

# A Three-Dimensional Jesus

*An Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*

C. Clifton Black

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## Preface

This book aims to introduce its readers to the New Testament's first three Gospels. It's safe to say that I've read no books more often than these. Oddly, for over six decades, not once have I tired of them. Just the opposite: the longer I've read them, the more they've fascinated, comforted, disturbed, calmed, provoked, and perplexed me. I wish this book were better. I'm certain it would be worse if the Gospels did not still keep from me secrets I cannot unravel. That fact is demonstrated whenever I enter a classroom: invariably a perceptive student will ask a question about the Gospels' interpretation that I cannot answer. Drawing on a nimble command of my intellectual powers, I declare, "I don't know." Throughout this book that confession recurs. As I've aged, I find myself making it more often—not only of the Gospels, but of just about everything else.

But take heart: we needn't know everything about the Gospels to profit by reading them. It's ignorance that maintains our humility, returns us to study, and helps us to spot frauds whose flimflam is exposed by reassertion of their oh-so-certain understanding.

*A Three-Dimensional Jesus* is an invitation: by no means a comprehensive account, but a friendly word of welcome. If this little book could pull the chain that opened the floodgates of one reader's imagination to blurt out, "What a weird, wondrous world Mark (or Matthew or Luke) has opened before me," I would be as happy as a clam. There I go again. How happy *is* a clam? What do we know of the emotional life of crustaceans? For all I know, they may be tired of all that sand up their bivalves.

Dr. Bridgett Green was the editor who soft-soaped me into this project. Departing for a time to join with the faculty of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary before returning to Westminster John Knox Press, she can sidestep blame for the outcome. No less charming but less fortunate is her successor at WJK, Ms. Julie Mullins, who has suffered me much while suffering much. Alice astutely asked, "What is the good of a book without pictures and conversation?" (Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* [1865]). Both are profuse in this book. For much of the former (my photographs), the subvention of travel to Israel, Palestine, and

Jordan in December 2019, and the luxury of a year's sabbatical in 2019–20, I thank the Trustees and President of Princeton Seminary. For invaluable help in confirming copyright clearances, I thank Michele Blum, overseer of rights and permissions at WJK, and Leslie Garrote, editorial intern at WJK and PhD candidate at Baylor University's Department of Religious Studies. JoAnn Sikkes at BookComp, Inc., composited and typeset a busy book with flair. The copyediting by S. David Garber and proofreading by Bob Land have been unimpeachable. I am grateful to Jen Weers, who prepared the subject index, and to Elise Hess for the index of Scripture and ancient sources. As always, Dan Braden supervised the entire production with consummate professionalism and good humor.

For this book's sparkling conversations on a potpourri of topics, I am indebted to Dale Allison, Marianne Blickenstaff, Alan Culpepper, Anna Marley, Markus Rathey, Barbara Reid, Elizabeth Shively, John Thompson, and William Willimon. All gave me precious gifts of their time and expertise.

Kaitlynn C. Merckling, matriculant for the PhD in New Testament at Princeton, supported me in countless ways as my research assistant. She is the latest, probably last, among a cadre of graduate students, now colleagues, who across two decades have cared for my books as though they were their own: David J. Downs (currently of Keble College, Oxford University), Melanie A. Howard (Fresno Pacific University), Micah D. Kiel (St. Ambrose University), Kara J. Lyons-Pardue (Point Loma Nazarene University), Devlin R. McGuire (Biblical Seminary of Colombia in Medellín), M. J. P. O'Connor (Northwest University), Callie Plunket-Brewton (Trinity Episcopal Church, Florence, Alabama), and Laura Sweat Holmes (Wesley Theological Seminary). With pride and affection I thank them all.

As ever, Harriet Black stood beside me while I pounded my head against cinderblocks. So she has done for forty-five years and counting.

“Let us be grateful to the people who make us happy; they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom.” Marcel Proust wrote a lot more than this in his seven-volume *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27), but nothing better.

C. C. B.  
The Feast of All Saints  
1 November 2022  
Princeton, New Jersey



# The Gospels

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## *A Curtain-Raiser*

Extended stories about Jesus in the New Testament (NT) are traditionally called “Gospels” (with a capital *G*). Around 155 CE Justin Martyr (ca. 100–ca. 165), an early Christian apologist, clearly and evidently for the first time on record used *euangelion* to describe a literary composition of the good news of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection (*First Apol.* 55). So far, so good.

From that simple observation erupts a lava of questions whose answers range among straightforward, unexpected, complicated, or downright impossible to reply with confidence. For clarity’s sake, let’s identify some of them right now.

- ◆ What does the term “gospel” mean? What bells chimed when first-century Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) heard that term?
- ◆ Who wrote the Gospels?
- ◆ Where did the Gospels originate?
- ◆ What traditions did their authors probably use in compiling them?
- ◆ Why were the Gospels written?
- ◆ What literary genre in antiquity do the Gospels most closely resemble?
- ◆ This book’s subtitle refers to “the Synoptic Gospels.” What are they?
- ◆ What is the relationship among these “Synoptic Gospels”?
- ◆ We know of many Gospels that never made it into the NT. Why not?
- ◆ Geographically, where are the events narrated in the Gospels set?
- ◆ Within the NT’s Gospels, who are the characters that we regularly meet?
- ◆ As the Gospels were transmitted by early Christians in the first and second centuries CE, what sorts of people in the Roman Empire would likely have heard or read them?

Reading these items, some of you may already be “sighing deeply in your spirits” (cf. Mark 8:12). Trust me. Each of these questions is important. Some are fascinating; many are elusive. If we don’t consider them at least briefly from the beginning, the rest of this book will make little sense. So let’s roll up our sleeves and get started.

## WHAT DOES THE TERM “GOSPEL” MEAN?

“Gospel,” a “good spiel,” translates the Greek word *euangelion* into English as “good news.” Convert “u” to “v,” abbreviate, and you have “evangel.” A reporter of good news is an “evangelist,” the term that biblical scholars use in referring to the authors of the NT Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In the middle and late first century CE, many NT writers use “gospel” (with a lowercase *g*) to refer, not to a book, but to *a message*: the proclamation of salvation, conceived as liberation from sin, brokenness, and estrangement from God. God reveals this good news through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection (Mark 1:1; Rom 1:1–4). This we observe in Matthew 11:4–5: “Jesus answered, ‘Go back and tell John what you are hearing and seeing: the blind can see, the lame can walk, the lepers are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the good news is preached [*euangelizontai*] to the poor’” (TEV).

Early Christians’ adoption of the word *euangelion* arose from at least two cultural traditions. In the Roman Empire,<sup>1</sup> the term had acquired religious significance with reference to Augustus, whose accession to the throne and subsequent decrees were propagandized as “glad tidings” or “gospels”:

A savior for us and our descendants, [Augustus] will make wars to cease and order all things well. Through his appearance Caesar has exceeded the hopes of all former *good messages* [*euangelia*]. . . . For the world the birth-day of the god [Caesar] was the beginning of his *good message* [*euangelion*].<sup>2</sup>

Although none of the evangelists presents Jesus in direct opposition to Caesar, they remembered that Jesus had preserved Jewish monotheism by differentiating Caesar from God (Matt 22:15–22//Mark 12:13–17//Luke 20:20–26). By adopting the term *euangelion*, early Christians may have quietly challenged any Roman emperor’s claim to be a “savior” through military victories.<sup>3</sup> Instead, they identified Jesus, even at his birth, as “a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:11; see also 1:68–69; 2:29–32).

1. Dating this ancient empire is difficult. A Roman Republic, in place as early as the sixth century BCE, was consolidated under the emperor Augustus by 27 BCE, split into Western and Eastern sectors around 395 CE, fell apart in the West around 480 after conquest by Germanic tribes, and came to an end in the East on May 29, 1453, when Ottoman Turks under Mehmed II conquered Constantinople. For more information on Roman emperors during the time of Jesus and the evangelists, see chap. 4 below.

2. Quoted by Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age according to St. Luke: A Commentary on the Third Gospel* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1972), 24; Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 3–4.

