

Questions to ponder when reading the Gospels:

- Who is the author of this Gospel and what do we know of him?
- Who might the audience be to which the author is writing?
- When was this gospel written in relation to the rest of the NT?
- What are some emphases of this Gospel and what does this say about the author and audience?
- How does this Gospel writer refer to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit?
- Is Christ's divinity or humanity emphasized more, or are they equally emphasized?
- What is unique and in this Gospel and what's missing that we might expect?
- What is the structure of the Gospel?
- How would only having this Gospel alter our faith? What might be lost and what might be gained? How would not having this Gospel alter our faith? What might be lost and what might be gained? Why must this Gospel stay in the canon?



Images of the Evangelists



Fig. 252. Abba Garima III, Mark the evangelist, digitally restored. AG III, fol. 310r.



Fig. 251. Abba Garima III, Matthew the evangelist, digitally restored. AG I, fol. 4r.



Fig. 253. Abba Garima III, Luke the evangelist, digitally restored. AG III, fol. 344r.

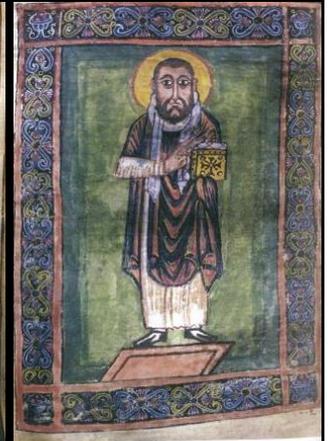


Fig. 254. Abba Garima III, John the evangelist, digitally restored. AG III, fol. 399r.

The Ethiopian *Abba Garima III* is the earliest reliably dated gospel book which has survived with intact portraits of all four evangelists and decorated canon tables. It is dated by radiocarbon testing to AD 330-650, based on three samples. Above are the earliest visual representations of the four evangelists from *Abba Garima III*.

Images of the Evangelists



Matthew, Luke, and John are “standing and holding a book which is identifiable as a gospel by the cross on its jeweled cover... in the East jeweled covers were used only on gospel books.

Images of the Evangelists



The depictions of Mark and John both have the same green background, with the evangelist on the same pedestal, despite one being seated and the other standing. Each of them wears a bishop's white scarf (*omophorion*). Both portraits also have the same distinctive pattern on their frames.

The evangelists in Abba Garima III are unusual for the variety in their clothing. Mark is the only one in anachronistic classical attire, but with the addition of a bishop's white scarf, *omophorion*.

Instead John is wearing contemporary ecclesiastical dress, consisting of a brown chasuble, the robe by priests and bishops when celebrating the Eucharist (and in the Eastern Church on some other occasions), over a narrow-sleeved tunic, as well as an *omophorion* (fig. 76).

The symbols of the Evangelists (See Ezek. 1 or Rev. 4:7-8)

The tradition of connecting the four evangelists with these symbols is ancient and predates our written accounts. The oldest account goes back to Victorinus, but then Jerome picks it up and modified it slightly writing, “Mark the Evangelist—opening thus: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness’”—has the image of the lion. John the evangelist, taking wing like an eagle, discourses on the Word of God.”



Matthew	Human
Mark	Lion
Luke	Calf
John	Eagle

The symbols of the Evangelists

According to this tradition, the fourfold gospel may be said to include either four perspectives on the figure of Jesus, symbolized by the four different creatures, or just two perspectives: one represented by the three texts that highlight Christ’ human nature, the other by the single text that highlights his divine nature... Augustine points to a basic difference between the flying eagle and its three colleagues:

These three creatures—the lion, the human, and the calf—are all earthbound. It follows that the three corresponding evangelists are primarily concerned with what Christ did in the flesh and with his instructions for the conduct of this mortal life, addressed to those who still bear the burden of the flesh. John, on the other hand, flies like an eagle above the clouds of human weakness and gazes on the light of unchangeable truth with the sharpest and steadiest eyes, those of the heart. (Watson, 92-93)



Matthew	Human
Mark	Lion
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Canonization: How many gospels?

If the New Testament contains four gospels, that does not mean that only four gospels were written. It means that four gospels were selected from a wider range of gospel literature to serve as the basis for the church's preaching, teaching, and worship. The four-gospel collection is the work not just of individual evangelists but of the church. (Watson, *The Fourfold Gospel*, 5)

As far as the evidence shows, the NT canon (as we have it) was fully accepted and listed by Athanasius in his Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter (367 CE).

