

GOSPEL DIFFERENCES

OVERVIEW

All four gospels tell essentially the same story - the ministry of Jesus from his baptism to his death; narrating his great deeds and words, his healings, and teachings in Galilee and in Jerusalem. All have similar plot-lines - conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day; eventually leading to his arrest and execution. Something odd happens afterwards, which eventually results in the formation of the church by the disciples.¹

The synoptic gospels share the same basic outline, present roughly the same order of events, use much the same way of relating stories and sayings, and basically present the same portrait of the good news and its preaching. John, however, is quite different. In the synoptics Jesus goes to Jerusalem once. In John he makes several visits. The order of commonly described events is different; e.g.: the cleansing of the Temple occurs early in John, introducing Jesus' ministry (Jn 2:13-22); in the synoptics it is near its climax (Mk 11;15-19). John relates fewer miracles, mostly developed either into a subsequent lengthy discourse by Jesus or into a controversy that brings out the sense and meaning of the event (e.g, the cure at the Pool of Bethesda (Jn 5)). The synoptic gospels turn attention to the Kingship of God. In John, Jesus concentrates on the gift of eternal life. In the synoptics, parables are an important form of teaching. In John they are rarely used. He prefers to present extended images such as that of the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:1-18).²

COMPOSITION

Mark assumes a situation of crisis and persecution. The narrative is developed according to geographic and theological principals. The prologue establishes Jesus superiority to John the Baptist and his identity as Son of God. In the first half, the episodes occur mainly in Galilee (1:14-8:21). The second half (8:22-16:8) moves from Galilee to Jerusalem.³ For Mark the time is always now. The action in his gospel only occupies a few weeks.

Luke uses a geographical arrangement. Jesus' ministry in and around Galilee (4:14-9:50) is followed by a long travel narrative in the context of his journey to Jerusalem (9:51-19:27). The final section deals with his death and resurrection. He sets his story in the broader stream of history; in the middle of time, between the past history of Israel and the future period of the church. Jesus only travels to Jerusalem for one Passover, at which he dies.

Luke stands out from others by the sophistication of its style of writing, its more elevated vocabulary, and its constructions and grammatical forms. Like dramas, his

¹ Richard A. Burridge, Four Gospels One Jesus?, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 166

² Henry Wansborough, The Four Gospels in Synopsis, in The Oxford Bible Commentary, John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1002

³ Adrian Hastings et al eds., The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 407

scenes are carefully crafted. He makes frequent use of patterns and parallels to convey messages. For example, the descent of the Spirit at Jesus Baptism is followed by a programmatic speech at Nazareth, paralleled by the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost and Peter's speech following.⁴

Matthew is organized around 5 blocks of Jesus' teaching, the most famous being the Sermon on the Mount.

John uses a different geographical arrangement. Jesus visits Jerusalem several times. His miracles are linked together with long discourses explaining their significance (eg feeding of 5,000 (Jn 6:1-14), followed by discussion of the Bread of Life (Jn 6:25-59).⁵ His cosmic scale runs from the beginning (before time itself) to the last day. Jesus' ministry is given a time-scale of three years.⁶

BEGINNINGS

Mark starts with Jesus' baptism – his first appearance on the public stage. In Matthew, His public significance begins with his birth and the visit of the Gentile wise men to worship him. Luke begins with the miraculous conception and birth of John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus. John takes a quantum leap back in time – in the beginning, before all time, He was with God and he is God (1:1). John's story is a life of the Cosmos.

PORTRAYAL OF JESUS

Mark's portrays Jesus as enigmatic and ambiguous.⁷ There is no infancy narrative. The account ends with an empty tomb. Mark's story is an unveiling of the mystery of who Jesus is. The reader is told at the start, but the characters undergo a slow and painful realization, a quest that pervades the gospel as the characters struggle to puzzle it out (2:7; 4:41; 8:21, 29; 11:28; 14:61), He is finally recognized by the Centurion at the Cross.⁸ In between he is presented as a miracle worker who heals the sick, expels demons, and manifests power over nature - even death.

Jesus is portrayed as an authoritative teacher (1:16-20, 1:22, 27, 4:41).⁹ He also takes to himself powers that only God possesses: forgiving sin (2:1-12), claiming to be Lord of the Sabbath (2:28), rebuking the storm (4:39), and walking on the sea (6:48).¹⁰ His identity, is only properly understood with reference to his death on the cross. Jesus' death is interpreted with reference to the biblical motif of the righteous sufferer (Ps 22, Isa 53). In his suffering and death he is not only faithful to God (14:36) and to his mission from God but also gives his life as a ransom for many (10:45).¹¹

