

5. LIVES OF JESUS

FOCUS: From divergent opinions on Jesus' "program" to the reasons for his having been killed, the many portrayals of Jesus in the gospels, in various traditions, theologies, and the arts, amount to a Jesus who lived many different lives – each of which helps us in teasing out what it means to be a disciple of this mysterious and profoundly significant phenomenon called Jesus of Nazareth.

WILL THE REAL JESUS PLEASE STAND UP?

Truth be told, there are as many Jesuses as there are disciples of this remarkable first-century figure. Regardless of how faithful one is to the portrayals of Jesus by any particular denomination or tradition, no two people understand or relate to Jesus in exactly the same way. This is one of the reasons the Bible includes four different versions of the story of Jesus' life and why 2nd and 3rd Baptist churches have spun off from the 1st Baptist Church.

From apocalyptic firebrand to mystical faith healer to political insurrectionist, the various images of Jesus are celebrated and defended by true believers of every theological and political stripe. Walk into the narthex of any number of Protestant churches and you're likely to find the sentimental blue-eyed, pink-skinned Jesus of artist Warner Sallman gazing beatifically upon your comings and goings. Enter the neighboring Catholic church and you'll probably find the image of a beaten, bleeding, emaciated man suffering on a cross.

From the Gospels to illustrated Bible storybooks to portrayals in film, Jesus has been the subject of considerable "spin" over the ages. Each tradition and each individual puts their own emphasis on this remarkable figure. For many middle-class Americans, the ideal Jesus is the gentle, upstanding, right-thinking (and often somewhat androgynous) suburbanite with good posture. The notion that Jesus might have been a short, dark, Middle-Eastern peasant rabble-rouser is so far from many people's capacity to comprehend, that all reason is rejected in favor of the gauzy Aryan visions of early childhood. A blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus, meek and mild, is such a stalwart icon of Western culture, that to suggest anything contrary or corrective to that image is tantamount to heresy.

A Discovery Channel special utilizing the latest in forensic technology reconstructed what Jesus might have looked like, based on mosaic representations and the actual skull of a first-century Jew. The result fomented an outcry from commentators far and wide with accusations of "revisionism" and "political-correctness" run amuck. Columnist Kathleen Parker was so distraught that she fretted that the Jesus she knew as a child was being replaced by "the kind of guy who wouldn't make it through airport security." She goes on to say,

“Given the tendency of academic research to steer conclusions away from anything that might be construed as Aryan or, heaven forbid, Falwellian, it's easy to imagine that biblical revisionists won't be satisfied until they discover that Jesus was really a bisexual, cross-dressing, whale-saving, tobacco-hating vegetarian African Queen who actually went to the temple to lobby for women's rights.”

April 1, 2001 Orlando Sentinel

Non-Caucasian Christians have long been dissatisfied with the Aryan Jesus. Be it Asian, African, South American, or Native American, cultures all over the world have represented Jesus metaphorically as “one-of-them.” Douglas Andelin’s rendering of Jesus on the cover of Bishop John Shelby Spong’s “Liberating the Gospels” appears as a disheveled Jewish peasant. The *National Catholic Reporter* awarded Janet MacKenzie’s *Jesus of the People*, an image of Jesus modeled on an African American woman the winner of the “Jesus 2000” international art competition.

The portrayal of Jesus as some sort of sweet guy-next-door is a sentimental misreading of the Bible. Jesus didn’t attract everyone far-and-near. He was a peasant who likely attracted peasants. As represented in the gospels, he was radical enough to make even many of the liberals of his day, the Pharisees, uncomfortable.

Dom Crossan explains that there’s really only one Gospel in the Bible and four “according to’s,” – this because the life of Jesus has too much meaning to be limited to only one telling that followers would be tempted to literalize and venerate. The four “according to’s” give us a glimpse of four very different understandings of who Jesus was; despite efforts to the contrary, they defy synthesis and harmonizing.

GOSPEL TEXT DETECTIVES

While they may be the first books of the New Testament, the gospels are far from being the earliest written material in the Christian scriptures. That distinction is held by the authentic letters of Paul, who was writing in the late 50s, some twenty years after Jesus’ crucifixion. The earliest source material of the Biblical gospels was probably written twenty or so years after that.

Most scholars agree that the gospels do not appear in the New Testament in the order in which they were written. Even the most cursory reading of the four Biblical gospels soon reveals a number of chronological inconsistencies – not to mention stylistic and content differences.