“identified noncanonical gospels do not appear to exercise a public liturgical role as analogous written sources alongside Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John... Important exceptions are the *Infancy Gospel of James* and the *Epistle of the Apostles*, which in some settings did exercise a relatively wide-spread liturgical role; but even these texts were not copies alongside the four gospels in ancient codices.” (Bockmuehl, *Ancient Apocryphal Gospels*, 13)

Have you ever heard that...? Then you know traditions from

- Mary's mother's name was Anna?
- Mary rode a donkey to Bethlehem?
- Joseph tried to find a midwife?
- Jesus was born in a cave?
- Time stood still when Jesus was born?
- Mary is descended from King David?
- Mary was a perpetual virgin?
- The Protoevangelium or Infancy Gospel of James
- “Quite unlike any other noncanonical work, this infancy gospel has profoundly shaped how most Christians through the ages and into the twenty-first century have understood and imagined the Christmas story—regardless of whether they had ever even heard of this text.” (Bockmuehl, 59)
- Veronica's used a veil to wipe Jesus' sweat?
- Acts of Pilate

“Apocryphal” Gospels

There are other so-called written “gospels” from antiquity, but most are expansionary and epiphenomenal. This means that the “apocryphal gospels” are secondary to the four canonical gospels, likely being written after the fact, and they play little or no role in the original, earlier compositions. Rather than retellings of the canonical gospel arc (baptism-resurrection), extant apocryphal gospels focus in a particular time to “fill in the gaps.” (Infancy Gospels, Gospel of Peter w/ focus on death and resurrection)

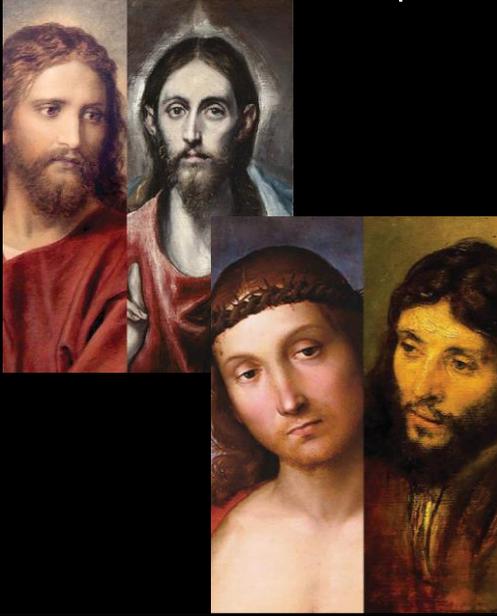
At some point around the beginning of the third century, Christians [in Rhossus, a coastal town in Roman Cilicia, between Turkey and Syria] petitioned Bishop Serapion of nearby Antioch for permission to use the noncanonical *Gospel of Peter* in their public worship. (A passion-and-resurrection narrative from this text was discovered in 1886; other early evidence seems to confirm that it was a full-length gospel of similar scope to Matthew in which “Peter” speaks in the first person singular.) Serapion, bishop of one of the major sees of the eastern Mediterranean and a determined opponent of heresy, had not read this text. Yet he was persuaded by the petitioners’ arguments and duly gave them permission to use it. (Watson, 4-5)

“Apocryphal” Gospels

Another example of how apocryphal gospels fill in the gaps relates to 1 Corinthians 15:7, which reads, “Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.” This post-Easter appearance is NOT recorded in any of the gospels, yet,

- “Jerome cites from the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* a striking narrative of the risen Jesus handing his burial shroud to “the servant of the priest” before appearing to James the Just and breaking bread with him (fragment 7)—thus filling an evident blank in the NT text, which records such an appearance (1 Cor 15:7) without describing it. The narration of such an encounter would be of obvious importance to the diverse communities for whom James the brother of Jesus was a particularly prominent apostolic figure.” (Bockmuehl, 99-100)

Fourfold Gospel or Harmony?



Between 160-175, Tatian (an early Christian Assyrian apologist) sought to combine and harmonize the four gospels and so developed the Diatessaron (through the four).

However, if we regard each gospel as a portrait of Jesus, is this appropriate? What is lost when we cut and paste different accounts of the life of Jesus?

While there is certainly history behind the Gospels, if each evangelist writes with certain emphases and motives in mind, blending them together leads to a distortion.

Eventually the Diatessaron was abandoned and the fourfold Gospel was embraced.



Do we recognize these four portraits as Jesus?