3. “Savior” (Gk. *sōtēr*) was applied to all sorts of authorities and estimable personalities in antiquity: not only rulers, but also physicians, statesmen, officials, and philosophers. In the OT it usually refers to Israel’s God (e.g., Pss 24:5; 27:9 [26:9 LXX]; Mic 7:7), a meaning carried over into the NT (1 Tim 1:1; 2:3; 4:10; Titus 1:3; 2:10; 3:4; Jude 25). Jesus is revered as Savior in Luke 2:11; John 4:42; Acts 13:23; Eph 5:23; Phil 3:20; 2 Tim 1:10; Titus 1:4; 2:13; 3:6; 1 John 4:14; 2 Pet 1:1; 3:2.

Also underlying “the good news” in the NT is a tradition in the Septuagint (LXX), a translation of the Hebrew Bible (HB)<sup>4</sup> into Greek that appears to have originated as early as the second century BCE. There the basic meaning of *euangelion* is a “happy report” (2 Sam 18:27). “The good news” acquires another connotation from the prophetic book of Isaiah, which proclaims “joyful tidings” of Israel’s liberation from Babylonian captivity, facilitated by Cyrus the Great, king of Persia (539 BCE):

How beautiful on the mountains  
are the feet of those who bring *good news*,  
who proclaim peace,  
who bring *good tidings*,  
who proclaim salvation,  
who say to Zion,  
“Your God reigns.”  
(Isa 52:7 NIV, emphasis added; also see 40:9; 61:1–2a)

The apostle Paul, a first-century Hellenistic Jew, refers to the “gospel” as orally communicated or “preached” (Rom 1:15; 10:15; 15:20; 1 Cor 1:17; 9:16). At its simplest “the good news” is identified with “Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David” (2 Tim 2:8; see also Rom 15:16; 1 Cor 15:16). Paul refers to “the good news” not just as words but as a *dynamic event*, the exercise of God’s might for human and cosmic restoration: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (Rom 1:16; cf. 1 Thess 1:5). Early Christians who trusted this “good news” quickly came to consider it a norm for proper conduct: “Only live as citizens in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil 1:27; see also Gal 2:14). God’s gospel had and has power to elicit courage amid suffering (Mark 8:35; 1 Thess 2:2) and requires obedience by its believers (Heb 4:6; 1 Pet 4:17). This gospel’s proclamation transcends time and space (Eph 1:13; Col 1:5; 1 Pet 1:12; Rev 14:6).

## WHO WROTE THE GOSPELS FOUND IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

On its face, this appears to be a silly question. There’s a twofold reason why it’s not. First: within the texts of the Gospels themselves, all are anonymous. But what about their titles, “According to Matthew” and the like? That’s the second point

4. The Hebrew Bible (*miqra*, “that which is read”) is a canonical collection of Hebrew books, traditionally consisting of teaching, or Law (*Torah*); Prophets (*Nevi'im*); and Writings (*Ketuvim*). During the Middle Ages the entire corpus came to be known by the acronym *Tanakh*: *T* + *N* + *K*. The Christian Bible incorporates these books as its “Old Testament” (OT). The precise number of books in the OT varies among Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant Christians.

to note. Our earliest Greek manuscripts with such titles cannot be dated earlier than 200 CE, a century or longer after these Gospels were almost surely written.<sup>5</sup> So where *did* these names come from?

The oldest tradition describing the composition of Mark and Matthew is from Papias (ca. 60–130), Bishop of Hierapolis (6 miles northeast of Laodicea, in modern-day Turkey; cf. Col 4:13), recorded by Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–ca. 340; *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.15–16):

Now this is what [John] the elder used to say: “Mark became Peter’s interpreter and wrote accurately whatever he remembered, but not in order, of the things said or done by the Lord.” For he had neither heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, [followed Peter], who used to offer the teachings in anecdotal form [alternatively: “as need arose”], but not making, as it were, a systematic arrangement of the Lord’s oracles, so that Mark did not miss the mark in thus writing down individual items as he remembered them. For to one thing he gave forethought: to leave out nothing of what he had heard and to falsify nothing in them. . . . And about Matthew, this was said: “Matthew systematically arranged the oracles in the Hebrew language, and each interpreted them as he was able.”

The earliest tradition about Luke’s Gospel is recorded in the Muratorian Canon, the oldest extant list of NT writings, which, though we can’t be sure, may have originated in Rome as early as 180:

The third Gospel book [was] that according to Luke. After Christ’s ascension this physician Luke, whom Paul had taken with him as an expert in the way [of the teaching], wrote it under his own name in accordance with his own thinking. Yet neither did he himself see the Lord in the flesh. Therefore, as he was able to ascertain it, he begins to tell the story from the birth of John [the Baptist] (lines 2–8; cf. Col 4:14)

Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130–200) offers the earliest reference to the Evangelist John, as quoted by Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.23.3–4):

In the second book of his work, *Against Heresies* [2.22.5], [Irenaeus] writes as follows: “And all the elders who associated with John the disciple of the Lord in Asia bear witness that John delivered the Gospel to them. For he remained among them until the time of [the Emperor] Trajan [98–117]; . . . and John is a faithful witness of the apostolic tradition.”

5. For more on this subject, see Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 65–74; Graham N. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 63–91.

The interpretation of these witnesses is difficult.<sup>6</sup> Any English translation masks Greek words whose connotations are uncertain. These traditions are practically impossible to verify and, in some cases, are contradicted by others. Sometimes what's stated doesn't tally with the evidence in front of us. Matthew—at least the Gospel we have—was indisputably written in Greek and not Hebrew, was not a translation of a Semitic original, and (as we soon shall see) seems dependent on Mark's Gospel to an extraordinary degree. If the author of Matthew's Gospel was a follower of Jesus, why would that evangelist have depended so heavily on a secondhand source?<sup>7</sup> Remember the critical point: *in none of these Gospels does an author identify himself*. Their various titles were not applied to the Gospels until the early third century, when widespread adoption of a fourfold Gospel canon made it necessary to differentiate them. Moreover, the testimonies I have quoted are notable for their reserve: Papias and the Muratorian Canon attribute their traditions to predecessors and come clean that neither Mark nor Luke was an eyewitness (which Luke 1:2–3 concedes). All are more focused on providing a “faithful witness to the apostolic tradition” and less concerned about specific writers who may finally have composed them.

Twenty-first-century readers in the West are preoccupied by literary authorship; first-century church leaders invested far more confidence in oral reports from trustworthy informants. Papias insisted, “I was of the opinion that things out of books do not profit me so much as what comes from a living and abiding voice” (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.4). Papias, Irenaeus, and others wanted trustworthy accounts about Jesus, and that's what the evangelists intend to provide. If the author of the Second Gospel<sup>8</sup> (for instance) cared nothing about identifying himself, why should we be obsessed by that?

## WHERE DID THE GOSPELS ORIGINATE?

Once again, certainty is impossible. Strong arguments have been made for Matthew's origin in Syria, particularly in the city of Antioch, whose ruins today lie near

6. Detailed analyses of two of these testimonies are offered by C. Clifton Black, *Mark: Images of an Apostolic Interpreter*, SPNT (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 77–191; and R. Alan Culpepper, *John the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend*, SPNT (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 107–86. On the traditions surrounding Matthew, consult W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 1:7–58; regarding Luke, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I–IX: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 28 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1981), 35–53.

7. Matthew the tax collector in Matt 9:9 is identified as Levi in Mark 2:14 and Luke 5:27. In oral traditions inherited by the evangelists, events were remembered even though names often varied. See also Matt 8:28//Mark 5:1//Luke 8:26.

8. By scholarly convention Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are referred to as the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Gospels, their canonical sequence, irrespective of the most probable dates when they were written: Mark, shortly before or after 70; Matthew, ca. 80–90; Luke, ca. 80–90; John, ca. 100. All these dates are matters of educated guesswork.

