

FOUR- DIMENSIONAL JESUS



*Seeing Jesus
Through the Eyes of
Matthew, Mark,
Luke, and John*



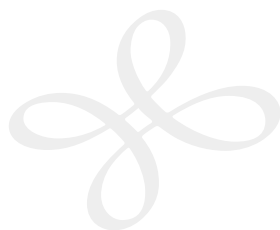
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FOREWORD

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—each of these four gospels was written in a different part of the world. Each addresses a different Christian community. Each presents a different portrait of Jesus. Together they offer a rich plurality of portraits.

But almost from the beginning, having four separate portraits was perceived as a problem. Soon the church felt a need to “harmonize” the four portraits in order to present Jesus from a single perspective. Thus around the year A.D. 175 a Syrian Christian by the name of Tatian set out to merge the four gospels into one and produce a harmonized gospel, free from all differences and discrepancies. What the church needed, Tatian believed, was a single story of Jesus rather than four different ones. Using a cut-and-paste method, he wove the four New Testament gospels into a seamless narrative. The end project—the *Diatessaron*—was enormously popular and was used in the Syrian area for a couple of centuries. Fortunately, better judgment eventually prevailed, and the church rejected the *Diatessaron* in favor of the four gospels that this harmony had tried to replace.

The *Diatessaron* may have disappeared, but the spirit that produced it lives on. Even today, efforts to fashion one gospel out of four continue. Having four gospels, after all, presents serious problems. What are we to

make of their differences? One harmonized narrative conveniently erases such differences—and problems. And who among us is innocent of harmonizing the narratives? For example, at our Christmas services we place the shepherds and the wise men in the same stable. But the shepherds and the wise men belong to different gospels. Luke's shepherds visit the stable; Matthew's wise men go to the house where Joseph and Mary live. Or consider a typical Good Friday service. The so-called "seven words" from the cross are presented as though Jesus uttered them one after the other. If things were only that simple. Mark's gospel has only one last word: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In Mark, Jesus utters a single cry and dies feeling forsaken by God. Not so in John's gospel, in which Jesus dies with a shout of triumph: "It is finished." Now, if Jesus' words in Mark and John are presented as sequential, in a harmonized reading, we are left wondering, How did Jesus die? In agony or in triumph? Besides, we will have difficulty feeling the horror of Jesus' death that Mark portrays and feeling the power of Jesus' triumphant cry that John shows.

The church has always come out in favor of multiple portraits of Jesus over a single harmonized portrait. It has done so in spite of considerable divergence among the gospels. Confessing with Paul that "we have this treasure [called Jesus] in jars of clay" (2 Cor. 4:7), the church has embraced the plurality of gospels.

In the chapters that follow we will explore the differences of the four gospels. We will see how an understanding of these differences leads to a four-dimensional portrait of Jesus, a portrait richer, though more complex, than the single, harmonized portrait that Christians sometimes produce.

SESSION 1

ONE JESUS, FOUR PORTRAITS



Gospels. What are they? Biographies of Jesus? If so, why do they pay so little attention to things that are dear to a biographer's pen? Why do they display minimal interest in the biographical data of Jesus' life? Strikingly, the gospels offer no description of Jesus' personal appearance. They contain virtually nothing about his family background. They are silent about his education. They make little attempt to date his actions. The gospel of Mark, for one, tells us nothing about these things. It also does what no biographer would do: skip over the first thirty years of Jesus' life. So, by and large, do the other three gospels.

If the gospels are not biographies, what are they? They are writings reporting the good news that Jesus is the Messiah. The gospels were written "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ [that is, the Messiah], the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). Yet each of the four gospel writers presents this good news in a unique way. The Jesus who appears in their gospels is an *interpreted* Jesus. Guided by the Holy Spirit, each writer paints a distinctive portrait, arranging the stories and sayings of Jesus to focus on the spiritual needs of a particular community.

