
THE FOUR GOSPELS: FOUR PORTRAITS OF JESUS

THE GOSPELS

- Gospels are four portraits of Jesus drawn with words by the evangelists. Together like a great prism they refract the pure light of Christ in manner that gives each a separate and distinct coloration. As prism colours splash against our minds and spirits in reading the gospels a Jesus emerges from the four accounts who possess greater depth, breadth and height than any single narrative.
- The gospels are story pictures of Jesus. While the writers present the basic facts of the life, death, resurrection of Jesus, their main intention is to help their readers experience the Risen Lord Jesus as directly as possible.
- There were no cameras or video recorders when Jesus lived on earth. While his first disciples shared intimately in the joys and sorrows of his public life, they did not know very much about his infancy or youth. Such things did not matter to them at the time; they were more interested in the way he spoke with power and worked great wonders.
- The death of Jesus was traumatic to the early disciples. In fact, the gospels could not have been written on Good Friday night; the disciples would have been in deep despair and sorrow. It was only after the resurrection of Jesus that the apostles began to look back at his earthly life and recognized the foreshadowing of his divine power and identity.
- Actually, gospels began with the preaching or oral communication of the earliest disciples. It was forty or more years after the death-resurrection of Jesus that the gospel writers and editors began to commit the good news to written form.
- Gospels basically written backwards; the end of the story – Jesus’ death and resurrection – was what really mattered most. The earliest parts of the gospels were added bit by bit as the church had more time to reflect on the mystery of the earthly years of Jesus. They began to question: what was he like in his infancy? How did he come into the world? What was his message when he preached? What do we know of his friends and travels? The inspiration of the Holy Spirit worked through these sacred authors as they selected certain of the elements and stories that had been handed down, synthesizing them and explaining them with an eye to the needs of the communities.
- In compiling and stylizing the material they would use in their gospels, the four evangelists – Matthew, Mark, Luke, John – present us with four very different portraits of Jesus. Drawn with words instead of an artist’s lines and colors, these portraits are sometimes intriguing, sometimes perplexing. Four diverse descriptions characterize the same person.
- In describing Jesus, the gospel writers were faced with a unique challenge. How do you portray someone who is both human and divine?
- The gospel writers had their perspective audiences to consider as well. The four evangelists tried to choose those words and deeds from Jesus’ life which would be most relevant to their particular audience. These audiences differed dramatically in religious background, culture and ethnic origin.

- All of this and more is reflected in the portraits of Jesus drawn by the gospel writers. Which gospel is the most authentic? What best reflects the historical Jesus? They all do. Together, like a great prism, they refract the pure light of Christ in a manner that gives each a separate a distinct coloration. As the prism colors splash against our minds and spirits in reading the gospels, a Jesus emerges from the four accounts who possesses greater depth, breadth and height than any single narrative could provide.

GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK 65 – 70 C.E. COMMON ERA – THE HUMAN JESUS: EL GRECO JESUS

- Like an El Greco painting, Mark's gospel pulls no punches and presents a **bare bones account of the life of Jesus**.
- **Nothing in gospel identifies the author by name.** Scholars believe this gospel was put together by John Mark, who lived in Jerusalem, called the interpreter of Peter by one of church earliest writers and is described in Acts as working with both Peter and Paul. We may assume that this gospel gives at least the flavour of Peter's preaching
 - Mark was not one of the Twelve Apostles
 - Three listings of Jesus' inner circle are given to us – Mt 10:2 – 4, Mk 3:14 – 19, Lk 6:13 – 16 – his name appears on none of them
 - He was quite likely not an eyewitness either
 - Mark was the most common masculine name in the Roman Empire in the first century doesn't help narrow the field
 - John Mark is mentioned three times in the Acts of the Apostles (12:12, 12:25, 15:37) This would make him a cousin of Barnabas (Col 4:10) and, for a time, a companion of Paul (Acts 12:25)
 - Long-standing tradition has Mark, later in life, accompanying Peter to Rome. This makes it very probable that Peter became the eyewitness source of information about Jesus which Mark incorporated into his account.
 - Mark sounds like Peter's idea of Jesus
- **First gospel written. Seems to have been written in Rome for the church there and for Gentile readers.** Jewish customs that would have been readily understood by Jews are explained in the gospel in way that suggests the customs were not familiar to the intended readers. Probably written for Roman followers of Jesus. **Written about 40 years after death-resurrection of Jesus.** Purpose: to present the person of Jesus through his actions and miracles. He acts as a storyteller in the gospel.
- **Strong sense of suffering dominates gospel with many references to trials and persecution.** This may reflect the persecution of the Christians by the Roman Emperor Nero. Also the Jews revolted against the Romans between 66 – 70 and many feel that Mark's gospel reflects an awareness of the suffering of that period as well. The Jewish Temple was destroyed around 70. Two of the most illustrious names in early roster of martyrs were Peter and Paul. Possibly because of the demise of so many leaders, Mark deemed it necessary to produce a written record of Jesus: who he was, what he did, what he taught. The rapid spread of Christianity throughout the Mediterranean world is another development suggesting the need for an organized account of Jesus' life.
 - Dangerous time for Christians who were treated harshly by the Romans. In Rome, for the first time in their history, Christians were singled out for

- persecution by the emperor Nero who blamed them for the burning of Rome in 64. The Romans had always thought of Christians as a Jewish group. But now Christians could no longer hide their special identity.
- Using Jesus as model, Mark gives his community new answers to the urgent questions of who they are and what they must do to follow Jesus in the chaotic experience of war, persecution and apparent abandonment. The stakes are high because in the midst of persecution it is much easier to deny one's Christian identity than suffer. Mark shapes his gospel as the haunting story of the Messiah who suffers so others can live, whose death and resurrection and seeming abandonment culminate in new life in God
 - Jesus faced exactly the same situation. Jesus too had to choose whether or not to remain faithful to his vocation in the face of apparent failure, persecution and death. It was not easy for Jesus either. He experienced, and so understands, exactly what the persecuted Christians were going through
 - Embracing martyrdom is not merely embracing suffering and death. The cross leads not to death but to eternal life. By being faithful to his Father's will, even though that meant enduring suffering and death, Jesus conquered death and rose from the dead. Mark is teaching his community that they should model themselves after Jesus. Be faithful, endure the suffering just as Jesus did. But united to Christ not only in his suffering and death but in his resurrection. To teach this message, Mark images Jesus as one who truly suffered.
- **Stresses the human suffering of Jesus in his passion and death**, perhaps to encourage the Christians who were being persecuted at the time. **Jesus' death is such a central point** that everything else that precedes it seems to be offered almost solely by way of introduction. Seems certain that one of Mark's intentions was to explain to the members of the early church how suffering is an essential part of Christian life and to give them the courage to endure it as Jesus had. Mark never lets us forget that Jesus is a suffering, crucified Saviour, but one who proclaims both penance and Good News. **Jesus is the crucified Son of Man: misunderstood, rejected, abandoned and killed.** He stressed the inevitability of the cross in the life of Jesus and in the life of His followers. Despite Jesus' clear teaching, even His disciples and family could not grasp the mystery of his suffering.
 - Presents an image of a Jesus who truly suffers. When Jesus is in the garden before the soldiers come to arrest him, he throws himself on the ground and prays to be spared from the suffering that he knows is ahead of him.
 - Jesus is pictured as needing human support and being sorely disappointed that his disciples fell asleep.
 - Jesus describes himself as being "sorrowful to the point of death" Mk 14:35
 - When the point of death actually comes Jesus is pictured as saying "My God, my God, why have you deserted me?" Mk 15:34
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 - Main thrust of gospel is to identify Jesus as the Suffering Servant of Isaias 52:13 – 53:12. Throughout the first half of the gospel Mark confirms the conventional Jewish expectation about the Messiah. Jesus appears as a prophetic teacher and lawgiver like

Moses, a miracle worker like Elijah and a kingdom builder like David (although his kingdom is spiritual rather than political).

