

FOUR MASTERPIECES: JESUS IN THE GOSPELS

JEFF PURSWELL

Those old enough to remember Y2K will recall the exhilaration surrounding the turning of a new millennium. The days leading up to 1/1/2000 buzzed with euphoric celebrations, historical retrospectives, futuristic prognostications, and—most feverishly—fears of a technological meltdown of apocalyptic proportions.

Getting in on the act was the *National Catholic Reporter*, which sponsored an art contest to create a new image of “the Jesus for the next millennium.” In an interview for NPR, the sponsor of the contest explained its rationale: “Artists are forward-looking people; and as we consider who Jesus might be and where Christianity might be going in the next century, we thought that an artist might have the answer.” And so it fell to visionary artists to create a portrait of Jesus suitable for a modern age—a “Jesus” borne not of divine revelation but a painter’s imagination.

Upon hearing this interview, my initial dismay soon gave way to a sober realization. This contest was not altogether different from what we are all prone to do—what *I’m* prone to do—when it comes to Jesus. Instead of looking to Scripture’s inspired portrayal, we craft our own personalized image of Jesus. Because an image we create is an image we can control. We want

a “Jesus” who is useful to us—shaped by our circumstances, catering to our desires, forwarding our personal agendas. The result is a portrayal that often looks suspiciously like ourselves.

Nothing demolishes such funhouse mirror, Christological creations like an encounter with the true Jesus. And the place where we can have such an encounter is in the four Gospels of the New Testament.

Looking for the Wrong Person

People derive many different things from the Gospels. Conservative scholars, battling attacks on the truthfulness of the Gospels, have at times focused on their historical details (a vital task, to be sure) to the detriment of their message. Preachers mine the Gospels for models of moral behavior to emulate

or avoid—Peter’s boldness (or pride), Mary’s submission, Zacchaeus’s tenacity. Neither focus is necessarily wrong, but both can divert us from the primary goal of these books.

*To read the
Gospels ... is to be
exposed to God
himself.*

Surely all of us have succumbed to a more subtle temptation when approaching the Gospels. In his book *Lost in the Cosmos*, the great southern writer Walker Percy perceptively asks, “Why is it that, when you are shown a group photograph in which you are present, you always (and probably covertly) seek yourself out?” Busted. However innocuous such self-focus may seem, it can utterly sabotage our reading of the Gospels. We hold in our hands a photo album filled with snapshots of incomparable beauty, but our eyes stray from the main character as we immediately try to find *ourselves* in the picture. “What are *my* storms that Jesus will calm?” “How can I overcome *my* temptations as Jesus did?” “If I have enough faith, maybe Jesus will heal *me*, too!” And all too quickly, the majesty of Jesus on display—his glimmering moral purity, or his deeply-felt compassion, or his uncompromising obedience, or his unrivaled authority—is eclipsed as we nudge ourselves into the frame.

To avoid the allure of man-centered or moralistic interpretations, we must keep in mind the purpose of the Gospels.

“We beheld his glory . . .”

Scholars have reached a virtual consensus as to the genre of the gospels—the kind of literature the evangelists intended to write and, therefore, how we are intended to read them. Although different labels are used, the gospels are perhaps best viewed as *theological biographies*.¹ The significance of such a designation is two-fold. First, the Gospels are supremely about Jesus!² Although they differ from modern biographies, they are nevertheless concerned about factual details concerning Jesus (“biography”). They faithfully record events in his life, the substance of his teaching, the focus of his ministry, the nature of his person.

But these are not *bare* details. The evangelists, under the inspiration of the Spirit, utilize these details, arranging them in various ways, applying them to their audiences’ needs, all to proclaim Jesus as Messiah, Savior, and Lord (“theology”). This informs how we are to approach the Gospels. We receive them as reliable accounts testifying to the greatest of all of God’s saving acts in history³, and we *listen* to them—carefully, reverently, expectantly—as they reveal to us the person of Jesus Christ, God the Son incarnate, who came to disclose God to us and to accomplish the redemption of his people.

To read the Gospels, then, is far more than learning “facts about Jesus”; it is to be exposed to God himself in the person of his Son. In speaking of his apostolic ministry, Paul uses a somewhat curious phrase in 2 Corinthians 4:6: “God has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God *in the face of Christ*.” He doesn’t say “the glory of God *in Christ*” or “the glory of God *in the teaching about Christ*.” Why “face”? There appears to be something about the incarnation, the “in-fleshing” of God in the person of Jesus, that reveals the glory of God in a unique way.