⁴ Wansborough, 1010

⁵ Burridge, 18

⁶ *ibid*, 138

⁷ Burridge, 65

⁸ Barton, 1008

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Hastings, 408

Matthew's view of Jesus is more explicit and transparent. He provides a revelation of God in the presence of Jesus, and portrays Jesus as the Teacher of Israel.¹² Jesus is portrayed as bringing the teaching of Judaism to completion and fulfilling scripture (1:23; 2:6; 15, 18, 23; 4:15-16; 8:17; 12:18-21; 13:35; 21:5; 26:567; 27:9-10). The miracles of Jesus are the fulfillment of Isaiah 61 (Mt 8:17; 11:5-6). The resurrection of Jesus is the sign of Jonah (Mt 12:39; 16:4). Jesus is the New Moses (Mt 2 (infancy), lawgiving (Mt 5:1) and the final charge on the mountain (Mt 28:16)).¹³

Matthew's Jesus is a more dignified and hieratic figure than Mark's, as though He is almost already the risen Christ. The human touches of emotion found in Mark are missing.¹⁴ Jesus is depicted as the fulfillment of Judaism. He is greater than the temple, Jonah or Solomon (2:6, 41, 420, the Son of David (principal theme of Mt 1), the New Moses (succeeding in the desert where Israel had fallen to the testing (Mt 4:1-11), God's son (2:15; 14:33; 16:16; 27:40, 43)).¹⁵

Luke stresses Jesus' humanity; with his lowly family background, birth and boyhood; and the adult theme of enjoying companionship, walking and eating with his friends.¹⁶

Jesus is portrayed as the Prophet to Israel, filled with and led by the Spirit (4:1, 14, 18). From the beginning the prophetic atmosphere is strong. Zechariah points out the child John as a prophet (1:79) and notes Jesus will be a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory of the people Israel (2:32) Jesus shows prophetic qualities in dialogue with teachers of the temple (2:47); in the Nazareth manifesto, likening his mission to that of Elijah and Elisha (4:24-7); after raising of the widow's son, where He is publicly hailed as a prophet (7:16). He interprets his journey as a journey of destiny to die as a prophet at Jerusalem (13:33). On the Road to Emaus – the disciples sum up Jesus' activity as that of a prophet, and He himself acts as a prophet interpreting the scriptures.¹⁷

That he is more than a prophet is shown in many ways: use of the title "Son of God"; his saying he really belongs in his Father's house (2:49); the genealogy linking Jesus directly to Adam, Son of God (3:23, 38); and frequent expressions of intimacy between Jesus and his Father (10:21-2; 22-34), reaching a climax in Jesus' last words of trust on the cross (23:46).¹⁸

Jesus is found at prayer at all decisive moments of his ministry (his baptism, his choice of the 12, the Transfiguration, the teaching of the Lord's prayer, and the agony in the garden)¹⁹

Luke's use of title *kyrios* of Jesus with the title "the Lord" hints at divine status for Jesus. This title used overwhelmingly by Luke in narrative sections (eg. 10:1; 11:39; 17:5).²⁰

¹² *ibid* 77

¹³ Barton, 1009

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ Barton 1010

¹⁶ Burridge, 108 and 127

¹⁷ Barton, 1011

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ *ibid*

The Gospel of John shows a striking emphasis on a Jesus with a much fuller consciousness of his divinity. Jesus seems above, or aloof from, the maelstrom of events. He virtually turns tables on Pilate; and shows no pain or emotion in death (19:30).²¹

In John, the primary object of revelation is Jesus himself, and his glory, or the revelation of God's glory in him. But it is a secret Jesus who is being revealed, and the theme of seeking Jesus runs through the Gospel from 1:38 "What do you seek?" to 20:15 "Whom do you seek?"²² John's portrait is incarnational. It contains the two clear assertions of the divinity of Jesus: "The Word was God (1:1) and "My Lord and my God!" (20:28).²³ He also shows Jesus subject to human exhaustion (4:6), loneliness (6:67), grief for a friend (11:35) and shrinking from death (12:27).²⁴

Conclusion

Four gospels implies plurality and diversity in our views of Jesus, but there are limits to the diversity. There are only 4 gospels not 44. This variety permits different temperaments. Matthew's human Teacher will attract those interested in law and teaching. Mark's enigmatic portrait may help those in the darker experience of suffering. Luke will appeal to people labouring for liberation among the oppressed. John's soaring flights will enchant the mystics. Put another way, Matthew is the "thinking" gospel, full of logic and order. Mark is the "sensing" gospel, with vivid and graphic immediate narrative. Luke is the "feeling" gospel, with concern for the burdened. John is the "intuitive" gospel, with flights of metaphor and symbol.²⁵

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²⁰ ibid

²¹ Paul J.,. Achtmeier, ed., Harper's Bible Dictionary, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 354

²² Barton, 1013

²³ ibid

²⁴ ibid

²⁵ Burridge, 174

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