Antakya, Turkey. Antioch figures prominently in the book of Acts (11:19–30), and Ignatius, an early bishop of Antioch who died sometime in the second century CE, alludes to Matthew (1:18; 3:15; *Smyrn.* 1.1). Rome persists in patristic anecdotes about the creation of Mark’s Gospel. From what we can piece together of early Roman Christianity, Mark’s origin there is plausible but impossible to verify. Luke’s Gospel appears intended for Gentiles in a predominantly Gentile setting, but there’s no scholarly consensus on its birthplace.<sup>9</sup> Ephesus, Alexandria, and Antioch have been proposed as places for the Fourth Gospel’s origin, yet “it is impossible to make out a satisfactory and conclusive case for any of [these] three great cities.”<sup>10</sup> As with authorship, so too with provenance: we needn’t despair over our insuperable ignorance because none of the Gospels’ interpretation depends on fixing their origins.

### ON WHAT TRADITIONS DID THE EVANGELISTS RELY IN COMPILING THEIR GOSPELS?

Since we have identified so much that we *don’t* know, it may come as a relief to note something that no serious scholar doubts: that the sayings and stories of Jesus, collected in the Gospels, at first circulated orally. Our best evidence for that lies in Paul’s Letters, written in 50–57, sometime between fifteen and thirty-five years before the Gospels were composed.<sup>11</sup>

By the early 50s, about twenty years after Jesus’ ministry, Paul knows that Jesus

- ◆ was Jewish: born under the law (Gal 4:4), of David’s lineage (Rom 1:3);
- ◆ had more than one brother (1 Cor 9:5), one of whom was named James (15:7; Gal 1:19; 2:9, 12);
- ◆ had a close entourage of disciples, including Cephas, or Peter,<sup>12</sup> and John (Gal 2:1–14);
- ◆ voluntarily gave his life for the sins of his followers (1 Cor 15:3; Gal 1:4), which they interpreted as fulfillment of God’s will for the world’s salvation (2 Cor 5:19; Phil 2:8) in accordance with Jewish Scripture (1 Cor 15:3);
- ◆ was, by decree of “the rulers of this age” (1 Cor 2:8), executed by crucifixion (1 Cor 1:17–25; Gal 3:1), and his remains were buried (1 Cor 15:4; Rom 6:4); yet
- ◆ was raised from death on the third day and appeared to Cephas, the Twelve, and to many other believers (1 Cor 15:4–8).

9. See Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, 1:138–47; Black, *Apostolic Interpreter*, 224–59; Fitzmyer, *Luke I–IX*, 53–59.

10. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 131.

11. Whether any of the Gospels depended on Paul’s Letters is, however, a disputed matter that we cannot resolve here.

12. *Cephas* is the Aramaic form of the Greek term *Petros*: “Rock.” In colloquial English, Jesus nicknamed Simon “Rocky” (Matt 10:2//Mark 3:16//Luke 6:14; John 1:42).

In addition, Paul occasionally cites sayings of “the Lord” (Jesus) to bolster points he wants to make on diverse topics: marriage and divorce (1 Cor 7:10–11; cf. Matt 19:6, 9//Mark 10:8–9, 11–12//Luke 16:18), recompense for the gospel’s proclamation (1 Cor 9:14; cf. Matt 10:10//Luke 10:7), and the benefit of breaking bread and drinking wine in memory of his death for their sake, “the new covenant in my blood” (1 Cor 11:23–25; cf. Matt 26:26–28//Mark 14:22–24//Luke 22:17–20). Some of Paul’s counsels echo those of Jesus without explicit attribution to him (Rom 12:14; cf. Matt 5:44//Luke 6:27; Rom 14:14; cf. Matt 15:10//Mark 7:14).

From this evidence it reasonably follows that others like Paul, who were not among Jesus’ earliest disciples, transmitted traditions about him that were received from those who had been early followers. These remembrances took various forms: sayings of different kinds, including parables (e.g., Luke 15:1–32); miracle stories, especially of healings (Matt 17:14–18//Mark 9:14–27//Luke 9:37–42); legends, like the birth of Jesus (Matt 1:18–2:23; Luke 1:26–2:40) and the death of his predecessor, John the Baptist (Matt 6:14–29//Mark 6:14–29); marvelous epiphanies, like Jesus’ transfiguration (Matt 17:1–8//Mark 9:2–8//Luke 9:28–36). Most likely the greatest of all Jesus-traditions, perhaps the earliest to be remembered, was the passion narrative: the story of the events leading to his arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, and resurrection (Matt 26:1–28:1–8//Mark 14:1–16:8//Luke 22:1–24:53//John 12:1–8; 13:21–30, 36–38; 18:1–20:29). How Jesus died, and the astonishing aftermath, generated pressure to remember his teaching and events earlier in his life.<sup>13</sup>

## WHY WERE THE GOSPELS WRITTEN?

The answer to this question should become clearer in the chapters that follow. Generally speaking, however, all the Gospels share some similar *raison d’être*:

- ◆ *to remember Jesus*: This is assumed in the preceding section. Papias favored “what comes from a living and abiding voice” (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39); but when death silenced the voices of Jesus’ earliest witnesses, memoirs had to be written to stabilize oral traditions.
- ◆ *to come to terms with the delay of the risen Jesus’ return in glory*: As we shall consider in a later chapter, Jews regarded resurrection as an end-time event. Paul believed that Jesus would return suddenly and soon, “like a thief in the night” (1 Thess 5:2), come to a world whose “present form . . . is passing

13. The classic studies of the traditions behind the Gospels remain worth reading: Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, trans. Bertram Lee Woolf (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1919); Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1968); Vincent Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1957).

away” (1 Cor 7:29–31). As decades passed, Jesus’ adherents were compelled to reconsider the imminence of “the day of the Lord” (1 Thess 4:13–5:11; 2 Pet 3:3–11). Jesus himself was remembered as warning his followers that not even the Son of God nor the angels in heaven know the exact day and hour (Matt 24:36//Mark 13:32). In the meantime:

- ◆ *to help early Christians understand their identity as communities formed around a crucified and risen Lord*: Their problems were many. Jesus’ earliest followers were Jews. How were rural, Palestinian traditions to be translated into language that an increasing number of urban Gentiles could understand? How were both Jewish and Gentile disciples to structure their communities as followers faithful to Jesus’ instructions? How were first-century Christians to interpret and respond to persecution, whether by their own families (Mark 13:12–13), fellow Jews (John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2), or Gentile authorities (Luke 21:12–15)? Therefore,
- ◆ *to reawaken and to fortify faith* are clear motivations in all the Gospels. While their contents may have converted some non-Christians, all these writings are confessional, assuming that their readers share their authors’ basic beliefs about Jesus. Across generations, such faith needed to be strengthened and put into concrete action. That fundamental obligation leads directly into the next issue.

## WHAT KIND OF LITERATURE IS A GOSPEL?

Believe it or not, NT scholars still cannot agree on that question. It didn’t distress the NT’s evangelists. Matthew introduces his work as a “book” (*biblos*); Luke, as a “narrative” (*diēgēsis*). Mark alone opens, “The beginning of the good news” (*euangelion*), but it’s not at all clear that he refers to a literary artifact: he could as easily be referring to “glad tidings.” What perplexes scholars is the Gospels’ literary genre, and genres are mixtures of form (a work’s style and structure), content, and function. In simple terms, when ancient readers or listeners encountered Matthew, Mark, or Luke, what did they think they were reading or hearing?

- ◆ “Sage sayings,” like Aesop’s fables (maybe 6th c. BCE) or later rabbinic aphorisms (codified in the Mishnah, early 3rd c. CE)? The Gospels contain such (like the Golden Rule: Matt 7:12//Luke 6:31),<sup>14</sup> but they also include a lot of material that cannot be so categorized.
- ◆ “Tales of Jewish martyrs” like Daniel (6:1–28) or Eleazar (2 Macc 6:18–31; 4 Macc 5:1–7:23, ca. 150 BCE–200 CE)? The passion narrative can be read in this way; again, however, there’s more to the Gospels than that.
- ◆ “Encomia”: praise of celebrated personages, like Philo of Alexandria’s *Life of Moses* (mid-first c. CE)? Certainly the evangelists are well disposed to Jesus,

14. This precept is widespread in Jewish literature, as illustrated in Sir 31:15, “Judge your neighbors’ feelings by your own, and in every matter be thoughtful” (RSV; ca. 175 BCE). Virtually all religious traditions uphold such a sentiment: “Do not impose on others what you do not yourself desire” (*Sayings of Confucius* [ca. 480 BCE] 15.24, trans D. C. Lau [New York: Penguin Books, 1979]).



but they don't heap praise on their subject as Philo does on his (Moses, the "lover of virtue," whose mind was purified of all passions: *Names* 37; *Law* 3.45, 48).