Agrapha Jesu: “unwritten” sayings of Jesus



There are sayings of Jesus preserved in the New Testament outside of the canonical Gospels:

- ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’ (Ac 20:35)

Apocryphal Gospels may preserve other agrapha:

- Dialogue with Peter in which Jesus encourages the disciples to be as sheep even in the midst of ravenous wolves (2 Clement)
- An enigmatic statement that the kingdom will come “when the two will be one and the outside like the inside, and the male with the female will be neither male nor female” (2 Clement and echoed in *GospThom.*)

Other early patristic writings:

- “My mystery is for me and the children of my house”
- “Ask for the big things, and the small things will be given to you as well”

(Bockmuehl, 45-46)

Many different approaches & questions: Going from the MACRO to the MICRO

All (Religious) Literature from the Ancient Near East

All (Religious) Literature contemporaneous with Hebrew Bible & New Testament Scripture (Apoc & Pseud)

Literature considered canonical/
authoritative by Protestants today

Genres/ Themes/ Eras

Individual Books

Narrative Arcs

Phrases

Words

Ipsissima vox vs. ipsissima verba

We only know a few of the exact words/ phrases from Jesus because he spoke Aramaic and the NT was written in Greek. Some words/ phrases were transliterated into Greek.

- Talitha kum (Ταλιθα κούμ, Mark 5:41)
- Ephphatha (Ἐφφαθά, Mark 7:34)
- Abba (Ἀββά[ς], Mark 14:36)
- Raca (Ρακά, Matthew 5:22)
- Mammon (Μαμωνάς, Matthew 6:24)
- Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani (Ἠλί, Ἠλί, λιμὰ σαβαχθανί, Mark 15:34)



Ipsissima Vox is a Latin expression meaning "the very voice", and describes the view that the NT Gospel-accounts capture the concepts that Jesus expressed, but not exact words. *Ipsissima Vox* is contrasted with *Ipsissima Verba*, meaning "the very words."

<https://www.theopedia.com/ipsissima-vox>

Exile as a metanarrative cipher for reading the Gospels

First Temple was the residence of God

After destruction and subsequent exile, where did God go?

There was a geographic return, but there was no theophanic procession back (no pillar of fire/cloud)

"At no point do we hear that YHWH has gloriously returned to Zion.

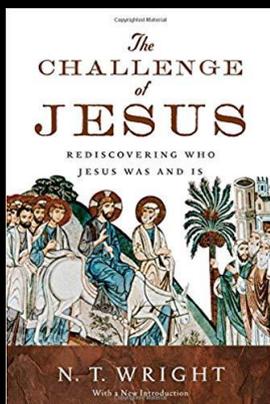
At no point is the house again filled with the cloud that veils his glory.

At no point is the rebuilt Temple universally hailed as the true restored shrine spoken of by Ezekiel.

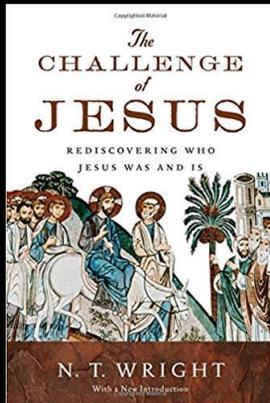
No new festival was invented to mark the start of the great new era.

Significantly, at no point either is there a final decisive victory over Israel's enemies or the establishment of a universally welcomed royal dynasty.

Temple, victory and kingship remained intertwined, but the hope they represented remained unfulfilled." (104)

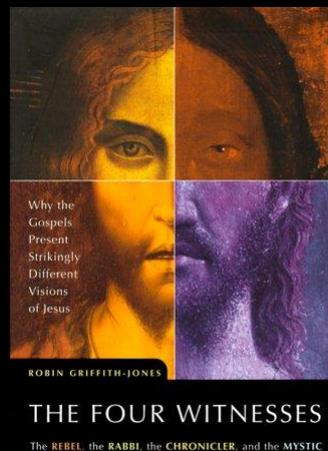


Exile as a metanarrative cipher for reading the Gospels



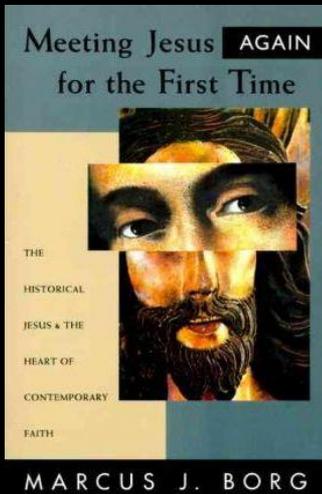
[Jesus] told the story of the kingdom in such a way as to indicate that Israel's long exile was finally coming to its close. In the celebration of the Passover at the Last Supper, "the words that [Jesus] spoke suggest that [he] was deliberately evoking the whole exodus-tradition and indicating that the hope of Israel would now come true in and through his own death. His death, he seems to be saying, must be seen within the context of the larger story of YHWH's redemption of Israel; more specifically, it would be the central and climactic moment toward which that story had been moving. Those who shared the meal with him were the people of the renewed covenant, the people who received "the forgiveness of sins," that is, the end of exile. Grouped around him, they constituted the true eschatological Israel. (85)

Historical Jesus



- "The term historical Jesus refers to attempts to reconstruct the life and teachings of Jesus by critical historical methods, in contrast to Christological definitions (the Christ of Christianity) and other Christian accounts of Jesus (the Christ of faith)." (*The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 779ff)
- Essentially, if each of the four evangelists had particular motives when telling their stories and leaning into our post-enlightenment historical mindset, how do we get back to the historical Jesus over and against the theological Christ?
- There have been various, differing eras or quests to search for the historical Jesus and scholars have arrived at very different answers.