That’s what we find in the Gospels. We not only learn precious truth *about* Jesus, but we *see* Jesus—acting in power, teaching with authority, loving with

1. THIS IS THE TERM PREFERRED BY CRAIG L. BLOMBERG, *JESUS AND THE GOSPELS: AN INTRODUCTION AND SURVEY*, 2ND ED. (NASHVILLE: B&H, 2009), 122. THE TITLE OF CRAIG KEENER’S MORE RECENT BOOK WELL CAPTURES THE NATURE OF THE GOSPELS: *CHRISTOBIOGRAPHY* (GRAND RAPIDS: EERDMANS, 2019).

2. IN HIS AUTHORITATIVE WORK ON GOSPEL GENRE, RICHARD BURRIDGE DRAWS THIS CONCLUSION: “IF GENRE IS THE KEY TO A WORK’S INTERPRETATION, AND THE GENRE OF THE GOSPELS IS BIOG, THEN THE KEY TO THEIR INTERPRETATION MUST BE THE PERSON OF THEIR SUBJECT, JESUS OF NAZARETH.” *WHAT ARE THE GOSPELS?: A COMPARISON WITH GRAECO-ROMAN BIOGRAPHY*, 2ND ED. (GRAND RAPIDS: EERDMANS; DEARBORN, MI: DOVE, 2004), 248.

3. RICHARD BAUCKHAM’S FASCINATING BOOK *JESUS AND THE EYEWITNESSES: THE GOSPELS AS EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY* (2ND EDITION. GRAND RAPIDS: EERDMANS, 2017) EXPERTLY EXPLORES THE CHARACTER OF THE GOSPELS AS WHAT THEY CLAIM TO BE: EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY. FOR A THOROUGH TREATMENT OF THE HISTORICAL ACCURACY OF THE GOSPELS, SEE CRAIG L. BLOMBERG’S *THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF THE GOSPELS*, REV. ED. (NOTTINGHAM: APOLLOS; DOWNERS GROVE: IVP, 2007).

compassion, rebuking the proud, embracing the outcast, and suffering, resolutely but alone, for our sins. It is staggering to consider that, through the inspired words of the Gospels, we are afforded an experience like that described by the apostle John: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Why Four?

This implies the importance—indeed, the genius—of having four gospels, and not just one. If all that mattered was a simple timeline of Jesus’ life, then a detailed, summary account which compiled all the data, canceling out repeated items and smoothing out all the differences, might suffice as a historical record. But the Gospel writers give us far more. Each writer provides a brilliantly conceived, finely textured account of Jesus’ life and ministry on earth. Each writes from his unique vantage point and perspective. Each proceeds with his own theological emphases and pastoral concerns, portraying and applying the life, teaching, and ministry of Jesus in distinct yet complementary ways.

Among the many masterpieces produced by Rembrandt are his self-portraits—which themselves are many, numbering over one hundred! Produced throughout his career, these works portray him from different angles, in different moods, with different colors and uses of light capturing different expressions and nuances of emotion. Far from being redundant, these works create something of a visual diary of his life in all its variety, development, and artistic expression, such that our understanding of Rembrandt and his work would be impoverished without them.

So it is with the Gospels. Like four masterpieces of the same majestic Subject but drawn from different angles and using a wide palette of colors, each one highlights different dimensions and perceives varied implications of the person and work of Jesus. As Leon Morris put it, “Jesus is such a gigantic figure that we need all four portraits to discern him.”⁴ Jesus was too big, his significance too momentous, his life too beautiful and complex to be captured in just one presentation. But with four, we get a nuanced, multifaceted portrait of Jesus in all its depth, texture, richness, and power.

4. LEON MORRIS, *STUDIES IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL* (MILTON KEYES: PATERNOSTER, 1969), 107.

Although we can hardly begin to scratch the surface here, even a glance suggests the splendor that awaits us in each of these masterpieces we call the Gospels.

Matthew: The Promised Messiah

The opening verse of Matthew signals a wealth of this Gospel's concerns. This book's subject will be "Jesus Christ"—"Christ," indicating his proper title as God's anointed one, the Messiah. As the "son of David," Jesus is the heir to David's throne, the long-awaited king of Israel who would rescue and rule over God's people. He is also the "son of Abraham," harking back to the founding of the old covenant people of God and also looking forward to the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham that "all the nations of the earth" would be blessed in him (Gen. 18:18; 22:18). This is the promise later echoed in Jesus' concluding commission to go and "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). Already the reader encounters Jesus not as a novel preacher but as a long-awaited royal figure who fulfills the hopes of Israel, even as through him God's ancient promises expand to embrace the entire world—including us, the readers.