- ◆ Apocalyptic? All the Gospels are colored by end-time thinking, stressing God's intervention in the last days. Still, Luke would never be confused with the NT's Revelation to John.
- ◆ Greek tragedy or comedy? The Gospels may incorporate aspects of both, but they are not constructed like Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (ca. 430 BCE) or Aristophanes' *The Clouds* (ca. 420 BCE).

Nowadays most, though not all, scholars classify the Gospels as specimens of *ancient biographies*.<sup>15</sup> Even that doesn't settle the matter because this genre was broad, absorptive of briefer literary categories, and in diverse ways bent, turned, and twisted by different ancient authors. Still, more than anything else the Gospels look and sound like ancient biographies: historically stylized prose narratives of an individual's life.<sup>16</sup> That fairly covers the Gospels' form and content. Their function is the proclamation of particular religious beliefs about their subject, Jesus, and the moral character shaped by those beliefs. It's hard to find an ancient biography that doesn't suggest to its readers an ethical takeaway of some kind. The Greek philosopher Plutarch (ca. 45–120 CE) compares his work as a biographer to that of a portrait painter who tries to capture "the signs of the soul," whether good or bad, of influential personages (*Lives* 1.2–3).

In a letter to a fledgling band of Christians written in the early 50s, Paul sang back to them what may well have been a hymn in honor of Christ, whose verses poetize the essence of who he was, what he did, how God responded to him, and the import of it all for everyone:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,  
 who, though he was in the form of God,  
 did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,  
 but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness  
 of men.  
 And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient  
 unto death,  
 even death on a cross.

15. This position was influentially articulated by Clyde Weber Votaw, *The Gospels and Contemporary Biographies in the Greco-Roman World* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970; comprising essays first published in 1915). More recently, David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, LEC (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987); most exhaustively, Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biographies*, 3rd ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018).

16. Like most ancient biographies, the Gospels presuppose some familiarity with their subjects, are selective in their reports, can be chronologically and geographically nonspecific, and are often vague about cause and effect in a person's life. In all these respects they differ from modern biographies, which play by different rules. To ask the Gospels to render comprehensive, well-rounded, unbiased lives of Jesus is unfair to their authors and inevitably disappointing to us as readers. The problem is not with the Gospels: it's with our unreasonable expectations of them.

Therefore God has highly exalted him  
 and bestowed on him the name which is above every name,  
 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
     in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
 and every tongue confess  
 that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

(Phil 2:5–11 RSV)

In different ways all the Gospels expand these declarations into gripping narratives.

A significant implication of understanding the Gospels in this way is the need to read them *bifocally*, as their authors surely intended: the Gospels are stories of Jesus framed to address the real-life concerns of early Christian communities. The Jesus they remembered is the living Lord, who speaks to his churches even now, as the earliest witnesses died, as the early Christian movement evolved, as they struggled to hold on to their Jewish heritage, as they drifted off course and required correction, as they underwent persecution, as they awaited Jesus' return for a much longer time than they had originally anticipated.

An analogy from recent American history may help us understand something of what the evangelists were doing. How does one explain the extraordinary popularity of the television series *M\*A\*S\*H* (1972–83), whose final episode (February 28, 1983) remains the most-watched dramatic finale in TV history? Why, almost four decades later, does *M\*A\*S\*H* remain a staple of international viewing, available on Netflix and other media providers? Did and does it satisfy some insatiable appetite to learn about the lives of doctors, nurses, and patients of a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital, stationed in Uijeongbu from 1950 to 1953? Hardly. Most viewers know and care as much about the Korean Conflict as they do the Peloponnesian War.

The answer: Vietnam. That conflict in southeast Asia (1955–75) overlapped the series' first three years and featured the return of wounded, traumatized American soldiers to civilian life. For a decade, families in the United States tuned in to the evening news on one of only three commercial stations and watched on-site coverage of a real, bloody war that was destroying not just a nation's but also a world's fathers and mothers, sons and daughters. Then, once a week, they gathered around *M\*A\*S\*H* to try to make sense out of the deadliest absurdity they were living. Because human beings *do* have a strange appetite for war, that series still resonates with the tragic farce of patching up soldiers to send them back onto front lines again, to be blown apart.

That's what I mean by reading the Gospels bifocally. In each, *two stories are unfolding simultaneously*: stories of Jesus, and stories of his followers four or five decades later. In the chapters that follow, we shall observe how three evangelists proclaimed faith, wrestled with faith, and guided their churches by remembering what Jesus and his earliest disciples had said and done.

## HOW ARE THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS INTERRELATED?

Three of the NT's Gospels may be conveniently viewed alongside one another: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Because their narrative presentations of Jesus are consistent and coherent, though not identical and interchangeable, scholars refer to them as the Synoptic Gospels (Gk. *opsis* [seen] + *syn* [in company with]).

Much similarity among the Synoptics may be seen in parallel passages of Jesus' words.

Matthew 7:7–8

Ask, and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. (RSV)

Luke 11:9–10

And I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. (RSV)

Matthew 13:12

For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. (NRSV)

Mark 4:25

For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. (NRSV)

Luke 19:26

I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. (NRSV)

Though they appear in different parts of these Gospels, these sayings are in verbatim agreement, not only in English but also in the Greek being translated. Note that the first set of sayings have no parallel in Mark. There are other permutations: material shared only by Matthew (15:21–28) and Mark (7:24–30), or only by Mark (1:21–28) and Luke (Luke 4:31–37), as well as material that appears in only one of these Gospels (Matt 17:24–27; Mark 4:26–29; Luke 7:11–17).

For you math lovers and statisticians, we can climb more deeply down into the weeds.

1. Of Mark's 662 verses, 609 are paralleled in Matthew. In other words: give or take a minor verbal variation, 90 percent of what one finds in Mark appears also in Matthew.
2. Of Matthew's 1,069 verses, 523 are paralleled in Mark. Give or take minor variations, 50 percent of what one finds in Matthew appears also in Mark.
3. Of Mark's 662 verses, 357 are paralleled in Luke; 55 percent of Mark's content may also be found in Luke.
4. Of Luke's 1,150 verses, 325 are paralleled in Mark; 40 percent of Luke's content appears also in Mark.
5. Within these parallel verses exists a *high degree of verbatim agreement* in Greek. There are a few minor instances of agreements of Matthew and Luke

with Mark that deviate from the Markan material, either stylistically or substantively.<sup>17</sup>

6. *A high degree of agreement in the sequence of passages* exists among these parallels. In material shared by all three, Matthew and Luke typically agree with each other's sequence of presentation only insofar as they agree with Mark's. Conversely, when either Matthew or Luke diverge from Mark's ordering of material, either Matthew or Luke deviates from the other's sequence. The chart on p. 13 (fig. 1) may help you in visualizing this. Matching texts are indicated with chapter-and-verse references.

We arrive, then, at an important conclusion: in both the wording of passages and their narrative arrangement, very seldom do Matthew and Luke agree with each other without also agreeing with Mark. In these three Gospels' interrelationships, *Mark appears to be the middle term or common factor*. That said, Matthew and Luke also share material with each other that Mark lacks, though this material is not arranged with the close agreement in narrative sequence that they share with Mark. (Hypotheses for these shared sources will be explored in the charts on the following pages.) And each of the three Gospels, especially Matthew and Luke, contains some material absent from the other two.

### Possible Solutions of the Synoptic Problem

With that, we have identified not only the Synoptics, but also the problem attached to them. *Some kind* of relationship exists among Matthew, Mark, and Luke. For centuries careful and curious readers have tried to account for that relationship.

