptist (see Matthew 14). Mentioned in Matthew 14:3-12, Mark 6:17-29, Luke 3:19.
 - Herod Philip I, married his niece Herodias, but she later left him and married Herod Antipas. Mentioned in Matthew 14:3, Mark 6:17.
 - Herod Antipas, served as tetrarch of Galilee and Perea 4 BC - AD 39. He had John the Baptist beheaded in Matthew 14 and he was one of the judges who dealt with Jesus in Luke 23. Mentioned in Matthew 14:1-12, Mark 6, Mark 8:15, Luke 3:1, Luke 3:19-20, Luke 9:7-9, Luke 13:31-32, Luke 23:7-15, Acts 4:27, Acts 13:1.
 - Herod Archelaus, served as ethnarch of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea, 4 BC - AD 6. He is mentioned in Matthew 2. When Joseph returned from Egypt, he was afraid of Archelaus and thus settled in Nazareth (the domain of Herod Antipas) rather than in Judea. He is mentioned in Matthew 2:22.
 - Herod Philip II, served as tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis from 4 BC - AD 34. Married Salome, daughter of Herodias. Mentioned in Luke 3:1.

1.3 Roman Emperors of the New Testament Period

- Julius Caesar

The first triumvirate consisted of Pompey, Crassius, and Julius Caesar. It began in around 60 BC as a political alliance, designed to secure control of the country but at the same time

distribute the power among three men. Crassius died. Pompey and Julius Caesar began a struggle for power that resulted in civil war. From this body of three, Julius Caesar emerged as dictator. Technically he was not an emperor, because the Roman Empire began with Augustus. Still he established Rome as a nation with a government under a single individual. Julius Caesar died on March 15, 44 BC.

- Augustus

After the death of Julius Caesar, the second triumvirate arose. This consisted of Mark Antony, Lepidus, and Octavian, an adopted son of Julius Caesar. Antony never really accepted Octavian. Eventually they battled for control. On September 2, 31 BC, a civil war was ended between Octavian and Mark Antony, with Octavian emerging as the undisputed leader. After he was the official leader of the nation, he took the name Augustus. Caesar Augustus reigned at the time of the birth of Jesus. He remained in office until his death in AD 14. Augustus is recognized as the first "official" emperor of Rome.

- Tiberius

Tiberius was emperor from AD 14 - 37. The city of Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee was built in his honor. He was not a well-liked leader and there was much rejoicing when he died. Tiberius is mentioned by name in Luke 3:1 and is referred to as Caesar in other places. He was emperor during the public ministry of Jesus. In the story where the people asked Jesus if it was lawful to pay taxes and he asked them whose picture was on the coin, it would have been Tiberius' picture that they saw. In AD 19, Tiberius expelled the Jews from Rome, although they later were allowed to return.

- Gaius, also known as Caligula

Gaius was emperor from AD 37 - 41. Gaius started out as a popular leader, but it soon became apparent that he had an illness that made him insane. He became an unpredictable tyrant and was assassinated. One of the things that he did to offend his subjects was to order that a statue of himself be placed in the temple in Jerusalem.

- Claudius

Claudius was emperor from AD 41 - 54. Claudius had great accomplishments in public life, bringing about many improvements in public buildings, building harbors, etc. He had a very chaotic private life, however, and put to death many people whom he considered to be enemies. Claudius was tolerant of Jews in the empire, although he did not allow them to assemble in the city of Rome because their numbers were too great. He is the emperor that put his friend, Herod Agrippa I in power. Claudius is assumed to be the emperor that eventually expelled the Jews from Rome because they were having internal problems over "Chrestus." Among those expelled were Aquila and Priscilla.

- Nero

Nero was emperor from AD 54 - 68. Nero was a stepson of Claudius. He was a self-indulgent spoiled brat. His time and the empire's money were spent on satisfying Nero's fancies. During his reign, the capital city burned. Many believe that Nero set the fire himself so that he would have a reason to build himself a lavish new capital. He needed to blame someone for the fire, however, so he chose a new religious sect called the Christians. He began official persecution of Christians and burned many of them alive for public sport. Many believe that this persecution is the backdrop for the book of Hebrews. His cruel treatment of Christians won them public sympathy and cost his public support. Nero

eventually committed suicide. In Acts 25 when Paul appealed to Caesar, Nero would have been the Caesar to whom he appealed.

- Galba

Galba was emperor from AD 68-69. He succeeded Nero, but there was a great political struggle in Rome over who should be the next emperor. Early in AD 69 Galba was executed.

- Otho

Otho was emperor for part of AD 69. Otho was put in power after the death of Galba, but he was not well accepted either. He committed suicide in April of AD 69.

- Vitellius

Vitellius was emperor for part of AD 69. Otho was succeeded by Vitellius. Vespasian was already mounting opposition. Vitellius was killed by Vespasian's troops in December of AD 69.