More encounters await. The very structure of this Gospel, organized around five large blocks of Jesus' teaching, portrays Jesus as a teacher *par excellence*, the authoritative revealer of God's will. His proclamation of the "kingdom of heaven" (32 times in Matthew) reveals that God's saving reign has now arrived, present in his very person. The theme of *fulfillment* pervades this Gospel. Jesus' life not only fulfills Old Testament prophecies but also patterns of God's actions in history; even the Mosaic Law is fulfilled in Jesus (Matt. 5:17-20), as the one to whom it pointed and in whom it finds its ultimate meaning. In all this and so much more, we encounter Jesus as *the long-awaited Son of David who brings the history of God's people to a climax, fulfilling all the Old Testament and inaugurating the kingdom of God through his life, death, and resurrection.*

Mark: The Suffering Servant

In the early centuries of the church, Mark's Gospel was often symbolized by the lion, an apt picture for the Jesus we encounter in this book. This Gospel lacks the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke and the opening theological reflection of John. Instead, Jesus breaks onto the scene, teaching "with authority" (1:27) and demonstrating that authority through healings

and exorcisms. The reader can't miss the repeated use of "immediately," punctuating this as a vivid, fast-paced account. But there is theology in Mark's style: through Jesus, God's kingdom is breaking into human history with decisiveness and force. Jesus' words and actions evoke highly charged responses and prompt human characters to constantly question (and misperceive) his identity (1:27; 4:41; 6:3). The reader, however, alerted both by Mark's headline in 1:1 and the testimony of supernatural voices (1:11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7), realizes that the Son of God is powerfully exercising God's reign over Satan and rolling back the effects of the fall.

This exalted portrait is counterbalanced in the second half of Mark's Gospel, with its slower pace and inexorable march toward the cross. Here we learn, in perhaps the theme verse for the book, that this mighty Messiah has supremely come, not to rule as a tyrant but, like Isaiah's suffering servant, to die as a ransom for many (10:45; cf. Isa. 53:10-12). In so doing, he also blazes a trail for his followers, who are called to follow his example of self-denial (8:34-38; 9:35-37; 10:42-45). The reader, then, receives another glorious portrait of Jesus, as *the mighty Son of God who comes as a suffering Messiah, dying as a ransom for God's people*.

Luke: The Savior of the World

It might surprise the casual reader to learn that, of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke), only Luke uses the words "Savior" and "salvation." Indeed, for Luke, Jesus is supremely the Savior, and the theme of salvation pervades this Gospel like a recurring musical theme does a symphony.⁵ Its opening notes in the infancy narrative point to the universality of God's salvation, from the genealogy which reaches all the way back to Adam (3:38) to Simeon's recognition that God's salvation will be a light "to the Gentiles" (2:32). This reaches a climactic expression in the story of Zacchaeus, the final act of Jesus' public ministry before entering Jerusalem: "For the son of man came to seek and to save the lost" (19:10).

Luke's readers will also be struck by the compassion of Jesus. Jesus' humanity shines through as he reaches out to the outcasts and the disenfranchised of society. Women play a prominent role in this Gospel, and comfort, salvation, and blessing are especially promised to the poor (1:53; 4:18; 6:20;

5. THIS METAPHOR COMES FROM I. HOWARD MARSHALL, *LUKE: HISTORIAN AND THEOLOGIAN*, 3RD ED. (DOWNERS GROVE: INTERVARSITY, 1988), 97.

14:12-14; 16:19-31). We see Jesus feasting with “tax-gatherers and sinners,” and he makes a tax-collector the unlikely hero of a parable (18:9-14), as he also does a despised Samaritan (10:25-37). Even in the throes of execution, Jesus mercifully promises Paradise to a convicted criminal. The reader of Luke will find great reassurance (cf. 1:1-4), beholding Jesus as *the Savior of the world who seeks out the lost*.

John: The Word Made Flesh

It is not surprising that the symbol for John’s gospel among some church fathers was the eagle, for the author, as it were, takes flight to see beyond Jesus’s earthly life to the Son’s eternal existence. John’s “In the beginning” (1:1) intentionally echoes Genesis 1:1, placing this story in a cosmic frame and disclosing that Jesus of Nazareth is, in fact, the eternal divine Word “made flesh” (1:14).

Here we come to the core of John’s presentation of Jesus: in his incarnation, Jesus has revealed God himself. He is the ultimate self-disclosure of God—particularly his steadfast love and faithfulness (“grace and truth,” 1:17; cf. Exod. 34:6-7). The reader learns from John’s unique terminology for Jesus’ miracles (“signs”) that these are not simply miraculous displays of power, but revelatory pointers to his glory as God’s unique Son (2:11; cf. 20:30-31). And as the one sent from the Father, Jesus offers to those who receive him in faith “eternal life” (17 times in John)—true, spiritual life; resurrection life; the life of the age to come—which can, by the new birth, be experienced now (4:14; 5:24; 6:47, 54; 10:28; 17:3; cf. 10:10; 11:25-26). And so John presents a final glorious portrait of Jesus as *the eternal Son who perfectly reveals the Father and gives eternal life to all who believe in him* (20:31).

