

One Jesus, Four Portraits

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Why the Gospels were written

All four Evangelists tried to present Jesus to their readers as *truthfully* as possible, but not necessarily with historical accuracy. To accomplish that goal, they carefully selected which events to include and which ones to omit, ordered their chosen material to serve their overall narrative, interpreted the significance of certain events for the sake of their readers, and added some original material to support their particular view of Jesus.

Despite their differences, Mark, Matthew and Luke all tell essentially the same story of Jesus' life. Hence, they are called "synoptic gospels." (*synoptic* = seeing together) John structures his Gospel differently, around seven miracles which reveal Jesus' divine nature.

The Gospels were meant to *inspire*, not just to *inform*, believers. The Evangelists hoped to strengthen the faith of their Christian readers. Hence, in some instances, the words that are attributed to Jesus or the events that are described may reflect the struggles faced by the author's community a few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. Scholars often use these details in their attempts to discern the date and place of composition for each Gospel.

Four Portraits of Jesus

Each Evangelist highlights certain aspects of Jesus, which he sees as especially significant.

- **Mark:** Jesus is fully and authentically human, with the full range of human emotions, but with his divine nature hidden.
- **Matthew:** Jesus is the Son of David and a new Moses, who fulfills all of the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament.
- **Luke:** Jesus is the embodiment of God's compassion, especially His concern for the poor and His mercy toward sinners.
- **John:** Jesus is the incarnate Word of God, sent by the Father to save the world from sin and death.

Beginning of the Gospels

Compare the beginnings of the Gospels, to see how they fit into the portrait of Jesus presented by each Evangelist:

- Mark's Gospel begins with Jesus already an adult, coming to receive John's baptism. Nobody recognizes him as a person of any significance. At his baptism, it appears that *only Jesus* sees the Holy Spirit descend, and *only Jesus* hears the voice of the Father speaking to him. It is not an epiphany for the crowd, but a private revelation for Jesus.
- John's Gospel begins with a prologue, which speaks of the Divine Word (*Logos*) that was with God from the beginning and eventually became incarnate in Jesus Christ. John

emphasizes that no one has ever seen God directly, but Jesus, the Divine Son, has revealed him in the flesh.

- Matthew's Gospel begins with a genealogy of Jesus. It suggests that the story of Jesus begins with Abraham, whom all Jews consider their father in the faith. The structure of the genealogy also suggests that the Kingdom of David, which ended with the Babylonian Exile, was restored forever by Jesus, as was prophesied.
- Luke's Gospel also contains a genealogy, which appears after Jesus' baptism. Instead of beginning with Abraham and tracing the generations up to Jesus, Luke's version begins with Jesus and moves backward all the way to Adam. This seems to be Luke's way of showing Jesus' solidarity with *all* human beings.

Infancy narratives

Matthew and Luke contain infancy narratives which are completely incompatible, and almost surely represent original compositions by these two Evangelists. The only details on which they agree are:

- Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea and later raised in Nazareth, in Galilee.
- He was born of a virgin named Mary.
- Mary was betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David.

Matthew emphasizes Jesus' Davidic lineage and his role as the new Moses, who will lead his people from slavery to freedom.

- The narrative comes right after Jesus' genealogy, which establishes his royal lineage.
- There is no Annunciation to Mary. She is simply found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. The angel of the Lord appears to Joseph instead. He addresses Joseph as "Son of David," and explains that all of this has happened in fulfillment of prophecy.
- There is no mention of Joseph and Mary traveling to Bethlehem; they lived there. That makes sense, since Joseph is a Son of David, and Bethlehem is the City of David. Jesus, presumably, was born at home.
- Within two years of Jesus' birth, Magi from the East show up. An OT prophecy directs them to Bethlehem. They offer Jesus gifts similar to those which the Prophets said foreigners would offer to the Messiah.
- King Herod issues an order to kill all the male infants in the region, similar to the order by Pharaoh to kill all the infant Jewish boys in Egypt at the time that Moses was born. The Holy Family escapes to Egypt and later returns to Israel, settling in Nazareth. Matthew cites the Prophet Hosea: "Out of Egypt I have called my son." That prophecy originally referred to the nation of Israel being led by Moses out of slavery and into the Promised Land. Now Matthew uses it to show that Jesus is the new Moses, who leads Israel out of their slavery to sin and death and into the freedom of the Kingdom of God.