- Vespasian

Vespasian was emperor from AD 69 - 79. Vespasian was emperor at the time that the rebellion in Palestine came to a head. His son, Titus, was the general that led the armies to destroy Jerusalem.

- Titus

Titus was emperor from AD 79 - 81. He was a popular leader who succeeded his father, but he died soon after becoming Caesar.

- Domitian

Domitian was emperor from AD 81 - 96. When Titus died, his brother Domitian became emperor. Domitian was an intolerant tyrant who engaged in bloody persecution of any who opposed him, especially on religious grounds. He was probably emperor at the time Revelation was written.

2. Gospels

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John

The New Testament contains four biographies of Jesus, called the Gospels. The word "gospel" means "good news." The coming of Jesus was good news indeed to a world longing for redemption.

At the time when Jesus ascended, his followers were primarily Jews. There was no Christian Church distinct from Judaism. The followers of Jesus met at the temple like all of the other Jews. The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is considered by many to be the event that really gave birth to "The Church," because it was the first single event that added massive numbers to the followers of Jesus, but even those people were (and continued to be) practicing Jews.

In time, God called Paul to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul carried on missionary activity, traveling about Europe and the Middle East, carrying the message of Jesus to Jew and Gentile alike. As a result, the church began to spread beyond the confines of Jerusalem and Capernaum. Many people who had no first-hand knowledge of Jesus began to be followers. These people wanted information. They wanted to hear everything that they could about their newfound Lord. They looked to those who had been close to Jesus, men such as the apostles, for this information. Eventually some of those men decided to write down their stories. Their accounts of the life of Jesus were circulated throughout the church. They became important documents of the church. Eventually four of them were canonized into Scripture.

There were more than four gospels written. One can still find copies of other gospels, such as the Gospel of Thomas. These other gospels did not make it into Scripture, however. That was not an arbitrary decision made by modern publishers. The people of the early church did not look upon these other gospels as being accurate portrayals of the life of Jesus. The people who knew Jesus and witnessed his life viewed the other gospels as being embellishments, facts laced with fantasies. They were not treated as Scripture by the early church and were not canonized into the New Testament.

And so we have the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Who were these people and what qualified them to write Gospels? Matthew and John are easy. They were disciples of Jesus. They lived most of what they wrote. Matthew obviously was not a first-hand observer of the nativity (about which he wrote), but he had free access to Mary and others who could tell him about those events.

Our first introduction to Mark may be in Mark 14:51-52:

A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.

Many believe that Mark is referring to himself in this obscure reference. This takes place in the Garden of Gethsemane at the time that Jesus was arrested. If this is a reference to Mark, then he had free access to Jesus and was present that fateful night when Jesus was arrested. He had at least some first-hand knowledge of the events of Jesus' life.

We first hear of Mark by name in Acts 12:12-14:

When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer

entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

The church in Jerusalem met in the home of Mark's mother. When an angel released Peter from prison, he went to this home. Later in this chapter (Acts 12:25) we read:

When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

Mark embarked on a missionary journey with Saul and Barnabas. In Acts 13:13 we learn that he left Saul and Barnabas and returned to Jerusalem. In Acts 15:36-41, Saul and Barnabas were preparing to go on another missionary journey:

Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

At this point in his life, Paul had very little use for Mark. He was disappointed in him for giving up when things got difficult on the first missionary journey. He felt so strongly about this that he was willing to break his relationship with Barnabas over the issue. Barnabas wanted to give Mark another chance. Note that Colossians 4:10 says that Barnabas had a cousin named Mark. It was probably this same Mark.

2 Timothy was written very late in Paul's life. In 2 Timothy 4:9-11 he writes:

Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.

Mark and Paul reconciled at some point. Late in his life, Paul viewed Mark as a useful partner and a comfort.

We also know that Mark had a close relationship with Peter. 1 Peter 5:13 says:

She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark.

Extrabiblical sources tell us that Mark was Peter's companion and assistant later in Peter's life. Thus the source for the Gospel of Mark would have been the events that he witnessed first-hand plus the volumes of information that he would have received from Peter and the others who were first-generation Christians.

This leaves Luke. In Colossians 4:14, Paul refers to him as "Our dear friend Luke, the doctor." He is only referred to by name three times in the New Testament (Colossians 4:14, 2 Timothy 4:11, and Philemon 24). Still, from these references we know that he was a traveling companion of Paul. We also know a great deal about Luke from the book of Acts, which he wrote. The first part of Acts starts out in third person, "they went" and "they did." In chapter 16, it shifts to first person, "we went" and "we did." It is assumed that this is the point in the story when Luke

became Paul's traveling companion. Paul did not have an easy life (check 2 Corinthians 11:23-29). Luke would have endured most of the same hardships as Paul. He was a man devoted to the cause of Christ and he spent his life helping to spread the Gospel about which he wrote.