- In the second half, Mark turns all of these tidy expectations on their head. Jesus is indeed the Messiah, but he “ must suffer greatly, be rejected... and be killed, and rise after three days.” 8:31. The rest of the gospel shows how the suffering Messiah fulfills God’s plan for salvation. Mark presents the Passion of Jesus as the great reversal of the common expectation that the Messiah would be a glorious King like David who would free the Jewish people from their oppressive Roman overlords. Jesus is indeed a king, but one who is crowned with thorns, mocked and beaten, and enthroned on a cross in humiliation with a sign indicating that he is “the King of the Jews”. Mark’s final picture of an abandoned Jesus dying alone outside the city challenges all the usual expectations about Jesus as a glorious and triumphant Messiah.
- Mark’s portrait of Jesus as the Suffering Servant of God who gives his life for all is also the clue to mark’s portrait of the genuine disciple. What happened to Jesus will happen to us. Following Jesus means not expecting that God will save us from our suffering, but that God will save us through our suffering. The cross is the only way to the crown of new life. Mark stresses that Jesus’ way of the cross is not a dead end – Jesus’ way of dying is the only way to new life in God.
- **Emphasis on humanity of Jesus** – portrays Jesus expressing strong emotions for example when a leper was bold enough to approach Jesus, Jesus is moved by pity. When Jesus is with the Pharisees who are questioning him about healing on the Sabbath, he looks at them with anger and grieves at the hardness of their hearts.. Makes it clear Jesus was truly a human being, that Jesus truly possessed both human and divine natures.
 - Tells us nothing about the infancy or adolescence of Jesus. The first time we meet Jesus he is already 30 years old at the shore of the Jordan River being baptized by John. By end of first chapter, Jesus had called his first disciples, performed his first cure, followed by two more, and set off for Capernaum.
 - Image of Jesus he present is called “low Christology”. The gospel teaches that Jesus is divine, that Jesus is God’s own son, but within the context of this central belief, the gospel emphasizes Jesus’ human nature.
 - See a Jesus who is entirely unsuccessful in teaching his disciples what he wants them to learn before he is taken from them. Jesus becomes so impatient with them that, even though they do not understand what Jesus is trying to tell them, they are afraid to ask him what he means. (Mk 8:14 – 21, 8:33, 9:32) You see Jesus’ frustration growing, even to the point that he zaps a fig tree that is not yet bearing fruit. Mk 11: 12 – 14, 20
 - Presents a Jesus who is earthy and easy to relate to, a Jesus who is quite approachable
- In Mark, Jesus’ teaching is the gradual unfolding, mostly in action, of the mystery of Jesus as embodying and revealing the kingdom. Running through it is the strain of the disciples’ lack of understanding
 - Jesus is portrayed as a wonder-worker, attracting great crowds that constantly press against him.

- His recorded words are few and most have to do with his prediction of suffering and death.
- Mark's gospel moves with dramatic pace to its concluding chapters which focus with shocking frankness on the final rejection of Jesus by the religious authorities of His day and , most sadly, abandonment by his own disciples
- Mark's gospel originally ended at 16:8 with the women running away from the tomb. Half fearful, half joyful. His gospel ends with a question: will the women believe and proclaim the Good News? The question lingers as a challenge for us today as it did for Mark's community – are we willing to proclaim a suffering Messiah? Do we understand that there is no escape from suffering?
- Is shortest of gospels, provides perhaps the most intimate portrait of Jesus.
- Themes: the identity of Jesus, the importance of the cross, discipleship

GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW (70 – 100 C.E. – 80 - 90 C.E.) JESUS AS THE MESSIAH OF THE JEWS