Despised and Rejected

Even the briefest glimpse at these four masterpieces would be incomplete without noting the most prominent feature of each of the portraits. With all of their richly textured diversity, they are united in their intense focus on the death of Christ on the cross. This involves not only the space devoted to the events of Christ’s death (Martin Kähler famously called the Gospels “passion narratives with extended introductions”⁶) but the way in which the cross casts its shadow far back into the narratives. Already in the first chapter

6. MARTIN KÄHLER, *THE SO-CALLED HISTORICAL JESUS AND THE HISTORIC, BIBLICAL CHRIST*, TRANS. CARL E. BRAATEN (PHILADELPHIA: FORTRESS, 1964), 80, N. 11.

of Matthew, we learn that Jesus “will save his people from their sins” (1:21). In Mark 2:19, Jesus speaks of the bridegroom being “taken away.” In Luke 2:35, Simon prophesies to Mary that, because of this child, “a sword will pierce through your own soul also.” And in John’s very first chapter, we hear John the Baptist’s pronouncement that Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29). Christ’s sacrificial death is no appendage to these narratives but the climax to which each is inexorably heading.

Once we arrive at Jesus’ passion, the four evangelists each provide unique facets of the glory we behold there. With the centurion’s confession in Mark 15:39, we see Jesus’ death as not only the culmination of his work as a suffering servant (Mark 10:45) but also confirmation that he is “the son of God”—the first time in the Gospel this title appears on human lips. Matthew’s passion narrative contains a number of cosmic events—signs both of judgment and the arrival of the new age—to confirm that Jesus’ was no ordinary death but truly an eschatological event. Luke is the only Gospel writer to include Jesus’ ascension (which he will repeat in Acts 1), highlighting the ongoing authority of Christ through those who will proclaim the gospel “in his name” (24:47). For John, the ignominy of Jesus’ death is transformed into the moment of his greatest glory. The “hour” we have been awaiting (cf. 2:4; 7:30; 8:20) finally arrives—the moment when the Son of Man will be glorified (12:23). And thus, the hideous cross is transformed from an instrument of death to a royal throne from which Jesus reigns, vanquishing death and all the powers of the evil one.

Four Portraits, One Jesus

Endless displays of beauty await us in the four Gospels of the New Testament. Yet, despite their unique perspectives and presentations, behind them all lay the same, glorious figure. All four testify to one sent from God, with unique authority, possessing divine attributes and exercising divine prerogatives, who came to make God known, to vanquish all the ancient enemies of humanity, and to bring the saving power of God to a fallen world. Indeed, Jesus claimed that people’s eternal destiny hung on their response to himself. For all there is to admire and marvel at in these portraits, it will all be meaningless apart from faith in Jesus as one’s Lord and sin-bearer.

And so, through the portraits that are the Gospels, Jesus not only comes to us, but he confronts us. He challenges our conceptions of him. He corrects

our assumptions about him. He claims our exclusive allegiance. And he calls us to live differently in light of who he is and what he has done.

Those who receive this Jesus—the *authentic* Jesus—will find in the Gospels deep gladness with every sighting of him, satisfaction in savoring him, peace in beholding his power, strength in hearing his promises, and hope in awaiting his return.

This was the burden behind one of the most significant books written by one of the most significant pastors in the 19th century. J.C. Ryle was not content only to teach sound doctrine; he wished believers to be familiar with Christ *himself*. To this end, his exhortation continues to draw believers to the treasure we have in the Gospels. May it draw us as well:

The Gospels were written to make us acquainted with Christ. The Holy Ghost has told us the story of His life and death, His sayings and doings, four times over. Four different inspired hands have drawn the picture of the Saviour. His ways, His manners, His feelings, His wisdom, His grace, His patience, His love, His power are graciously unfolded to us by four different witnesses. Ought not the sheep to be familiar with the Shepherd? Ought not the patient to be familiar with the Physician? Ought not the bride to be familiar with the Bridegroom? Ought not the sinner to be familiar with the Saviour? Beyond doubt, it ought to be so. The Gospels were written to make men familiar with Christ, and therefore I wish men to study the Gospels. ... Surely we cannot know this Christ too well! Surely there is not a word nor a deed, nor a day, nor a step, nor a thought in the record of His life, which ought not to be precious to us. We should labor to be familiar with every line that is written about Jesus.⁷

7. J.C. RYLE, *HOLINESS: ITS NATURE, HINDRANCES, DIFFICULTIES, AND ROOTS* (DURHAM: EVANGELICAL PRESS, 1979), 191-192.

JEFF PURSWELL

Jeff Purswell is the Director of Theology for [Sovereign Grace Churches](#), the dean of the [Sovereign Grace Pastors College](#), and serves as an elder at [Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville](#) (Louisville, KY).