The literary genre of “gospel” is anything but objective biography. The best that can be expected from these sources is a subjective representation of Jesus aimed at a particular community of believers. Gospels are not divine dictation of what happened or even “history” as we understand it today. The gospels are a

record of the developing traditions about Jesus from different communities. They are “layered” stories consisting of many elements – some going back to the historical figure of Jesus and others developed out of the experience of the early Christian community. As one becomes acquainted with the style, vocabulary, and theological emphasis of each evangelist, instances where they deviate from their own “agenda” jump out as being either out of place or obviously taken from another source.

The similarities and differences between Matthew, Mark, and Luke have given rise to what scholars call the “Synoptic Problem.” The synoptic or “common view” of these three texts leads to further questions not only about how similar they are in some places, but how different they are from one another and from John. The most obvious difference between the first three gospels and the Gospel according to John is the order of events:

THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

*Begins with John the Baptist
OR birth and childhood stories
Jesus is baptized by John*

*Jesus speaks in parables and
aphorisms*

Jesus is a sage

Jesus is an exorcist

*The “Kingdom of God” is the
theme of Jesus’ teaching*

*Jesus has little to say
about himself*

*Jesus takes up the cause
of the poor and oppressed*

Jesus’ public ministry: 1 year

Temple incident: late in the story

*Jesus eats a last supper
with his disciples*

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

*Begins with creation –
no birth or childhood stories*

*Baptism of Jesus assumed
but not mentioned*

*Jesus speaks in long,
involved discourses*

Jesus is a philosopher and a mystic

Jesus performs no exorcisms

*Jesus himself is the theme
of his own teaching*

*Jesus reflects at length
on his own mission and person*

*Jesus has little or nothing to say
about the poor and oppressed*

Jesus’ public ministry: 3 years

Temple incident: early in the story

Foot washing instead of the last supper

As one explores the chronological differences of the gospels, it also becomes clear that there is a completely different cast of characters in some places, different styles and vocabularies, and different political and theological agendas.

GENERAL GOSPEL CHARACTERISTICS

Mark:

The Storyteller. Jesus gives few speeches. The “mystery” of Jesus, the “hidden” Jesus is emphasized: “don’t tell anyone” is often on Jesus’ lips. Due to the story’s multiple geographical impossibilities, it seems probable that the author was never in Palestine.

Matthew:

The Teacher. Jesus gives five big speeches. The most “Jewish” of the gospels, Jesus is portrayed as a second Moses, mirroring the life experiences of the first Moses: exile in Egypt, killing of infants, mountaintop experiences, etc. Matthew’s telling is centered on the concept of the kingdom of heaven.

Luke:

The Historian. The author of Acts is, like Mark, also poor at geography. Luke’s Jesus emphasizes the poor, the outcast (like the shepherds) and the plight of women.

John:

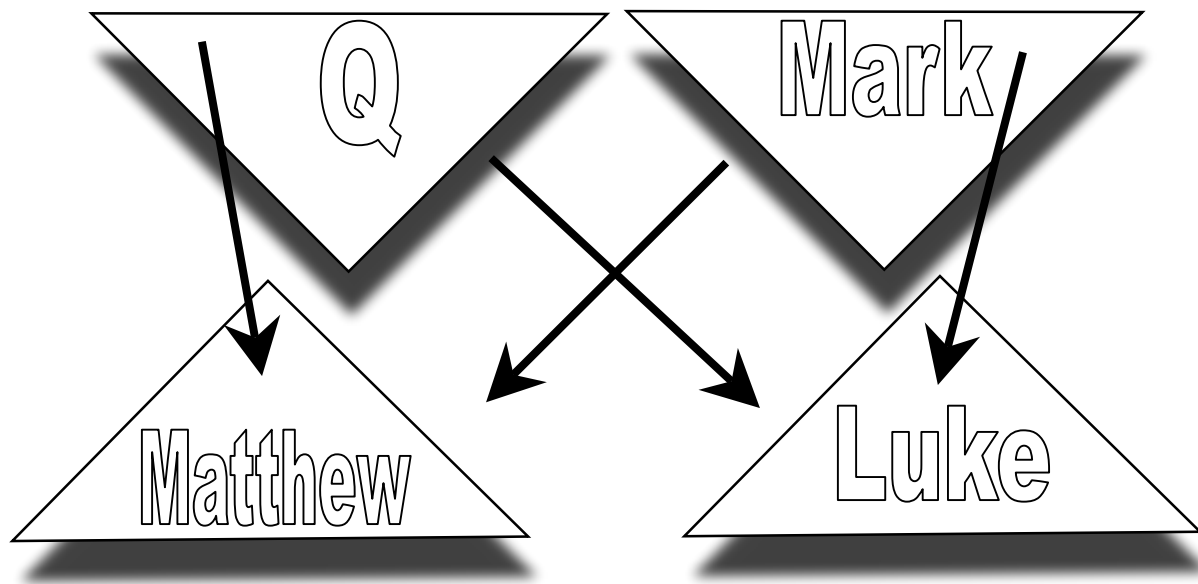
The Greek. Contrasts “that which is above” and “that which is below” to the point of being almost Platonic. Jesus offers ethereal discourses about water, bread, birth, lambs, light, and himself. The split between Jews and Christians (not as evident in the Synoptics) rises to the point of anti-Semitism in some places in John.