- **Like a Chagall painting**, Matthew continually draws on his memories and knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures and life traditions. Like Chagall, Matthew's gospel weaves the threads of the Jewish heritage into a new tapestry, the faith of the Christian church.
- **Writing about 10 years after Mark**, Matthew had the advantage of drawing on Mark's gospel as well as other oral sources from his own community **in Antioch, Syria to Jewish Christians..** Very likely Mark's gospel was the lectionary used in Matthew's community as they gathered for prayer. Unfortunately Mark's gospel was not completely adequate for the particular needs of Matthew's church as they struggled with one of the greatest questions of the New Testament: how should the emerging Christian community relate to its Jewish heritage and the continuing practice of Judaism?
 - Because Syria was positioned immediately north of Palestine, its cities were home to sizeable Jewish populations, and it was from these groups that the majority of Matthew's congregation came at first.. Matthew takes advantage of his people's extensive Hebrew background to pound home the good news that Jesus is without a doubt the long-awaited Messiah, the fulfillment of all that is written in the Hebrew Scriptures.
 - The Jews in Antioch were appalled to find communities that included Gentiles. Matthew's primarily Jewish community was facing Marginalization in a church that was fast becoming non-Jewish. He realized his community would be able to continue only if they could step out from the solid foundation of their Jewish tradition into the wider Gentile – Christian world. Gospel is answer of how to do this. Matthew tried to reassure them that the Gentiles had indeed been called to membership in the church by God's own design. Although Jesus might have preached exclusively to the Jews, his resurrection had put things in a whole new perspective.

- Matthew is very interested in Jesus' origins and launches into his account with a rundown of Jesus' family tree, a tree whose more illustrious branches include names such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Ruth, David, Solomon, Joseph. Properly this is Jesus' foster father's lineage which is in keeping with Matthew's tendency to make Joseph the central character of his infancy narratives.
- With the stories of Jesus' birth, Matthew begins to draw parallels between the Messiah and Moses. Only Matthew tells how Herod's jealousy and hatred forced Joseph and his family into Egyptian exile. Matthew thereby establishes that, just as Pharaoh feared and loathed the Hebrews in Moses' time, so Herod treated Jesus and his family.
- In chapter 2, the story of the Magi, Matthew summarizes the story of Jesus: recognized by the foreigners, he is rejected by his own. This same theme appears at the end of the gospel as the leaders of the Jewish people call for his death and a Roman centurion proclaims his divinity. The Magi were of Gentile origin and speak to "Many will come from the east and the west and will recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the banquet in the kingdom of heaven Mt.8:11
- Matthew is goldmine for quotations from Jesus who is seen as a teacher here. Because it contains Jesus' teachings in thorough, well organized and understandable manner, quickly became most popular and widely used of all gospels in early church, especially when educating new Christians. Its sensitivity to the continuity between Christianity and Judaism also made it valuable for Jews who were inquiring about the faith
- Shows interest in the church itself – only gospel to use word church and it seems concerned with the church's organization and with the community life and teaching among believers.
- Matthew presents Jesus as the Master, a teacher and compassionate healer who guides us step-by-step through a course in Christian discipleship. The disciples are learners, which is primary meaning of Greek word for disciple.
 - Matthew's Jesus often characterizes the disciples as having little faith. They respond to the call of Jesus and then tag along with him – listening to his words and observing his miraculous deeds. Like us, they grow in faith as they learn about Jesus and his rigorous demands for discipleship. Becoming a disciple means not just knowing about what Jesus said and did, but also putting his demands into action Mt. 7:21
 - Peter serves as Matthew's example of both positive and negative possibilities of our discipleship. The first to be called Mt 4: 18 – 22, Peter responds eagerly and becomes the leader of the disciples (Mt 10:2, 15:15, 17:1 – 8, 24 – 27). He responds so correctly to the question of Jesus' identity that Jesus recognizes that Peter's profession of faith is the kind on which the church can be built. Mt 16:13 – 20. Despite this great privilege, Peter is still a person of little faith who needs to grow.
- Matthew records 5 sermons / discourses of Jesus: sermon on the mount 5:1 – 7:29, about his missionaries 9:35 – 11:1, the kingdom 13:1 – 51, the church 18:1 – 35 and the last things 24:1 – 25:46

