

Dear John: Your Gospel does not meet our current needs

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [December 1, 2009](#) issue

To: John

From: Harold Sniveling, Acquisitions Editor

Re: Your submission

Our editorial team has had the opportunity to work through your manuscript. Your “Gospel” does not fit our publishing needs at this time. While undeniably sincere, the work is marred by undeveloped characters, uneven plot, choppy style and numerous digressions. To be more specific, I include below our reader’s report.

Chapter 1: A nice opening—vaguely uplifting without being preachy. But then you abruptly sail into “a man sent from God named John.” I couldn’t figure out how this “Baptist” contributes to the story. Indeed, except for a couple of unexpected appearances in the rest of the manuscript, you seem to forget him. Your introduction of the central character is disappointingly underdeveloped: what of his youth and his early influences? Did he suffer some early trauma that explains his bizarre self-image? What of his inner aspirations? Relationships with women?

Chapter 2: Your central character seems to float above the whole story. Better to have less monologue and more dialogue. The wedding at Cana story is interesting but makes no apparent contribution to the plot. Suggest a reworking of the whole episode to make it the center of the chapter. Whose wedding was this? Was Jesus a relative or ex-husband of the bride? What was the source of his conflict with his mother? I expected some sort of problem with alcohol. Again, you introduce grand possibilities only to drop them. The scene in the temple not only feels out of place (your chronological sequencing needs work) but also makes Jesus seem unappealingly arrogant. Move it to the end, if you use it at all.

Chapters 3-7: This section definitely needs more focus. You would also do well to kick up the pace a bit.

Chapters 8–10: Some of these stories suggest that your central character is seriously unbalanced. Do you really want him saying, “I am the light of the world”? Your readers are going to expect some help in understanding his overblown ego. Is he overcompensating for some inner insecurity? Has he fallen victim to the adulation of his followers? Show rather than tell. It’s hard know if readers are supposed to like Jesus or be put off by him. Readers who are into spirituality (and some of your stuff definitely seems pitched to them) are going to find Jesus frequently abrasive. Your tendency toward hyperbole and exaggeration works against the credibility of the narrative.

Chapter 12: The absence of characters that women can relate to is a major problem. I fear readers will be uncomfortable with Jesus’ obsessive focus on and fraternization with his exclusive little band of unattached men. And remember, romance sells. Put in more women and have Jesus get personally involved with one or more. The episode with Mary and Martha is a missed opportunity.

Chapters 13–17: Your manuscript really drags here. Jesus’ speeches are redundant and boring. The device of a long, verbose prayer just doesn’t work. I think I’d leave all this out.

Chapters 18–19: There is a much welcomed verisimilitude here, and you avoid digressions. But surely you can find more efficient ways for Jesus to convey his message.

Chapter 20: Some of your best work here. Nice interaction with Mary and Thomas. It would be good to work these figures more into earlier chapters. Above all, decide if you are writing history or telling a story. Consider the latter approach, since few will believe that your narrative has much historical basis.

Chapter 21: The ending needs work. After the intensity of the cross and resurrection thing, a seaside breakfast is not sufficiently climactic. Troubling the reader with details about the exact number of fish that were caught is embarrassing. And the ending: “Jesus did so many things that, if they were all written down, the world couldn’t contain the books that would be written”? It’s like you couldn’t figure out how to stop so you just gave up.

I hope these comments will help you say whatever it is you intend to say, and in a way that attracts readers. Speaking of readers, you would do well to define just who it is you hope to reach. “The whole world” (chapter 3) just won’t do.

Though your work is not a good fit for our list, you might rework it for a youth-oriented (14 to 18 years old) fantasy fiction market. Youth, we have found, tend to eat this sort of thing up.