

THE FOUR GOSPELS

SETS OF PARALLEL OR SYMPATHETIC PASSAGES STUDIED IN FOUR WEEK GROUPS

CYCLE ONE

BEGINNINGS

1. Mark's gospel begins abruptly with the baptism of Jesus (vv.1-11). Its immediate context is 2nd Isaiah and its nonviolent Servant. The key image of the baptism, signaling the self-conscious relationship of Jesus with the Father, is the nonviolence metaphor of the dove (a sacrificial animal, compare "lamb"), which is also the central Song of Songs metaphor of intimate personal love.
2. Matthew begins his gospel with passages which establish the status of Jesus (genealogy, stories of infancy, e.g. Three Kings). In the baptism story John also serves to establish the status of Jesus. John gives an extended sermon, laced with violent images, threatening "wrath to come" (3:7). The impression is this is the teaching of the gospel. We have to wait until chapter 11.11-12 & 19 to see Jesus gently but clearly distinguishing himself from John, and precisely on the issue of violence.
3. Luke is conscious he is writing a "gospel", as his formal intro. shows, situating his gospel within human history and politics, and consciously pitching it as cultural and historical agency on behalf of the oppressed, beginning especially with women. Mary, the mother of Jesus, had no voice in Mark or Matthew. Now she has a decisive and powerful one. Before Jesus is even born she proclaims the subversive message of redemption: "[The Lord] casts the mighty from their thrones and raises the lowly!"
4. John is justly famous for beginning with beginning, both the beginning "from ever" and the one right now, when the world begins over, and for the first time, with the new meaning brought by Jesus the Word. The Wisdom of Solomon is the text which lies behind many of the themes of the prologue. Feminine Wisdom provides the model for Jesus' relationship with the Father. The witness (and very possibly the writing) of the gospel is feminine, beginning from Mary Magdalene in chapter 20.

CYCLE TWO

FIRST MINISTRY

1. Mark. The first thing that Jesus actually does, after announcing that the time is now and the kingdom has drawn near, is to set a man free from an unclean spirit. "Unclean" means some form of violence become identified with the self. The man with this violated self accuses Jesus of wanting to destroy the community, then names him with a form of divine status. Just by entering the human scene Jesus

provokes a violent reaction, at once threatening and seeking to co-opt him. Jesus silences this mimetic language and returns the man and his community to peace.

2. Matthew. In place of Mark's dramatic incident in a synagogue showing Jesus "teaching with authority," Matthew lays out Jesus' Wisdom instruction, the Sermon on the Mount. The focus on nonviolence is astonishing, both for its vividness and the way it has been ignored in Christian practice. We are used to the theological excuses, but the crisis of our time returns us to this teaching which gives us spiritual power for nonviolent living. Jesus built on the Wisdom tradition (viz. Book of Sirach), and personally identified with the persona of Wisdom giving him authority to say "You have heard it said... but I tell you..."

3. Luke. Beginning of ministry at Nazareth (4:16-30) is a mirror image of the Markan story of the synagogue at Capernaum, but now Jesus' teaching is verbal and explicit and the violence is from the whole crowd rather than a single "unclean spirit". He cites the Jubilee prophecy from Isaiah 61:1-2 (with possible allusion, from Daniel 9:24, to a final, apocalyptic jubilee), while omitting Isaiah's threat of vengeance. The crowd are scandalized by his nonviolence, his "words of grace", but he underlines blessing for pagan enemies with examples from Elijah and Elisha. The simmering violence of the group at once moves to kill him.

4. John. Marriage Feast of Cana is the "first of the signs", the beginning of ministry. It also comes before ministry, so straddling a borderland reaching back to "In the beginning was the Word." It stands right before the hugely symbolic destruction of the temple, an intense, privileged position. The role of the "Woman"--the mother of Jesus, but unnamed--is a "place-holder" and symbolic: she is Wisdom or the feminine relationship in God who gently pushes Jesus toward his "hour" of recreating the world from within. Later, at the cross, the representative beloved disciple is told to take to his/her own this vital relationship.

CYCLE THREE

ARGUMENTS

1. Mark. Jesus forgives the sins of a paralytic "lowered" through the roof into relationship with him, then he heals him (2:1-12). "Only God can forgive sins." Or, at most, the temple can make sin offerings. Jesus assumes authority of the first and bypasses the second. The reaction he provokes is as predictable as it is dangerous. Interpreted by the standard theological model God uses wrath or violence to punish infactions of the covenant, especially blasphemy. Jesus' words and deeds directly challenge this model, bringing peace and healing. But from the point of view of this theology they threaten to bring down God's disfavor...