Mark's Portrait of Jesus



Until the late nineteenth century most scholars believed that the gospel of Mark was simply a pale imitation of the gospel of Matthew. Mark, after all, contains very little that is not found in Matthew as well. And Matthew is almost twice the length of Mark. Saint Augustine (354-430) called Mark the abbreviator and follower of Matthew, and Augustine's description stuck. Through the centuries Matthew tended to be the most read and Mark the least read of the gospels. This situation began to change in the second half of the nineteenth century. Careful study of the gospel texts revealed that things were just the other way round: Mark had not used Matthew; rather, Matthew had used Mark. This discovery triggered a fresh reading of Mark. Mark was no longer seen as an imitator of Matthew. Mark, in fact, was the first to paint a written portrait of Jesus.

Mark's Opening Line

"If there had never been a Christian religion, if Jesus had disappeared from memory, if there was no Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, and, one day, we discovered a little book which opened with the line *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*—what would we think? Our brains are dulled with familiarity. Even if, from an early age, you have rebelled against the whole idea of God and religion, you will have heard the name of Jesus Christ. You will have heard the description 'the son of God.' You will know the word *gospel*. . . . And so it is very hard to imagine hearing or reading for the first time 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. . . .' But it is probably the most stunning opening line ever written. It is the start of St. Mark's Gospel."

—Alec McCowen, *Personal Mark*, New York: Crossroad, 1984, p. 9.

Who Is Jesus?

Of the four gospels, Mark alone centers from beginning to end on the problem of Jesus' identity. At the outset Jesus is an unidentified stranger and an unfathomable mystery. As the story progresses, the question on everybody's lips is, "Who is this?" The crowds, the scribes, the high priest, Jesus' relatives and disciples—they all ask it.

Who is Jesus? Mark tips his readers off in the opening sentence of his gospel: "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." So Jesus is the Christ. He is the anointed one, for that is what the name Christ means. In the Old Testament the one who is anointed is above all the king, which prompts the question, If Jesus is the anointed King, when will he be acclaimed as King? When will he be crowned? When will

he ascend his throne and rule? This question draws readers into Mark's story and keeps them in suspense.

Who is Jesus? For the benefit of his readers Mark briefly answers this question in the opening sentence of his gospel: Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed King. But none of the people within his gospel knows this. All they know is that Jesus is different from anyone else. No one knows what accounts for the difference.

Jesus' Secret

In Mark, Jesus refuses to declare openly who he is. Only in one place (8:27-33) does he come near to admitting that he is the Messiah, the anointed King. Everywhere else he seeks to hide his identity as the Messiah, wishing to conceal a secret about it. The secret is this: the Messiah must suffer. The Messiah is not a triumphant but a humiliated figure.

When Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say I am?" and Peter answers, "You are the Messiah," Jesus warns them not to tell anyone. Then he quickly shifts from the title Messiah to the title Son of Man, teaching the disciples that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected and killed (8:31). Although he does not explicitly reject the title Messiah, Jesus prefers the title Son of Man. For Mark, Jesus is the Messiah who hides himself and chooses to express his identity as the Son of Man.

Of course, to openly claim the title Messiah would have been to court wholesale misunderstanding, because the title Messiah referred to the highest political office in Judaism. The Messiah, a descendant of David, was to rule Israel in the same way as King David. He would defeat the Romans, liquidate Gentile opposition, and lead Israel to a position of world leadership. Understandably, Jesus hurries to distance himself from this political role by calling himself the Son of Man. By claiming this title, Jesus indicates that he knows that he must suffer, yet one day God will bring him out of defeat to triumph.

Jesus' announcement that the Messiah must suffer and die shocks Peter. To him and the other disciples, a suffering Messiah is a contradiction in terms. Yet this contradiction, Mark shows, is at the heart of Jesus' mission.

Following Jesus

For Mark, the focus of Jesus' life is the cross. Mark makes the shadow of the cross fall over nearly one-half of his gospel. The Jesus he portrays is above all the suffering Jesus. Mark emphasizes this aspect of Jesus' ministry

more than any of the other gospels. And why? Because suffering is so much part of the life of the Christians in Rome to whom he most probably writes. In A.D. 64, Emperor Nero accused these Christians of setting fire to the city of Rome. As a result, many Roman Christians were killed. Mark is writing a pastoral response to this crisis, and in his gospel these Christians discover that nothing they are suffering is alien to Jesus. The Jesus they meet in Mark stands before them “in the glare of the fires lit by Nero” (W. D. Davies) and calls them to take up their cross and follow him.