THE TWO-SOURCE HYPOTHESIS

For years, careful readers have noted that wherever Matthew and Luke agree, they match Mark nearly word for word. In fact, Matthew reproduces nearly 90% of Mark and Luke copies about 50%. They often reproduce Mark in the same order. It became clear that Mark was written first and was creatively plagiarized by Matthew and Luke. However, each writer’s political and theological agenda influenced the telling of even stories copied from another source. Stories like the baptism of Jesus and the portrayal of Pilate change radically from Mark, to Matthew and Luke, to John. This becomes clear when comparing the gospels in a printed “parallel gospels” (or an interactive internet parallel like John Marshall’s: <http://www.utoronto.ca/religion/synopsis/>).

In addition to using Mark as a source, scholars have hypothesized a second source used by Matthew and Luke. Identified as “Q” (from the German for “source,” *quelle*), Matthew and Luke have approximately 200 “sayings” in common that are not taken from Mark. At first a “sayings” only gospel was denied as unlikely. Then, in 1947, the text of the Gospel of Thomas was discovered in Nag Hammadi – a gospel consisting only of sayings. That, along with other evidence, confirmed the possibility of “Q’s” existence as a “sayings gospel” and

furthered the notion of a “two-source” hypothesis, wherein Matthew and Luke drew from both Mark and “Q” in composing their gospels.



THE SYNOPTICS AND JOHN

The differences between the Gospel of John and the synoptic gospels have been recognized for centuries. Even Clement of Alexandria explained that the author of John was “urged by his friends and inspired by the Spirit” to compose “a spiritual Gospel” (Eusebius, Hist. Eccl 4.14.7) as a complement to the “less spiritual” synoptics.

Although in her book, *Beyond Belief*, Elaine Pagels makes an interesting case for John having been written as propaganda opposing the Gospel of Thomas, there seems to be little evidence to suggest that John was written to either complement or correct the synoptics. What remains clear is that the topography, order of events, location of events, the teaching style and themes of Jesus – as well as the very self-understanding of Jesus – are radically different in John.

SO WHO WAS JESUS?

In the years after Easter a number of ways surfaced for understanding this remarkable individual called Jesus. Birth narratives were developed to express the disciples’ understanding of Jesus’ special origins. Sayings and events were elaborated upon that the evangelists knew Jesus *would’ve* said and done had he had the time or inclination. Much of what we know about Jesus and his life are not facts of history but images and metaphors – not historical but powerfully true nonetheless.

When Dom Crossan tells the story of Lincoln High School, he paints a picture of an idyllic tree-lined street at the end of which looms the marble-colonnaded entrance to the school. At the foot of the stairs is a large statue of the school's namesake, Abraham Lincoln. In front of him is a large tree stump. Kneeling on the other side of the stump from Lincoln, eyes looking up in hope and expectation, is an African American slave. The slave's arms are stretched wide so that the chains linking his wrists rest on the top of the stump. Feet planted firmly, lumberjack Lincoln stands poised with an axe above his head ready to come down and shatter the chains of the slave. The question he then asks is, "Did this happen?" Well, no, not literally. But is it true? Absolutely. The language of metaphor, parable, and artistic representations often express profound truths better than the raw historical data – a reality that the evangelist authors of the gospels knew well.

Messiah, Christ, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, true God of true God – verily, verily, I say unto you, the names for Jesus seem without number. And yet from the multitude of possibilities, "Son of God" language became one of the dominant metaphors for describing who Jesus was. Throughout the history of Israel all sorts of persons were referred to as "sons of God" in order to speak of their intimacy of relationship with the Divine. But with the birth stories of Jesus, the relational metaphor became biological and proceeded to become claims of divinity in John and the creeds of the early church. Taking such metaphors literally has a "trickle-down" effect, making theologians scramble to come up with concepts like the Trinity – a conceptual stretch that attempts to explain how both the claimed divinity of Christ and monotheism can co-exist.