First, we can rule out correspondences of oral tradition before any of the Gospels were committed to writing. As I have mentioned, most scholars assume that such oral tradition circulated during the years immediately after Jesus. Among Palestinian Jewish Christians, most likely it would have originated in Aramaic, but verbatim agreements among the Synoptics are *in Greek*. A good example is Matthew 7:7–8//Luke 11:9–10, quoted above in parallel columns. Look again at the words underlined. Either Matthew is using Luke's wording, Luke is using Matthew's wording, or both are drawing on the wording of a common source. However you slice it, the relationship among the Synoptics is primarily *literary*, based on written material.<sup>18</sup> One or more of these Gospels is using another as a source.

17. An example: In Matt 26:68 and Luke 22:64, Jesus' accusers ask an identically worded question: "Who is it that struck you?" Mark does not reproduce that question. In context, however, it makes better sense of their challenge, "Prophesy!" (Mark 14:65).

18. Adverbs like "primarily" are weasel words but in this case necessary. Even if their relationship is basically literary, that would not preclude the continuing influence of oral modifications of the documents until they reached a level of fixity several centuries later. Common sense suggests that such influence was in play, inhibiting absolute verbatim agreements.

**Fig. 1. A Comparison of the Structure of the Synoptic Narratives**

<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Luke</b>
1:1–2:23 (Infancy Narratives)	--	1:1–2:52 (Infancy Narratives)
3:1–4:25	1:1–39	3:1–4:44
--	--	5:1–11
5:1–7:29 (First Discourse: <i>The Sermon on the Mount</i> )	--	--
8:1–4	1:40–45	5:12–16
8:5–34	--	--
9:1–17	2:1–22	5:17–39
9:18–10:4	--	--
10:5–42 (Second Discourse: <i>Missionary Instructions</i> )	--	--
11:1–30	--	--
12:1–21	2:23–3:19	6:1–19
--	--	6:20–8:3 (The “Small Insertion,” including <i>The Sermon on the Plain</i> , 6:20–49)
12:22–50	3:20–35	--
13:1–52 (Third Discourse: <i>Parables of the Kingdom and the Church</i> )	4:1–34	8:4–21
--	4:35–5:43	8:22–56
13:53–17:27	6:1–9:32	9:1–45 (excluding Mark 6:45– 8:26: The “Great Omission”)
18:1–35 (Fourth Discourse: <i>Instructions for Church Life and Discipline</i> )	9:33–50	9:46–50
--	--	9:51–18:14 (Special <i>Lukan Travel Narrative</i> : The “Great Insertion”)
19:1–24:3	10:1–13:4	18:15–21:7
24:4–25:46 (Fifth Discourse: <i>Eschatology and the Church</i> )	13:5–37	21:8–38
26:1–28:8 (Passion Narrative)	14:1–16:8 (Passion Narrative)	22:1–24:11 (Passion Narrative)
28:9–20 (Resurrection Appearances)	--	24:13–53 (Resurrection Appearances)

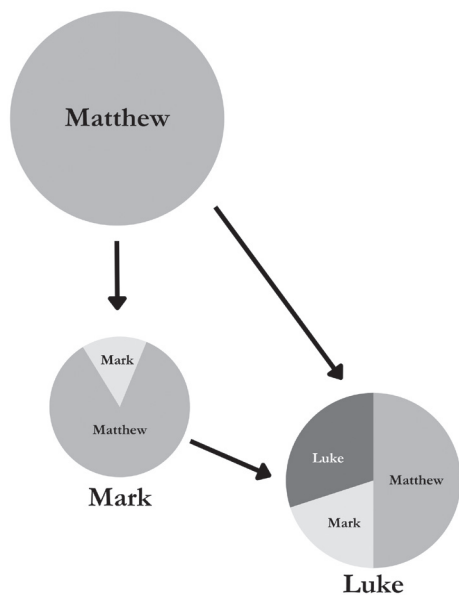


Fig. 2. The Augustinian hypothesis: Matthew was the earliest Gospel, on which first Mark and then Luke depended. Luke was also dependent on Matthew and to a lesser degree on Mark. Diagram courtesy of M. J. P. O'Connor.

If Mark is the point of intersection between Matthew and Luke, one may hypothesize at least a dozen possibilities for how the three Gospels relate to one another. The four most prevalent in NT scholarship<sup>19</sup> are schematized in Figures 2, 3, 4, and 5.<sup>20</sup> All these hypotheses are logically possible. Not all are equally plausible.

### 1. The Augustinian Hypothesis

The first hypothesis, often called Augustinian because it was assumed by Augustine of Hippo (354–430), is the least satisfying. It accounts for Mark and Luke’s verbal agreement with each other, as well as Luke’s agreement with both Mark and Matthew. (Luke used both sources.)

This hypothesis explains little else: (a) When all three Gospels agree, why does Luke tend to follow Mark’s wording, not Matthew’s, even when Matthew’s version is linguistically and syntactically superior? (b) About 40 percent of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:29) is reproduced in Luke’s Sermon on the Plain (6:20–49); the remaining 60 percent of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount is scattered throughout Luke. Why would Luke, which presents itself as “an orderly account” (1:3), break up Matthew’s neatly arranged blocks of Jesus’ teaching?<sup>21</sup>

19. The hypothesis of Luke → Mark → Matthew is most unlikely, since Luke lacks 45 percent of Mark’s content.

20. In Figs. 2–5, Matthean material is indicated in gray, Markan material in palest gray, Lukan material in darkest gray. Black is for Q, an entity to which I shall soon introduce you.

21. If these blocks have slipped from your mind, return to fig. 1 and note Matthew’s five great discourses.

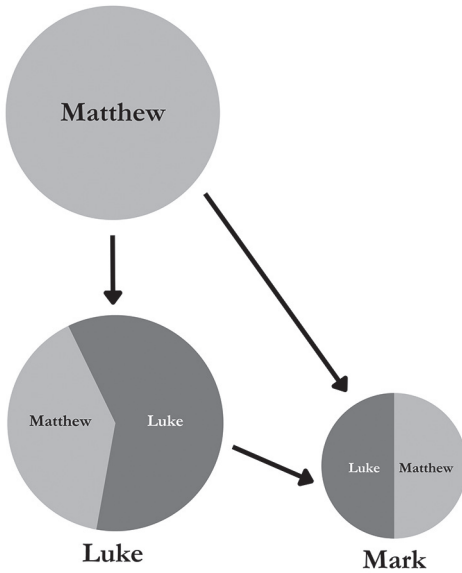


Fig. 3. The Griesbach hypothesis: Matthew was the earliest Gospel, on which Luke depended; Mark is a compression of both Matthew and Luke. Diagram courtesy of M. J. P. O'Connor.

(c) Why do Luke's infancy narratives (1:5–2:52) and post-resurrection stories (24:15–33) apparently show the author as being unaware of Matthew's (1:1–2:23; 28:11–20)? (d) If Mark used Matthew, why did Mark omit Matthew's stories of Jesus' birth and postmortem appearances and the majority of Jesus' teaching?

## 2. The Griesbach Hypothesis

The second hypothesis, which often travels under the name of its proponent Johann Jakob Griesbach (1745–1812), has in its favor three strengths. (a) It justifies Matthew and Luke's minor agreements in wording against Mark. (Luke follows Matthew's lead.) (b) It explains some odd characteristics of Mark vis-à-vis the other Synoptics: in preserving some passages missing from one of his sources, sometimes Mark follows Matthew (Mark 7:24–30//Matt 15:21–28), yet at other times Luke (Mark 1:21–28//Luke 4:31–37). (c) Most important: this hypothesis does not require the assumption of any lost sources outside of the three Gospels to interpret the Synoptics' relationships (which the third hypothesis, to be presented, does involve): that which appears in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark was simply ignored or excised by Mark. The weaknesses of this "two-Gospel hypothesis" as a source for Mark are the same that plague the Augustinian conjecture. How does one explain Mark's excision of so much Matthean and Lukan material, especially that which is congenial with Mark's point of view (e.g., Jesus as teacher; John as Jesus' precursor)? And why would Mark, whose Greek is by far the least polished of the three, deliberately muddle Matthew's clear Greek and Luke's elegant Greek?