- A central theme is the kingdom, the rule of God in human hearts and minds. This kingdom comes in Jesus, whom Matthew shows to be the messiah- not a king ruling over but a humble suffering messiah who offers the kingdom to those who freely submit to the will of God.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE (70 – 85 C.E.) JESUS THE COMPASSIONATE SAVIOUR

Luke wrote a two-volume work, a gospel and the acts of the apostles. Some identify him with Luke the physician, friend of Paul. He was a Gentile, hence he always needs to explain Jewish customs to his readers. He was from Antioch in Syria. He used Mark which was written earlier. Addresses a primarily Gentile audience. There is less emphasis on Law and Jewish ritual and more on Jesus' mercy and compassion, especially for women, the poor, outcasts, sinners and the afflicted. He did not know Jesus and had to rely on others who were eyewitnesses to Jesus' life.

Stresses the universal nature of salvation. Shows Jesus as friend to sinners, outcasts, suffering and particularly women. Christian message is for everyone. Luke illustrates that God, through Jesus, accepts the persons who are least expected to receive God's favour.

Picture of Jesus who deeply loves all men and women.

Also reminds reader of joy that is shared by those who experience God's forgiving love in Jesus

His is a cultured and sensitive mind. Some of the optimism and joy of the early church breaks through his writing. The church is beginning to realize that the day of the Lord is not necessary imminent. The coming of the Holy Spirit, for what ever length of time is the all important substitute.

Jesus of Luke is very human, sympathetic, merciful. Stresses mercy and compassion of Jesus. Also presents the demand to carry one's cross every day.

Sets out early to show the continuation of Christianity with Judaism of Hebrew Scriptures. Emphasizes central role of the Spirit in Jesus' life. Even closes his gospel by stressing continuing presence of Jesus through the Spirit after Jesus' death and resurrection

○ **LUKE'S ACTS OF THE APOSTLES (80 – 85 c.e.)**

- Concentrates on acts – work – of two apostles, Peter and Paul from the events of Ascension and Pentecost to Paul's captivity in Rome (63 C.E.) when the gospel has been preached to the ends of the known world. Luke's purpose is to show how the Christian community grew under the guidance and control of the Spirit.
- In pages of Acts, Christians begin to separate from Judaism, welcome Gentiles and spread the Good News to the world.
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THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN (90 – 100 C.E.): JESUS AS THE DIVINE SON OF GOD

- Like a Salvador Dali picture, John's gospel brings a new and different look at the life of Jesus. **John's emphasis is on the relationship each has with the Lord, who is God's self-revelation.** Much of what we believe about Jesus as God in human flesh is based on John's testimony.

- Gospel was written, most would say, sometime during the closing decade of the first century of the Common Era C.E. Some scholars would date it even later.
- The particular genius of John's Gospel is the use of dramatic devices that pull readers or listeners into the drama. His Gospel **provides lengthy encounters in which we can see how the people react to Jesus and grow in faith.** He wants us to be engaged. Near the end of the Gospel, he states that the reason for the writing is that "you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief, you may have life in his name. (John 20:31. The characters described as encountering Jesus in the Gospel are in a way everyman and everywoman. Their encounters are narrated for your sake that in them you may recognize yourself and be drawn into meeting in your life.
- **Beloved disciple, son of Zebedee) is identified as the witness behind the gospel tradition** in John 23:23 but John 21:20 – 23 contains a reference to his death. So clearly he cannot be the one and only author, even though he may be responsible for much of the gospel, which is the result of several stages of editing. Scholars suggest it might have been written by members of the community founded by the beloved disciple. The three epistles of John, seem to have come out of the same group, but some scholars suggest that a Christian prophet, also named John, but otherwise unknown, wrote the book of Revelation
- **Written for Johannine community** – a group of house churches which originated among the various sects of Judaism in Palestine.
- Writer may have known one or more of the other three gospels and certainly drew on traditions related to theirs. **Several types of sources seem to be used:** collection of miracle stories; collection of sayings of Jesus different from that behind the other gospels; earlier account of Jesus' passion, the empty tomb and resurrection appearances of Jesus.
- Was strong attempt to present an understanding of **Jesus as divine Son of God**
Before the ink is dry on the first sentence, the author has established Jesus' identity beyond a shadow of a doubt. In the beginning was the Word (Jesus), and Jesus was with God and Jesus was God. In this Gospel, Jesus is portrayed primarily as God – totally in charge of any and all situations in which he finds himself, including his death "I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again.(John 10:17b-18a
 - Jesus establishes his own godly credentials. Does this by stressing **unity with the Father.** "And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." (these 11 words constitute John's infancy narrative, since he concentrates on Jesus' divine origin rather than his human one.) "and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth." (John1:14) Also in John 10:27-30; John 14:8-9a His unity with his Father established, Jesus could credibly offer the gift of eternal life. "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he/she dies, will live and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." John 11:25b-26a
 - The **"I am" statements** are intended to remind the reader of Moses' first encounter with God at the burning bush – "I am who I am...This is what you

shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you.” Exodus 3:13-14 Chapter 8 is a virtual seedbed of them beginning with Jesus’ assertion “ I am the light of the world.” And culminating in Jesus’ playing his trump card to end an argument,” Before Abraham came to be, I AM.” John 8:58b

- John’s **Jesus story differs dramatically from the Synoptics**: in content, in style, in themes and certainly in cast of characters. John’s Gospel introduces its readers to persons never mentioned in the other three, usually in the context of events never mentioned in the Synoptics.
- John has **the deepest theology** as well as the longest and most dramatic accounts. **Most symbolic of gospels**, moving through the familiar, mysterious world of water, wine, blood, bread, life, light. His emphasis is on the already now rather than the not yet in history of Jesus’ saving work. Attention paid to spiritual significance of apparently routine ordinary happenings
 - **Two favourite themes: life and light** “What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. John 1:3b-5
 - **In John’s gospel, Jesus’ astounding deeds are always referred to as signs, never as miracles. The function of a sign is to deliver information or to point to something of greater importance. John wants the signs to point to the true identity of Jesus so that people witnessing them do not get so caught up in the wonder of the moment that they fail to see the source.**
 - **Life** becomes a focal point appearing 49 times, many of those in conjunction with the word eternal – life once life is created it is never destroyed. When our time on earth ends, we simply change dimensions and live on forever in the company of the loving God gave us our being.
 - **Light: is dominant theme of gospel.** When John records an event he frequently includes the time of day. While most of them can be taken at face value, a deeper meaning usually lies below the surface.
 - **Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night** – probably did come at night – also wanted to show although he was knowledgeable in religious matters, he was still in the dark about Jesus. The two men talk for some time. At the close of their encounter, Nicodemus has seemingly come to no decision about Jesus and may or may not be more enlightened than when he arrived. John leaves the episode open and moves on. It will take Nicodemus most of the rest of the gospel to come fully into the light. We meet him again cautiously defending Jesus in a heated discussion with the high priests (John 7:40-52) and when he assists Joseph of Arimathea with Jesus’ entombment (John 19:38-42)
 - Chapter four – just before Jesus encounters the **Samaritan woman at the well**, John says it was about noon. At high noon, the sun stands directly overhead, in this case acting as a spot light shining directly down on the “light of the world”
 - **Coming into the light** often leads the person involved through a progressive comprehension of who Jesus is. With the Samaritan

woman there is a steady development of understanding, a constant movement toward the light.

- Directly related to the light is the **come and see theme**. People are continually invited to come and see, to come closer to Jesus and, in so doing, to see with greater clarity. Most vivid example is the man born blind.
- More forcefully than in others the mature faith of the church shines forth, In John Jesus speaks with the majesty and assurance of one already raised to the right hand of the father, from the beginning of his public life. He is in command.

Differences from other gospels:

Jesus' words no longer focus on the kingdom of God or use proverbs and parables. Instead he speaks in symbolic

John presents ministry of Jesus over three years

He puts the death of Jesus on the day of preparation before Passover

He does not mention exorcism among the healings

In John the disciples recognize Jesus as Messiah from the beginning, while in other gospels this is the climax of Jesus' ministry in Galilee