The synoptics portray Jesus going to those who were hated and despised and declaring God's love for the outcast and the negatively stereotyped. John attests to God having "so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son." And while theologians have long debated Jesus' true mission, that of apocalyptic prophet, sage teacher of wisdom, or sacrificial lamb, the variety of images and stories of Jesus seems to point to one reality: an experience of someone who is beyond all description while at the same time being the embodiment of that for which the deepest human yearnings strive.

All of this is to say that the evidence we have as to the identity, actions, mission, and vision of Jesus varies widely and wildly depending on the source and theological filter. At best, one can speak of the "lives" of Jesus rather than the life of Jesus. Our awareness of the origins of the gospels, the traditions which have formed our image of Jesus, and the continuing struggle of faithful people to understand the complexity and radical nature of Jesus' message for the world are critical in understanding how we might live a Christian life today.

DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)

DVD Chapter 2:

Levine describes some of the likely characteristics of Jesus. Make a list.

Borg suggests several generalizations about Jesus that have a “fairly high degree of probability.” List them.

What are some of the subversive & marginal characteristics of Jesus’ life and ministry described by Flunder, Scott, & Prejean?

What borders did Jesus cross in the gospel of Mark? To what purpose?

DVD Chapter 3:

What are some of the characteristics of the “Kingdom of God?”

Why would the alternative vision of Jesus’ Kingdom be so treasonous or threatening?

DVD Chapter 4:

Describe the differences between the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus and their implications for Christian belief.

Why does Borg consider the empty tomb a “distraction” from a relationship with Jesus as a figure in the present?

Nakashima-Brock suggests that the early church was much more preoccupied with Jesus' Divine-Human nature than it was with the "atonement." Why?

DVD Chapter 5:

Describe some of the layers Flunder bemoans as obscuring the real Jesus.

SPIRITPRACTICE:

"The Gospel according to..." with John Dominic Crossan
What message does Crossan get from the "four-fold" gospel?

Questions for Personal Reflection:

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION:

Sit down and read the Gospel according to Mark straight through. Read slowly and soak in the images and stories. From your own experience and knowledge of the gospel story, note what you think is missing from Mark's telling. What is different? Keep track of the places that made you stop and wonder or where you were certain it happened in a different way. Using a parallel gospel (all four gospels – or five including Thomas – lined up in columns) compare the other gospels with your notes in hand. What do the individual evangelists change? What stories have you internalized that are fleshed out by another gospel? How does this exercise change your understanding of the genre of "gospel?"

LIVING IT OUT

SESSION 5 DROP THE WEIGHTS!

When I was sixteen, I went through training to become a senior lifeguard. The teacher and the three other students were 21 year-old male friends of my brother. My being paired with the largest one of them who was always extremely resistant to being “saved” during rescue exercises brought them all great glee and made me even more determined to do as good or better than everyone of them.

Toward the end of a grueling class one day, we each were to retrieve weights from the bottom of the pool and carry them back and forth across the pool three times. When I was almost back for the third time, the weights became too much and I went under momentarily.

The instructor yelled from the side, Drop the weights!” There was no way I was going to give them this satisfaction. Down I went again. “Drop the weights!” There was no way I was going to lose face with these men; no way I was going to fail. Close enough to almost touch the edge of the pool if I didn’t have the weights in my hand, I started the decent for the third time. For an instant, it seemed easier to hold on to something that could bring my death than face the threats, real or perceived, in life. In the midst of practicing to save others’ lives, I had a decision to make about my own. Would I cling to pieces of metal in order to make a point? Would I hold on to something worthless so I would not be deemed inadequate or less than?

I dropped those weights; made it to the side of the pool; and this event has been a metaphor I have revisited throughout my life. Often we are faced with life and death and for a time we choose death. We cling to weights that are worthless believing they allow us to “save face” or “fit in.” We cling to that which is familiar, but is not life giving.

Wisdom threatens us with life and whispers such questions and invitations to us as that subversive Galilean rabbi uttered: “Do you want to be made well?” “Sell all you have, give it to the poor, come and follow me.”

For Your Spiritual Journal:

How does Christ threaten your life or threaten you with life?

When is it easier to cling to that which is not life giving instead of reach out to that which is?

When do you hold fast to that which seems to bring you comfort, security, and/or status and are not willing to open your life, heart, resources to those who are struggling?

You may also want to read *Threatened by Resurrection: Prayers and Poems from an Exiled Guatemalan* by Julia Esquivel.

Prayer

God of the manger and the marginalized, you have given us a precious gift in the life of Jesus. May we get into the Stories and discover the raw, nourishing and challenging truths. May we experience them in such a way that they become real to us and expressed in our lives. Hesitantly and hopefully we pray. Amen.

-- Cynthia Langston Kirk