Luke emphasizes that Jesus has come as a sign of God's mercy, to save all peoples, but especially the poor and the lowly.

- The stories of John the Baptist and Jesus are told in parallel. Mary's "Magnificat" portrays Jesus' birth as a sign of God's mercy toward Israel. Zechariah's "Benedictus" portrays John's birth as a sign of God's faithfulness to Israel and his mercy toward all who are enslaved to sin.
- The angel announces Jesus' conception only to Mary, not to Joseph. She interprets this gift as God looking favorably upon her lowliness, as He has done with others throughout history.
- Jesus is born in very humble circumstances. Joseph and Mary live in Nazareth, but must travel to Bethlehem for the census. While they are there, Mary gives birth. Jesus is placed in a manger (a feeding trough), for the Holy Family is too poor to find accommodations fit for human beings.
- The good news of Jesus' birth is announced only to poor shepherds in a field. They come to rejoice with the Holy Family.
- Before returning home to Nazareth, Mary and Joseph present Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem and offer in sacrifice a pair of turtledoves. The law generally required a larger animal to be sacrificed for a firstborn son, but allowed for a pair of turtledoves in cases of extreme poverty.

Passion Narratives

The Passion narrative is the heart of all four Gospels. John's portrait of Jesus as the all-powerful Son of God comes through very clearly, especially in comparison to the three Synoptic Gospels. Luke's version also includes a few details that highlight his view of Jesus as the embodiment of God's compassion and mercy.

- Garden of Gethsemane
 - All three of the Synoptics show Jesus praying repeatedly in the Garden, agonizing over his decision to accept the Father's will. John omits any sense of agony or anxiety on Jesus' part.
 - In all three Synoptics, the guards come with overwhelming force to arrest Jesus. In John (18:4-8), the guards, though armed, are incapable of taking Jesus into custody until he permits them. Jesus twice asks the guards whom they are looking to arrest, and in response Jesus declares, "I AM," using the divine name to identify himself as God.
 - Luke (22:51) is the only one who shows Jesus healing the slave whose ear was cut off.
- Way of the Cross
 - In all of the Synoptics, Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus carry his cross. In John (19:17), Jesus carries it by himself.
 - Only in Luke (23:27-31) does Jesus pause on his way to crucifixion to console the women of Jerusalem, who are weeping for him.
- Crucifixion

- Only in Luke does Jesus forgive his executioners (23:34) and one of the thieves crucified with him (23:42-43).
- John's account (19:21-22) emphasizes that "King of the Jews," written on the placard above Jesus, is actually a statement of truth, not a false claim.
- Jesus' last words from the cross
 - In Mark (15:34-37), Jesus dies crying out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"
 - Matthew (27:46-60) copies Mark's account almost verbatim.
 - Luke (23:46) shows Jesus uttering a loud cry and saying, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."
 - In John's account (19:28-30), Jesus does not even appear to suffer. When he decides that his mission has been completed, he solemnly declares, "It is finished."

Some special features that distinguish each of the Gospels

- The Marcan Secret
- Matthew's Sermon on the Mount
- Luke's parables of mercy and compassion
- The seven "signs" in John's Gospel

The Marcan Secret

A key motif in Mark's Gospel is the so-called "Marcan Secret," namely, that Jesus' divinity is masked by his humanity, until he dies on the cross.

- People are repeatedly astonished by the power and authority that Jesus demonstrates, because no human being should be capable of such things.
 - 1:27 Jesus casts out a demon, and the witnesses marvel, "He gives orders to unclean spirits and they obey!"
 - 2:12 Jesus cures a paralytic, after forgiving his sins. The people say, "We have never seen anything like this!" The scribes are more concerned that Jesus, as a human being, has no authority to forgive sins.
 - 4:41 Jesus calms the wind and the sea, prompting his own disciples to ask, "Who can this be that the wind and the sea obey him?"
 - 6:52 Jesus walks on water, after the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, but his disciples still do not understand what all of this means. Mark says that, "their minds were completely closed to the meaning of the events."
- On several occasions (1:24, 1:34, and 3:11-12), Jesus does not allow demons to speak, because they recognize him as the Son of God.
- When Jesus claims or exhibits divine authority, the religious leaders challenge him, assuming that he is merely human.
 - 2:6-7 When Jesus forgives the sins of the paralytic, the scribes accuse him of blasphemy, saying, "Who but God alone can forgive sins?"