But having established Luke's devotion, we have not addressed the issue of his sources. Luke was a companion of Paul. We have no indication that Luke ever met Jesus or heard him teach. Where did Luke get the information necessary to write a biography of Jesus? That question is answered in the opening verses of his book. Luke 1:1-4 says:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

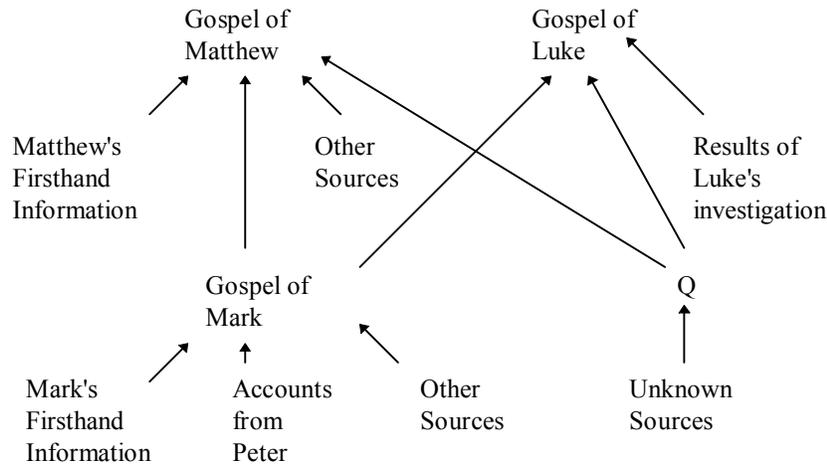
With the inquiring mind of a physician, Luke carefully investigated the stories of Jesus. He talked to the eyewitnesses. He pieced together the whole picture. Then he wrote it down.

His book is addressed to "Theophilus" (so is the book of Acts). Theophilus may have been a literal person, but "Theophilus" is Greek for "lover of God." The audience for his book may have been the generic lover of God rather than a single individual named Theophilus.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels. "Syn" is a Greek prefix meaning "together." These Gospels are called Synoptic because they "look together." There is a great deal of overlap in the accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In fact, extended sections of the Greek text are repeated verbatim or almost verbatim among these books. It is generally assumed that Mark wrote his Gospel first. Matthew and Luke had copies of Mark's Gospel and used it as a source when they wrote their own Gospels. Today we would call that plagiarism and we would frown on that practice. In the first century, this was a fairly common thing to do. Remember that Matthew and Luke were not writing books for profit; they were simply trying to record their thoughts about Jesus and they were trying to give the church the best reference material that they could. Nobody would have thought twice about copying portions of a letter from a friend and including it in a larger manuscript.

Matthew and Luke also have portions that appear verbatim in the two books but do not appear in Mark. There are different ways that this could have happened. Matthew could have written his Gospel before Luke and Luke could have copied portions of it into his manuscript. The reverse could be true. Many scholars believe that there was some other document (or perhaps several documents) which is no longer in existence that both Matthew and Luke used as sources. They have given the name "Quelle" (German for "Source") to this document, and it is referred to simply as the "Q" source. Nobody knows for sure whether it really existed and if it did who might have written it.

Thus it is hypothesized that the sources for the Synoptic Gospels were as follows:



Again, this is purely conjecture. The only thing that we do know about the source of these Gospels is in 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

The Gospel of John, on the other hand, is not one of the Synoptics. There is little overlap between the Gospel of John and the other Gospels. He tells of a number of different events in the life of Jesus. Even when he does describe an event that is described in the other Gospels, it is not usually a verbatim quote, as is true in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. If John had a copy of the other Gospels when he wrote, then he chose to supplement those accounts rather than retell them. His is an eyewitness account, written by "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23).

One other issue needs to be addressed before moving into the text. There are places where two or more Gospels seem to be narrating the same event, but the accounts do not agree exactly. Some of the details – the number of people present or the exact order of events – do not agree. Does this mean that the Gospels are not accurate? This is not a trivial question. If one concludes that little portions of the accounts may not be completely accurate then the whole account falls apart. If you study the Bible with the attitude that it is not entirely true, then which pieces do you throw away? Anytime you come up against something that is difficult (or that addresses sin in your life) do you have license to toss it and move on? If portions of the text did not really happen, then is the resurrection one of those "iffy" pieces? In John 14:2-3, did Jesus really say "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." Did John just make that up to sell more books?

The accuracy of the Bible is a big issue. The differences in the Gospel accounts should not really be a matter of concern, however. If two eyewitnesses to an automobile accident went into separate rooms and wrote accounts of what they saw, they would vary in detail. That does not make either of them wrong. The differences would be a result of which details the different witnesses considered to be important or the manner in which they narrated the event. If their accounts turned out to be exactly the same, it would lead to suspicion that they had discussed what they would say or perhaps that they had even concocted the story. The fact that the Gospels vary a bit attests to the fact that they are genuine independent testimonies by people telling what they know of their Lord.

That is what the early church needed – independent testimonies about the Lord. That is what we need as well. We can thank God that the Holy Spirit worked through these four men to produce these writings and that God has seen fit to preserve them through the years for us.

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