Matthew’s Portrait of Jesus



Who Is Jesus?

Like Mark, Matthew portrays Jesus as the Messiah, though he emphasizes the secrecy of Jesus’ messianic identity less than Mark does. Almost as soon as he appears, Matthew’s Jesus is welcomed as the promised one of Israel’s history. As the heir of David and of Abraham (1:1-17), his mission is first to Israel: “He will save his people from their sins” (1:21). Yet Jesus’ mission field is much wider than Israel. In fact, it embraces all nations. This is why Matthew tells the story of the Magi from the east. Their visit foreshadows the day when east and west will bow before the “king of the Jews” (2:2).

Matthew’s Church

The church for which Matthew writes his gospel is apparently a church in transition. Its life is painfully marked by change and confusion. For although the church’s original members had been mostly Jewish, its current members are mostly Gentile. And this major shift from a Jewish Christian to a Gentile Christian membership called for rethinking the meaning of the Jesus stories as told, for example, in the earliest gospel, the gospel of Mark. “A remodeled church needs a remodeled gospel,” says John P. Meier in *The Vision of Matthew*. “Matthew, the faithful servant of the tradition, wishes to affirm, not reject, his Christian past. But he knows that *his* situation is different and that consequently the tradition must be understood in a new light” (p. 28).

To resolve the tension between past Jewish and current Gentile membership, Matthew presents Jesus from a different perspective than that to which the original Jewish membership had been exposed. With a written form of Mark's gospel in front of him, Matthew sets out to rework and remodel it. He incorporates about 80 percent of Mark's gospel into his own and generally follows Mark's story outline. Still, his overall portrait of Jesus is quite different from Mark's. Though Matthew is a faithful guardian of the Jesus tradition, he is not a mechanical copier. By adding from sources other than Mark and using a process of reordering and rewriting, Matthew makes old traditions speak with a fresh voice to changing conditions.

Matthew, the Most Used

"It is the only gospel that uses the word 'church.' Of all the gospels it was best suited to the manifold needs of the later church, the most cited by the church fathers, the most used in liturgy, and the most serviceable for catechetical purposes. . . . The evangelist we call Matthew had a genius for collection and organization that made his gospel the best guide to practical Christian life."

—Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*, New York: Paulist Press, 1984, p. 124ff.

Jesus the Teacher

Mark presents Jesus primarily as the incognito Messiah destined to suffer and die, but Matthew presents Jesus first and foremost as the teacher of the church. He does this by structuring his gospel around five large discourses of Jesus' teachings and by inserting these discourses into the story outline borrowed from Mark. The five discourses are these:

1. *The Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7)*. In this sermon Jesus is the teacher of Christian morality. The clue to understanding this morality is grasping that the one who teaches it also embodies it. Jesus is what he teaches. Jesus lives what he teaches. To do what Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, we must possess the Christ-like qualities mentioned in the opening beatitudes (5:3-11). We must be poor in spirit, meek, merciful, pure in heart, and makers of peace.
2. *The Mission Discourse (10:5-42)*. Here Jesus commissions the twelve apostles to proclaim by word and action the approach of the kingdom of God. His words apply not just to the twelve disciples; they are equally valid for all who will be enlisted in the service of the kingdom in years to come.
3. *The Parable Discourse (13:1-52)*. In the seven parables of this discourse, Jesus teaches that the kingdom progresses in secret. In the first and most important of these parables—that of the sower—he teaches that the

kingdom is coming like vulnerable seed that birds can devour, thorns can choke, and the sun can scorch. And Jesus is the sower of that seed. In him the kingdom of God enters our world. To those who know this, these parables are revelations about Jesus. To those who don't, these same parables are puzzles or mystifying conundrums.