- 11:27-28 After Jesus cleanses the temple, the religious leaders demand to know, “On what authority are you doing these things? Who has given you the power to do them?”
- 14:61-62 When Jesus finally admits his divine identity during his trial before the High Priest, all the religious authorities interpret this as a false claim that proves Jesus to be a blasphemer.
- The first time in Mark’s Gospel that another person recognizes Jesus’ divinity is at the moment of his death, when a Roman centurion proclaims, “Clearly, this man was the Son of God!” (15:39).

Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount

In Matthew 5:20-48, part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus presents a series of teachings. Some of them appear in an abbreviated form in Luke’s Sermon on the Plain. However, the setting and the manner of Jesus’ preaching in Matthew clearly show Jesus to be a new Lawgiver, with even greater authority than Moses.

- The setting is a mountaintop, reminiscent of Moses receiving laws from God on Mount Sinai and handing them down to the people.
- Jesus warns his disciples (5:20), “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was based on strict obedience to the Law of Moses.
- In a series of five teachings (on murder and anger, on adultery and divorce, on swearing and oaths, on retaliation, and on love of one’s enemies), Jesus first quotes what the Law of Moses says, and then proceeds to demand of his disciples far more than the Law requires.
- Jesus concludes (5:48) his teachings by telling his disciples to, “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” This is the new standard that Jesus has set for his disciples. Jesus appeals only to his own authority and his personal knowledge of the Father to supersede the laws handed down through Moses.

Luke’s parables of mercy and compassion

Although Luke shares many of the sayings found in Matthew, and tells essentially the same narrative as Mark and Matthew, he also includes quite a bit of material that is not found in any of the other Gospels. In particular, Luke’s Gospel contains several parables that highlight God’s mercy towards sinners and encourage Jesus’ disciples to show compassion for the afflicted, even if they are strangers or perceived as enemies. It is impossible to know how much of this material was composed by Luke, how much Luke might have obtained from a source not accessible to the other Evangelists, or how much was available to others, but selected by Luke to support his view of Jesus.

- Forgiveness of sinners
 - 13:1-9 The Barren Fig Tree
 - 15:8-10 The Lost Coin (following the Lost Sheep)

- 15:11-32 The Prodigal Son
- 18:9-14 The Pharisee and the Publican
- Compassion for the afflicted
 - 10:29-37 The Good Samaritan
 - 16:19-31 The Rich Man and Lazarus

The seven signs in John's Gospel

John's Gospel is structured around seven "signs," which call forth a response of faith from the reader, and sometimes from the characters in the story.

1. Changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana (2:1-11)
 - Found only in John.
 - Details in the story tie it to the crucifixion and the Sinai covenant.

2. Healing the royal official's son (4:46-54)
 - The same basic story also appears in Matthew and Luke, where the emphasis is on the faith and humility of the royal official.
 - John shifts the emphasis to Jesus' power and his challenge to the royal official to believe in him. After the official makes his request, Jesus first laments that people must see signs in order to believe in him. Then he dismisses the official, assuring him that his son will live. The official believes in his word and returns home. The official's entire household comes to believe in Jesus because of the healing.

3. Healing the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-18)
 - Found only in John.
 - Following the miracle, Jesus gives a long discourse. Although the issue raised by the religious leaders was that the cure took place on a Sabbath, Jesus' discourse focuses more on his relationship with the Father and his ability to raise the dead to new life.

4. Feeding the 5,000 (6:1-15)
 - This story appears in all four Gospels. However, John adds some unique elements, while the other three versions are virtually identical.
 - John mentions that the Jewish feast of Passover was near, making the connection with Eucharist even more obvious.
 - In the Synoptics, the miracle is prompted by the disciples encouraging Jesus to dismiss the crowd, so that they can go and find something to eat. In John's version, Jesus already knows what he intends to do, and he tests Philip by asking how they can feed so many people.
 - In John, the people recognize the miracle as a sign and want to carry Jesus off and make him king.