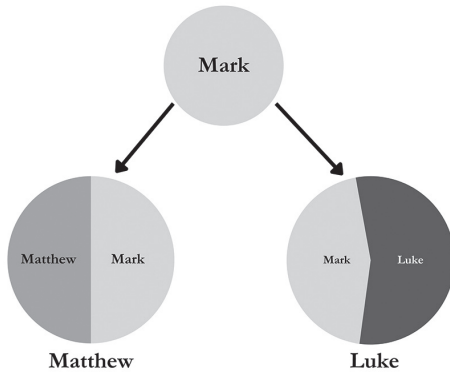


Fig. 4. The hypothesis of Markan priority: Mark was the earliest Gospel, on which Matthew and Luke depended apart from each other. Diagram courtesy of M. J. P. O'Connor.

### 3. The Hypothesis of Markan Priority

The strength of the third hypothesis, which assumes Mark's compositional priority, is this: if we assume that Matthew and Luke used Mark, it's usually easy to understand *how* they used it and *why* they changed it in the ways they did. Stylistically, they clean up Mark's blunders. Theologically, they clarify a lot that Mark leaves obscure. Narratively, they fill a lot of gaps. Where they forge into territory Mark hasn't covered, Matthew and Luke take very different shapes. For instance, Mark lacks both a story of Jesus' birth as well as a reunion of the risen Lord with his disciples. Matthew and Luke append both, drawing on different traditions available to each evangelist.

The greatest weakness in the hypothesis of Markan priority is that it cannot account for the plethora of Jesus' teaching, absent from Mark, which Matthew and Luke share. In Mark you won't find most of the content in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:29), much of which is paralleled in Luke's Sermon on the Plain (6:20–49).<sup>22</sup> To explain that, most scholars postulate the existence of a written source of Jesus' sayings, a source that no longer exists but from which both Matthew and Luke drew, probably independently of each other.<sup>23</sup> Scholars have tagged this hypothetical sayings-source as **Q**: not in homage to James Bond's gadget master, but because *Quelle* is the German word for "source." Compilations of **Q** material reveal some consistent themes, coherently developed.<sup>24</sup> It's not an unreasonable conjecture, but it sticks in the craw of advocates of the

22. Matthew 5:13 and 15 have rough parallels in, respectively, Mark 9:50 and 4:21. See also Matt 5:23–24, 29–30//Mark 11:25; 9:43–48; Matt 6:12, 14–15//Mark 11:25; Matt 7:2//Mark 4:24–25.

23. Why? Because Luke radically diverges from Matthew's sequence of these sayings, though not from Matthew's ordering of Markan material. Moreover, Matthew clumps many sayings of Jesus together. Luke, for no apparent reason, disseminates them throughout his Gospel.

24. See Robert A. Spivey, D. Moody Smith, and C. Clifton Black, *Anatomy of the New Testament*, 8th ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 112–13.



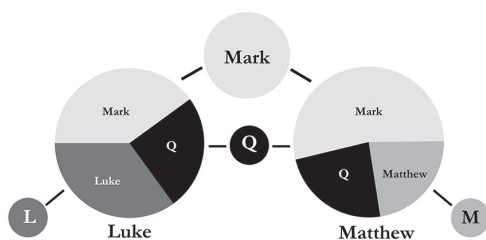


Fig. 5. A four-source theory. Independently of each other, Matthew and Luke drew upon Mark, Q, and one source unique to each. Diagram courtesy of Melanie A. Howard.

Griesbach hypothesis, who favor their argument's apparent simplicity. Even those who accept Q's existence need to keep firmly in mind that it is a *theoretical* entity.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. The Four-Source Hypothesis

For over a century most scholars have accepted the theory of two sources, Mark and Q, to resolve the Synoptic Problem and explain the convergences and divergences among three Gospels that are so similar. If we assume that Mark was the earliest Gospel—and I do, as do most scholars—then, to account for the material unique to Matthew (M) or to Luke (L), one must expand the two sources (Mark and Q) to four. Proportionately, the result is depicted in figure 5.

No solution of the Synoptic problem satisfactorily accounts for all its intricacies. If the bar is set that high, no solution ever will. We can speak only of hypotheses and probabilities, not of knockdown proof. At this writing and for the foreseeable future, the two-source (or four-source) theory seems to me and most scholars the best, or least problematic, to explain the Synoptics' interrelationships.

### WHAT ABOUT THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN?

With the other three, the NT's Fourth Gospel shares a broad narrative outline about Jesus: rather early, he is baptized (John 1:29–34) and calls disciples (1:35–51); eventually he dies by crucifixion and is raised from death (12:1–21:25). John contains other specific stories with parallels in Matthew, Mark, and Luke: among others, Jesus' feeding of five thousand (John 6:1–15; cf. Matt 14:15–21//Mark 6:35–44//Luke 9:12–17) and his expulsion of moneychangers from the temple (John 2:13–22; cf. Matt 21:12–13//Mark 11:15–19//Luke 19:45–48).

Even so, the differences between John and the other Gospels far outrun their likenesses. In the Synoptics, Jesus' ministry, localized in Galilee and its environs, apparently spans about a year. In John, Jesus travels to Jerusalem (in Judea) for

25. *The Critical Edition of Q*, ed. James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann, and John S. Kloppenborg, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), is 691 pages long; no mean feat for a commentary on a document we do not have, whose existence is only postulated.

at least three annual feasts (2:13; 5:1 [?]; 7:1–52; 11:55–12:19).<sup>26</sup> The sheer content of John diverges from that of the others. Of John’s ninety-three constituent passages, only twenty-five have clear Synoptic parallels. Put differently, 73 percent of John’s Gospel has no material counterpart in the other NT Gospels. The Synoptics’ Jesus speaks as a Jew of God’s inbreaking kingdom (Matt 4:17//Mark 1:14–15//Luke 4:43); the Johannine Jesus accepts others’ acknowledgment of him as king (John 1:49–50; 12:13, 15; 18:37) and even declares himself “Christ” (John 17:3). In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus speaks in Christian terms about himself (cf. John 14:6 with Acts 4:12).

For these and other reasons, John is not considered a Synoptic Gospel. Not more than 27 percent of it can be tracked alongside Matthew, Mark, or Luke. More often than not, its contents and plotline simply veer away from all the others, as though it were drawing from a distinctive tradition that occasionally intersected with theirs.<sup>27</sup> That’s why this book does not linger on John, even though it has proved as fundamental as Matthew, Mark, and Luke in shaping the church’s evolving theology and practice.

### **WHAT ABOUT OTHER ANCIENT GOSPELS NOT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?**

Even more maverick than John are written materials about Jesus that were multiply generated in the church’s first four centuries. We know of about fifty such documents. Some have survived as fragments, others as whole books. Still others we know only because they were quoted by such early Christian writers as Clement (ca. 150–ca. 215) and Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185–ca. 253), Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 315–403), and Jerome (ca. 345–420). In terms of genre, they roam the literary map, with legends, dialogues, and revelatory discourses. Some are anonymous; others are attributed to Christian apostles (like Peter), holy women (like Mary, the mother of Jesus), arch heretics, and even OT figures (Eve). One of the most intriguing is the *Gospel of Thomas*, written in Coptic (Egyptian), perhaps of Syrian origin in the mid-second century CE. Lacking any narrative framework, *Thomas* is a serial presentation of 114 purportedly “secret sayings”: some are strikingly close to what we find in the Synoptics; others are rather bizarre.

26. How old was Jesus when he died? Christian tradition blended his three-year ministry in John with Luke’s claim (3:23) that Jesus was about thirty years old when beginning his ministry:  $30 + 3 = 33$ . Nowhere in the NT are these inferences added up.

27. The NT’s four Gospels ride more closely together in the passion narrative: of John’s twenty-five passages in that section, fourteen (56 percent) have Synoptic parallels while eleven (44 percent) do not.