4. *The Discourse on Church Order (18:1-35)*. The question "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" triggers this discourse. The answer: those who are meek and humble of heart, for they imitate the essential attitude of Jesus. Thus the church is well-ordered when leaders and members humble themselves.
5. *The Eschatological Discourse (24:1-25:46)*. In this final discourse Jesus teaches about the end of the world and his return in glory. The question he keeps asking is, When I come, will I find you watching and ready?

At the end of Matthew the risen Jesus refers to all five discourses when he commissions his disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (28:19-20). These words provide the key to understanding Matthew's whole gospel. They tell us that, in contrast with Jesus' ascending from his church in Luke 24:51, the risen Jesus comes to his church as its teacher and will abide with it until the end of the age.

Luke's Portrait of Jesus



Who Is Jesus?

It is widely believed today, writes Joseph A. Fitzmyer, that Luke wrote his gospel for a Gentile Christian audience. His readers "were not Gentile Christians in a predominantly Jewish setting; they were rather Gentile Christians in a predominantly Gentile setting" (*The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, p. 59). To address this audience, Luke portrays Jesus as bringing salvation to the whole world and creating a worldwide community in which the distinction between Jew and Gentile is irrelevant.

Luke starts off by setting his story in the context of world history. Jesus is born in Bethlehem because Caesar Augustus has decreed “that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world” (2:1). Jesus’ genealogy is traced back to Adam (3:38), the forefather of all humankind, and not simply to his Jewish ancestors, David and Abraham (as in Matthew). Luke never raises the question of whether Jesus is sent only to the Jews, as Mark and Matthew do in the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman. And when Jesus is brought to trial, Luke’s interest focuses on the proceedings in the Roman court, not, as in Mark and Matthew, on the proceedings in the Jewish court. Luke shows that Jesus’ innocence was established before a Roman court—a world court. Luke’s worldwide perspective flows from his belief that Jesus’ mission is worldwide. He begins his gospel with Simeon’s announcement that the infant Jesus is “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” (2:32) and ends it with the risen Jesus reminding his disciples “that repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations” (24:47). There can be no question, writes W. D. Davies, “that for Luke the greatest fact of the first century was the church in which the division between Jew and Gentile had been annulled” (*Invitation to the New Testament*, p. 224).

First Sermon

In Luke, Jesus reveals his identity in his inaugural sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth, his hometown. The story of this event, in a way, contains the whole of Luke’s gospel. It gathers into itself all the events that follow. In the Nazareth synagogue Jesus proclaims his mission: to bring in God’s year of Jubilee—the year that is to see the end of poverty, bondage, and oppression. Jesus begins his sermon with a quotation from Isaiah 61:1-2: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

At first Jesus’ listeners respond with enthusiasm. They marvel at his gracious words and speak well of him. But when he applies the passage to himself, they start having doubts. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” In the end, after Jesus hints at the inclusion of Gentiles within God’s purpose of salvation from oppression, the people of Nazareth run him out of town. That is because, in his sermon, Jesus refers to two Old Testament events to show that already, centuries ago, God had been gracious to the Gentiles. When there was a great famine, the prophet Elijah was not sent to any of the widows in Israel,

but only to a Phoenician widow. And the prophet Elisha healed none of the lepers in Israel, but only Naaman the Syrian. What Jesus is saying is this: Because the people of Nazareth reject him as the fulfiller of Isaiah 61:1-2, he is now forced to offer salvation to the Gentiles, just as Elijah and Elisha did in their day. In other words, at the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus already sees himself as the bringer of salvation to the whole world.

Breaking Down Barriers

Luke, A Piece Torn from Wildness

“Luke is the most reasoned, calm, plausible, and orderly Gospel. . . . But Luke’s Gospel is calm and plausible only compared to the swirling bewilderments of Mark and the intergalactic leaping of John. All of the Gospels are unprecedented, unequaled, singular texts. Coming at Luke from our world, we stagger and balk. Luke is a piece torn from wildness. It is a blur of power, violent in its theological and narrative heat, abrupt and inexplicable. It shatters and jolts.