5. Walking on water (6:16-21)

- In Mark and Matthew’s accounts of this event, the disciples are afraid because they think they are seeing a ghost. In Matthew’s account, Peter even asks for proof that it is really Jesus. In John’s account, the disciples do not think they are seeing a ghost. They recognize Jesus coming toward them and are awestruck by their fear of the Lord.
 - Jesus uses the divine name, “I AM,” to identify himself, just as he does in the Garden of Gethsemane.
6. Healing the man born blind (9:1-41)
- Although the Synoptics all tell a brief story about Jesus healing a blind man named Bartimaeus outside of Jericho, this story in John is quite different.
 - The dialogue makes clear that John is using physical blindness as a metaphor for spiritual blindness. The formerly blind man receives “sight” in that he comes to recognize and follow Jesus. The Pharisees remain “blind” because they fail to recognize or accept Jesus.
7. Raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1-44)
- Found only in John.
 - Jesus waits until Lazarus has been dead for four days, after the time when Jews believed that the spirit left the body. Hence, this miracle proves conclusively that Jesus has power over life and death.
 - Jesus tells his disciples that he is glad that he waited for Lazarus to die, so that they might come to believe.

Where did the Evangelists get all of this material?

- Two second-century authors attest that Mark was known to be a disciple and “interpreter” of Simon Peter while Peter was Bishop of Rome, in the 60’s. Hence, even though Mark was not an apostle, his Gospel was widely viewed as having apostolic authority, because it was Peter’s eyewitness testimony. That may be the reason why Matthew and Luke borrowed so liberally from Mark. (90 percent of the verses in Mark’s Gospel appear in Matthew; 55 percent appear in Luke.)
- Matthew and Luke also share a great deal of material that seems to have come from a collection of Jesus’ sayings and/or teachings. It is very unlikely that Matthew and Luke were drawing only from oral tradition. There seems to have been a written collection of Jesus’ sayings that Christians considered to be authentic and authoritative.
- Much of the other material that Matthew and Luke added, including the infancy narratives and many of Luke’s parables, was clearly designed to enhance the portraits of Jesus which they already saw emerging from his life story. They would not have considered their original material to be fictional. Rather, they were attempting to highlight what they saw as the most important aspects of Jesus, in order to draw the reader into a deeper relationship with him.

- John took a completely different approach to telling Jesus' story. We don't know how much he altered the historical details to fit his narrative. But, almost all of Jesus' discourses, which are unique to John's Gospel, most likely reflect the concerns of the Christian community at the end of the first century, not the actual words of Jesus. Again, John would not have considered these parts of his Gospel to be fictional. Rather, he was using the true story of Jesus as a vehicle to explain to his audience certain critical elements of the Christian faith that were under attack. These truths emerged from theological reflection on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. So, John attributes the teachings to Jesus himself.

Why do we need all four Gospels?

Each of the Gospels offers us a unique insight into the person of Jesus Christ. And each of those insights is essential to our Christian faith.

- Mark and John, taken together, powerfully affirm the humanity and divinity of Jesus, which are essential to our understanding of the Paschal Mystery. Many heresies have denied either Jesus' humanity or his divinity, or they have denied that human and divine natures could coexist within Jesus. Once that core belief is lost, so is our hope for salvation through Christ.
- Matthew provides a crucial link between the Old and New Testaments. One of the most dangerous heresies of the first two centuries A.D. was Marcionism, which claimed that the Creator God of the Old Testament and the God of Jesus are two different beings. Matthew's Gospel refutes that argument very directly.
- Luke shows us God's unfathomable mercy, revealed in Jesus' compassionate acts and in some of his most beloved parables. Many of those parables appear only in Luke's Gospel. Without them, our hope for forgiveness and mercy would be greatly diminished.

Each of the Gospels portrays Jesus as fully human, fully divine, compassionate and merciful, and anointed by God as Messiah and Savior of the world. But, each of the four Gospels highlights one of those aspects of Jesus more than the others, so that we may contemplate it more deeply. The synthesis that emerges from all four portraits taken together is the real **Jesus Christ**, who is the object of our faith and devotion. It is not just the historical Jesus of Nazareth, but Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns for ever and ever!