Jesus said, “Look, the sower went out, he filled his hand [and] cast [the seeds]. Some fell upon the road; the birds came [and] gathered them. Others fell upon rock, and struck no root in the ground, nor did they produce any ears. And others fell on the thorns; they choked the seeds, and the worms ate them. And others fell on the good earth, and it produced good fruit: it yielded sixty per measure and one hundred twenty per measure.” (*Gos. Thom.* 9; cf. Matt 13:3–9//Mark 4:3–9//Luke 8:4–8)<sup>28</sup>

Jesus said to them: “When you make the two one, and when you make the inside as the outside, and the upper as the lower, and when you make the male and the female into a single one, so that the male is not male and the female is not female, and when you make eyes in place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and an image in place of an image, then shall you enter [the kingdom].” (*Gos. Thom.* 22)<sup>29</sup>

That second saying may have been profoundly meaningful for the community to whom it was addressed, but it flunked two important tests for eventual inclusion in the NT. (1) It was too eccentric for most Christians. (2) It didn’t sound like Jesus as they remembered him (cf. Mark 10:6; Gen 1:27).

Another option available to early disciples was the *Diatessaron* (Gk. “through [the] four”), a collected combination of the NT’s Gospels attributed to Tatian the Assyrian (or Syrian, ca. 120–ca. 180 CE) around the year 170 CE. Although its original text has not survived, we know enough about it from Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 4.29.6) to suss out its character: a harmonized amalgamation of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—the Cuisinart version, as it were. It was immensely popular in the Syriac church, which reckoned it scriptural right down to the fifth century. In the end most Christians worldwide concluded that each NT Gospel should have its peculiar say, placed alongside each other. Had they not so decided, this book could offer you only a one-dimensional Jesus. But Tatian’s creation still lingers in our imaginations when we accidentally blend the Gospels into a singular form or when we watch practically any movie ever made about Jesus. Invariably and deliberately, the screenwriters create their own *Diatessarons*.

## A SENSE OF PLACE

When reading the Synoptics, we step into a strange world and a culture unlike our own in many respects. Yet many of the places Jesus and his disciples frequented

28. See R. McL. Wilson, trans. of *Thomas*, in *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1, *Gospels and Related Writings*, rev. ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 118.

29. Wilson, *Gospels and Related Writings*, 120. To this the only sensible reply of the disciples I can imagine would be, “Yeah, that’s just what we were thinking, but we wanted to hear it from you.”



**Fig. 6. Map of Israel in the first century CE.**

may still be visited. Because all the Gospels present them on the stage of world history as they knew it, not far away in some celestial Olympus, we honor the evangelists when we consider biblical geography. To that end, I direct your attention to figure 6. On this map you can find places whose names I'll set in **boldface** (below).

The Roman Empire partitioned Israel into numerous territories with porous boundaries. Moving clockwise, from north to south and back, these included **Syro-Phoenicia** (Mark 7:26); **Ituraea**, **Abilene**, and **Trachonitis** (Luke 3:1);

the **Decapolis** (“Ten Towns”: Matt 4:25; Mark 5:20; 7:31); **Idumea** (Mark 3:8); **Judea** (Matt 2:1, 5, 22; Mark 3:8; 10:1; Luke 1:5, 65); **Samaria** (Luke 17:11); and **Galilee** (Matt 4:15, 18, 23, 25; Mark 1:9, 28, 39; 9:30; Luke 1:26; 2:4, 39; 4:31; 5:17). Matthew (4:25; 19:1) and Mark (3:8; 10:1) refer to an indeterminate region “beyond the **Jordan [River]**.”

Galilee (Matt 4:12//Mark 1:14//Luke 4:14; and elsewhere) was a hub for intersecting Palestinian ports and caravan routes through Syria, Jerusalem, and Egypt. Adjacent to the Decapolis (Mark 5:20; 7:31), Galileans were more familiar with Gentile languages and customs than were Judeans (cf. Matt 4:15), who in turn eyed Galilee with suspicion for its adulterated Judaism. Galilee was an agrarian wonderland: fertile soil, more abundant pastures than in Syria or Judea, lucrative exports of olives and grain and wines, and a fishing industry based on the freshwater **Sea of Galilee** or Tiberias (modern-day Lake Kinneret: Matt 4:18; 15:29; Mark 1:16–20; 7:31). While most Galileans probably eked out a hand-to-mouth existence comparable to America’s southern sharecroppers during the Great Depression, a few wealthy families owned imperially regulated estates in Galilee and other regions. (At one time Herod the Great, whom we’ll meet in chap. 3, may have acquired about two-thirds of Judea, the province to the south [A. J. 15.342–64].) **Nazareth**, an agricultural village in Lower Galilee, is remembered as Jesus’ hometown (Matt 21:11; 27:71; Mark 1:9, 24; 10:47; 16:6; Luke 4:16, 34; 18:37), as well as that of Joseph (Matt 2:23; Luke 2:4, 39) and Mary (Luke 1:26; 2:39). Jesus ministered mainly in neighboring villages near the Sea of Galilee: **Capernaum**, on the lake’s northwestern shore, which the evangelists present as something like Jesus’ base of operations (Matt 4:13; 9:1; 11:23; Mark 2:1; Luke 4:31); **Chorazin** (Matt 11:21; Luke 10:13–15), about three miles north of Capernaum; **Nain**, nine miles southeast of Nazareth (Luke 7:11–17); and **Bethsaida** (Mark 8:22–26; Luke 9:10–11), whose precise location is uncertain but located by some on Tiberias’s northern shoreline.

On the Mediterranean’s eastern coast in Phoenicia, **Tyre**, touting itself as the world’s oldest continuously inhabited city, and **Sidon**, to its north, are identified as scenes of Jesus’ mighty works (Matt 11:21–22; 15:21; Mark 7:24; Luke 10:13–14). The same is claimed for one of the Decapolis’s ten cities, **Gerasa** (Mark 5:1–20//Luke 8:26–39; modern-day Jerash, Jordan). **Gadara**, another member of the Decapolis that neighbors modern Umm Qais, is the place Matthew 8:28–34 identifies for Jesus’ healing of two demoniacs. At **Caesarea Philippi**, south of Mount Hermon, Peter confesses his belief in Jesus’ messiahship (Matt 16:13–20//Mark 8:27–30). Unlike Matthew (10:5), Luke situates some of Jesus’ ministry (17:11) and that of his envoys (9:52) in the province of Samaria, a district that continues to maintain a dissident Jewish identity centered on Mount Gerizim (John 4:1–30).

Connecting Galilee and Judea is the **Jordan River**, which flows roughly from north to south from southeastern Syria, crosses the modern-day Hula Valley,



Fig. 7. The Jordan River remains a site for Christians' baptism and renewal of their baptism. Photograph by Clifton Black.

north of the Sea of Galilee, and drains into the Dead Sea in Judea. For Jews, just north of the Dead Sea is the traditional site of crossing into the promised land (Josh 3:15–17); for Christians, it is the place of Jesus' baptism by John (Matt 3:13–17//Mark 1:9–11//Luke 3:3).

The southern district of Judea—specifically, **Jerusalem** and its environs—is the locale for the Synoptics' passion narratives. (In Luke 9:51–18:14 much of Jesus' ministry happens en route to Jerusalem.) This district's limestone canyons made travel difficult, though the arable soil of its hill country remains good for fruit trees and vineyards. Traditionally its severe eastern wilderness was regarded as a place of testing (2 Sam 15–16; *B.J.* 6.326, 351, 366), as it was for John the Baptist and Jesus (Matt 3–4). Probably because of its association with King David (Mic 5:2), the divergent nativity stories in Matthew (1:18–2:23) and Luke (2:1–39) locate Jesus' birth in **Bethlehem**, six miles south of Jerusalem. **Jericho**, a Palestinian town in the landlocked territory of the West Bank, is remembered as a site for Jesus' healing of the blind (Matt 20:29–34//Mark 10:46–52//Luke 18:35–43); in Luke it is also the home of Zacchaeus, a tax collector honored by Jesus (19:1–10). Bethphage, which the evangelists identify as near **Bethany** (Matt 21:1//Mark 11:1//Luke 19:29), is the hamlet where Jesus dispatches disciples to secure a colt



Fig. 8. The Old City of Jerusalem, viewed from the Mount of Olives to the east, with the Dome of the Rock, an Islamic sanctuary, in the center. Photograph by Clifton Black.

for his entry into Jerusalem. Overlooking the eastern side of Jerusalem's Old City, the Mount of Olives is the setting for Jesus' somber discourse with his disciples regarding the city's imminent destruction and its aftermath (Matt 24:3–14//Mark 13:3–39). Luke identifies that slope as the place of Jesus' prayer before his arrest (22:39–54); Matthew (26:36–56) and Mark (14:32–52) pinpoint those events at Gethsemane, a park at the foot of Mount Olivet. The exact site of Jesus' crucifixion, Golgotha (Matt 27:33//Mark 15:22) or "Skull Place" (Gk. *kranion*, Luke 23:33), remains disputed. Hebrews 13:12 indicates that it was outside the wall of the Old City. The fourth-century Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the traditional site of Jesus' death, sits today within Jerusalem's Old City Walls, though the walls may have been differently contoured in the first century. Likewise, we're unsure of the precise location of **Emmaus**, where Luke 24:13–32 describes a dramatic appearance of the risen Jesus to some disciples at supper. (Its location on the map, northwest of Jerusalem, is a guess.)