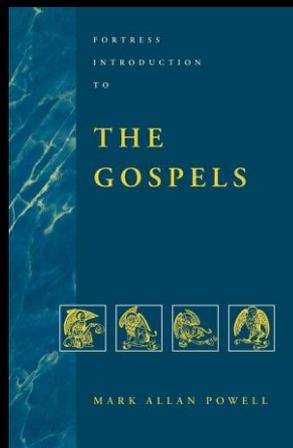
Historical Jesus



- the gospels are neither divine documents nor straightforward historical records... the gospels represent the developing traditions of the early Christian movement.
- [The gospels] contain not only the [early Christian] movement's memories of the historical Jesus, but those memories added to and modified by the growing beliefs and changing circumstances of the movement. Thus the gospels are the church's memories of the historical Jesus transformed by the community's experience and reflection in the decades after Easter. They therefore tell us what these early Christian communities had come to believe about Jesus by the last third of the first century. They are not, first and foremost, reports of the ministry itself.
- This understanding of the gospels is the basis for the well-known scholarly distinction between *the Jesus of history* and *the Christ of faith*... The first phrase refers to Jesus as the particular person he was—Jesus of Nazareth, a Galilean Jew of the first century who was executed by the Romans. The second phrase refers to the Christ of the developing Christian tradition—namely, what Jesus became in the faith of the early Christian communities in the decades after his death.

(Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 9-10)

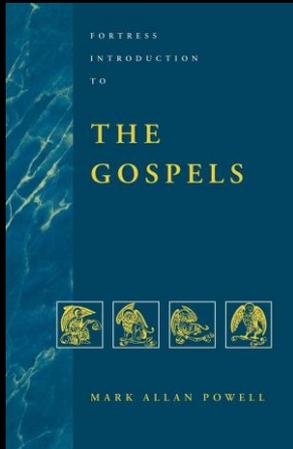
Historical Jesus



There have been various, differing eras or quests to search for the historical Jesus and scholars have arrived at very different answers.

- **Marcus Borg** sees Jesus as a Jewish mystic, a charismatic “Spirit person” who was intent on revitalizing Israel... [His] mission involved initiating a religious movement that would prioritize compassion over concern for purity...
- **John Dominic Crossan** views Jesus as a radical peasant who rebelled against political and religious authorities by defying their conventions... In violation of accepted taboos he sought to demonstrate a radical egalitarianism by openly engaging in table fellowship with misfits and outcasts...
- **John Meier** describes Jesus as “a marginal Jew,” that is, as a Jewish teacher who by circumstance and choice lived on the margins of his own society, speaking and acting in ways that made him appear “obnoxious, dangerous, or suspicious to everyone.” ...

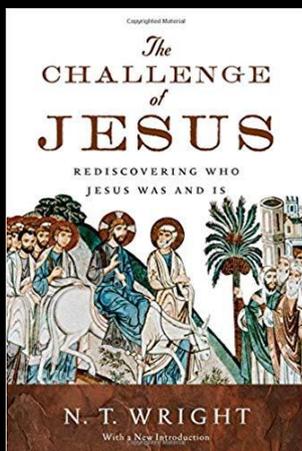
Historical Jesus



- **E.P. Sanders** presents Jesus as an eschatological prophet whose essential mission was to announce a great future event that was about to take place... His vision for this transformation was decidedly Jewish: the selection of twelve disciples was intended to represent the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel...
- **N.T. Wright** describes Jesus as one who believes his vocation was to enact what Scripture said God would do. Viewing himself as both prophet and Messiah, he understood his own destiny as symbolizing that of Israel...

(Powell, *Fortress Introduction to The Gospels*, 13-14)

Historical Jesus



Look what happens, [Ernst Käsemann] said in a famous lecture in 1953, when the church abandons the quest for Jesus. The nonquesting years between the wars created a vacuum in which nonhistorical Jesuses were offered, legitimating the Nazi ideology. I would go so far as to suggest that whenever the church forgets its call to engage in the task of understanding more and more fully who Jesus actually was, idolatry and ideology lie close at hand. To renounce the quest because you do not like what the historians have so far come up with is not a solution. (21)

- Next week: Easter Sunday there is NO Sunday School
- The following week (April 28), we begin a short study of Revelation