Its grand-scale, vivid, and shifting tableaux call all in doubt.”

—Annie Dillard, “The Gospel According to Saint Luke,” in *Incarnation*, New York: Viking, 1990, p. 29.

Luke focuses his portrait of Jesus more sharply by telling numerous stories of Jesus accepting people whom the Jews held in contempt. For example, the Jews loathed tax collectors who willingly had contact with Gentiles and who had a well-deserved reputation for dishonesty and extortion. They equally loathed the Samaritans, whom they considered racial and religious half-breeds. So it comes as no surprise that Luke, rather than the other gospels, tells the parables of the Good Samaritan (10:25-37) and of the tax collector (18:9-14). Nor is it surprising that only Luke records the story of Jesus’ stay at the house of Zacchaeus the tax collector (19:1-10). With these stories Luke shows that Jesus’ all-embracing love breaks down barriers

to prepare for the worldwide church.

John’s Portrait of Jesus



Jesus, says Mark, is Messiah Incognito, the great unknown. Jesus, says Matthew, is the teacher of the church. Jesus, says Luke, is the inaugurator of a worldwide community in which the distinction of Jew and Gentile has become irrelevant. Who does John say that Jesus is?

The One Who Is Sent

The gospel of John offers many answers to the question of Jesus' identity. No other gospel presents such a wide array. In the first chapter alone, Jesus is named the Word, the Lamb of God, the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of Israel, and the Son of Man. And in John, Jesus makes no effort to deny or qualify any of these identities.

Among the many designations in John, however, the one that stands out is Jesus' self-designation as the one sent from the Father. It is Jesus' fundamental understanding of himself. Coming from the Father and being sent by the Father distinguishes Jesus from everyone else. Jesus represents the Father, speaks for the Father, acts on the Father's behalf. Jesus is no mere prophet, the way John the Baptist was. He carries the Father's authority. Writes Jose Comblin, "The Father did not send Jesus to bring a gift to humanity; he sent Jesus to humanity. . . . Jesus, in the Fourth Gospel, is solely and entirely he who was sent. His whole being is a communication between God and the world" (*Sent from the Father*, New York: Orbis Books, 1979, p. 2ff.) Jesus does not bring a message from the Father; he is the message. Jesus does not reveal truths; he is the truth. Jesus does not offer bread from heaven; he is that bread. Jesus does not impart life from above; he is the life. Jesus is not the bearer of divine light; he is the light. "I am the light of the world," Jesus tells the Pharisees—who immediately challenge him to prove it. Jesus answers them: "I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the one who sent me—the Father" (8:18). John's entire gospel is based on the understanding that Jesus comes from the Father and that everything he says and does flows from his oneness with the Father. Jesus descended from the Father and testifies to what he has seen and heard with the Father.

John's Sole Concern

"John is concerned with one theme only, which he continually varies: to know him is life. That, then, is the one question that he asks his readers: Do we know Jesus? Everything else fades into twilight and darkness; it loses its importance and is pushed aside."

—Ernst Kaesemann, *Jesus Means Freedom*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969, p. 146.

The Four Gospels Compared

"Mark sees Jesus from beneath, historically, in all his rich humanity, transparent to the mystery of deity. Matthew sees Jesus in profile, doctrinally, highlighting Jesus' head (as Rembrandt does with Paul) so that we especially see Jesus' powerful thinking and teaching. Luke is a study of Jesus' hands and, behind the hands, a study of the heart that moved the hands into a ministry to all kinds of people but especially to outsiders, the marginal, and the disdained. . . . John is a portrait of Jesus from above, from the eagle's eye, revealing Jesus to us in all his majestic preexistent deity, visible now palpably in human flesh. . . . Still another way to see the Gospels comparatively is to say that in theological form Mark is Luther, Matthew is Calvin or Thomas [Aquinas], Luke is Wesley or Xavier or Chrysostom, and John is Augustine or Barth."

—Frederick Dale Brunner, *The Christbook*, Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987, p. xvii.