The Jerusalem temple, the cultic heart of Jews across the centuries and a center of Jesus' teaching in Matthew (21:12–23:39), Mark (11:1–12:44), and Luke (19:45–21:4), is no more. Only a portion of its Western Wall remains after its demolition by the Romans in 70 during a disastrous Jewish uprising. In its place

since the seventh century has stood the Dome of the Rock, the Islamic shrine commemorating Muhammad's night journey to heaven, according to early interpretation (ca. 621).

## THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

In all four of the NT's Gospels, particular figures recur and interact in complicated ways. Each merits attention, beginning with the most central. All of the NT's Gospels invite an encounter with Jesus of Nazareth: a real, distinct, historical figure. Yet none of them is preoccupied by chronological, psychological, or purely factual interests; all are dominated by their religious and theological perspectives. Jews and Muslims, agnostics and atheists, can (and usually do) concede the existence of the Jesus of history. Only Christians acknowledge this Jesus as the Christ of faith.

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### The Historical Jesus

#### A Conversation with Dale Allison Jr.

*Dale C. Allison Jr. (PhD, Duke) is the Richard J. Dearborn Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. His academic research is focused on the historical Jesus, the Gospel of Matthew, Q, early Jewish and Christian eschatology, inner-biblical exegesis, the history of the interpretation and application of biblical texts, and the Jewish Pseudepigrapha.*<sup>30</sup>

*CCB: As a historian, do you find some claims about Jesus made in the Gospels rather incredible? Why or why not?*

*DCA: I believe that human experience is teeming with puzzling anomalies and, indeed, fantastic absurdities. The world is not a reasonable place, where everything has a reasonable explanation. So the catch for me is almost always not the claim but the evidence. And there are episodes in the canonical Gospels for which the evidence is indeed meager. Peter's walking on the water in Matthew 14:28–29 is an example.*

*CCB: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in [our] philosophy" (Hamlet 1.5.67–68). May I assume that you would not dismiss out of hand the historicity of some miracle stories in the Gospels?*

30. This and all conversations with other scholars in this volume have been edited and compressed for brevity and clarity.



DCA: It would not surprise me if Peter and a few others really did witness Jesus transfigured in light (Matt 17:1–7//Mark 9:2–8//Luke 9:28–36), or if some of his healings involved more than psychosomatic factors. I am also fairly confident that Jesus was able once in a while to have a sense of what would happen before it happened.

*CCB: What was Jesus “up to”? Do you think historians can recover what was important to him?*

DCA: I don’t believe he was a monomaniac. He must have been “up to” several things, just as each Gospel is “up to” several things. In this they represent him accurately. In general, however, I think that the summaries of the evangelists, such as Mark 1:14–15 and Matthew 4:23–25, give us a decent sense of what he was about. Beyond that, if I had to bet, I’d wager as Johannes Weiss (1863–1914)<sup>31</sup> and Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965)<sup>32</sup> thought: he hoped early on for a movement of widespread repentance that would usher in the eschatological kingdom of God. Yet repentance on a sufficient scale did not, to his satisfaction, eventuate. Partly as a consequence, he went up to Jerusalem, still hoping that the kingdom might come in its fullness, yet resigned to martyrdom.

*CCB: How badly did Matthew, Mark, or Luke distort Jesus’ ministry? What did they get right about him?*

DCA: I think that the best way of getting at the historical Jesus is to read Matthew, Mark, and Luke, albeit with critical commentaries at hand. On the recurrent themes and motifs, they cannot be far off. Or if they are, then the sources have suffered a catastrophic memory loss, and we can’t make up the lack.

*CCB: What other recurring themes or motifs, yet unmentioned, do you think should be noticed?*

DCA: A sense that something new is at hand: God depicted as Father, hostility to wealth, extraordinary requests and difficult demands, and conflict with religious authorities. Intention is what matters most: special regard for the unfortunate, loving and serving and forgiving others, and suffering and persecution for his disciples. I also believe that Jesus thought he was Somebody. Misleading is Rudolf Bultmann’s famous dictum that, with Easter, “The proclaimer became

31. Johannes Weiss, *Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, ed. Richard Hyde Hiers and David Larrimore Holland, LJS (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

32. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery, ed. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

the proclaimed.”<sup>33</sup> Jesus was the center of his own eschatological scenario, and he thought of himself as *messias designatus*, Messiah-in-waiting.

*CCB: Why should we try to reconstruct Jesus historically? Why not take the Gospels at face value?*

DCA: I don't take any important text at face value. And I don't understand how anyone, after the Deists,<sup>34</sup> can take any religious text at face value. Would one ask this about the Book of Mormon? Or the Qur'an? In the end, I am a modern person as well as a Christian. Both doubt and faith run deep within me. Moreover, just as I care about what really happened in the cases of Socrates, Augustine, Muhammad, Luther, Lincoln, and my own father—nobody asks why I care in those cases—I care about what really happened with Jesus. Theologians who don't care are a mystery to me.

*CCB: I take your point. As you know, some skeptics argue that all historical reconstructions are flawed, maybe doomed, by the historians' own biases and blind spots. What's your response to such arguments?*

DCA: I agree: all historical reconstructions are flawed. This, however, does not mean they are doomed. That would be skepticism run amok. We should do our best, despite all our failings. This isn't any different from trying to live a good life: we do our best even though we constantly fail and fall short.

*CCB: What books about Jesus do you recommend to serious students as trustworthy and helpful?*

DCA: I would say: Go and read some old books—David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (German original, 1840),<sup>35</sup> Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*,<sup>36</sup> C. H. Dodd's *The Parables of the Kingdom*,<sup>37</sup>

33. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel, 2 vols. in 1 (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 1:33.

34. Deists expounded a philosophical view, which took hold in France and Great Britain during the Enlightenment and relied on reason alone, discounting divine revelation as a source of religious knowledge.

35. David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, trans. George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans; in 1846), from the 4th German ed. (1840), ed. Peter C. Hodgson, LJS (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).

36. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (German original, 1906), 2nd English ed. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1922).

37. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (original, London: Nisbet & Co., 1935), 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961).

and Joachim Jeremias's *The Parables of Jesus*.<sup>38</sup> Then read through Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz's *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*.<sup>39</sup> If you study these five books carefully, you'll be able to understand most everything else, including the up-to-date stuff.

*CCB: On both counts, I concur. Thank you very much, Dale.*

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To Professor Allison's remarks, I add that the so-called "historical Jesus" is no less a literary construct than that of the NT's evangelists. The difference between them: the Gospels' authors interpret Jesus religiously, from the standpoint of Christian faith, dilating on developments that occurred in the decades between his life and their compositions. Historians attempt scholarly retrievals of what lies beneath the Gospels' surfaces, often by peeling away the evangelists' interpretations. How wide is the gap between the historians' Jesus and that of the evangelists? Not so vast, in Professor Allison's view. I agree—but others do not. The question has been disputed across three centuries of NT scholarship. It will never be resolved.

Now let's turn to the characters in the Gospels with whom Jesus mixes it up.

## END OF SELECTED EXCERPT

### Order Now from Your Preferred Retailer



38. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. S. H. Hooke, 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972).

39. Translated by John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).