2. Matthew repeats Mark's sequence after Sermon on the Mount, with arguments on eating with sinners, and fasting. Jesus responds with short sayings which stand the world on its head, in the first

case overcoming exclusion with inclusion. The second shows Jesus in all likelihood composing his own idioms. Sewing new cloth and making new wineskins are astonishing images, signaling cultural practices and therefore new human culture. We need to go back to Genesis 4, and the birth of culture, to understand their revolutionary level of change. It is no surprise that the episode after has to do with the liberation and life of women.

3. Luke is faithful to Mark, putting the controversies first, following with the Sermon on the Plain, and then material which is his own, centered dramatically on women. The story of a woman who anoints Jesus is a thread through all gospels and is a constant source of argument. Here the woman crosses just about every boundary imaginable in first-century Israel. But Jesus affirms her love, making forgiveness love's accomplice, rather than a ritual or divine decree. Luke's story is unique, but an anointing by a woman appears in the other gospels just before the Passion, with John creatively meshing the two traditions.

4. John's first controversy is the big one! Following the pattern of argument after an action the fourth gospel brings the symbolic destruction of the temple, dramatically anticipating what has to be--historically--the final moment of Jesus' public ministry. If we read the event correctly--a physical interruption of the business of sacrifice (in Mark the blocking of the traffic of temple paraphernalia/vessels)--then there is no way Jesus could do this and be allowed to continue. Jesus not only blocks the anthropological institution of sacrifice, here in the gospel he asserts himself as the alternative. His "body" equals new humanity!

CYCLE FOUR

JOHN THE BAPTIST

1. Second to Jesus himself the Baptist is the most seminal figure in the gospels, the one who opened the way for Jesus, from whom Jesus separated in his ministry and yet referred back to frequently. The narrative of the Baptist's killing in Mark 6 sets up the character of Jesus' own death: the crises of desire and violence are the same. Both Herod and Pilate wish to protect the prisoner, yet the force of their desire, that of other power-players (Herodias/temple priests) and of the crowd overwhelm them. As well as giving a clear historical setting the pattern of these elements make the gospels manuals of mimetic desire.

2 & 3. Taking Matthew and Luke together we look at Jesus' discourse concerned exclusively with John (Matt. 11:1-19, Lk. 7:18-35). What an amazing compliment! One senses personal affection in Jesus' sarcastic images catching popular reaction to the Baptist: a Jordan river reed rattling in the wind, a man dressed in freakish clothes....is that what you went to see? No, this was a prophet, and more! Then comes the twist. The context is John's anguished question "Are you the one who is to come [i.e. Elijah]?" Jesus answered by listing the works of restoration (prophesied by Isaiah) and challenging John not to be tripped up by their nonviolence in contrast to his own expectation of a violent Elijah. John's own words at Matt. 3:7-12 (parallel in Lk) have a distinctly Elijah militancy and Jesus directly names John

himself as Elijah ("who is to come," Mt.11:14: c.f. Malachi 3;1-2,4:1-6: this would be before "the great and terrible day of the Lord.") The twist is that John, the greatest of the old human order, is less than the least in the kingdom, for these are born of nonviolent Wisdom. In the meantime John's ministry was a hijacking of the kingdom by violence. Even as honors John Jesus critiques him, offering a completely new way for humanity.

4. The 4th gospel shows the Baptist denying he is Elijah. That would fit John's belief Jesus would fill that role. Which suggests this gospel retains authentic memories, at the same time proposing theology impossible at the original level. For example John's testimony, "Here is the Lamb of God." Referring to the Passover Lamb and the Nonviolent Servant it says after all John DID get the nonviolence of Jesus. But if so why did disciples who heard him not understand Jesus' death. More likely the gospel constructs theology with perfect hindsight, reflecting growth of understanding in the community which produced the gospel

CYCLE FIVE

JESUS & SATAN

1. Satan is almost as central to the gospel as Jesus himself: the great apocalyptic adversary. But what is "satan"? In the OT it is never a proper name but the accuser, a common noun. Job 1: 6-7 is the classic instance: here the satan is a figure in the heavenly court with the job of finding faults, a kind of secret police. Mk.3: 20-30 shows Jesus deconstructing the accusation against him, and with that all accusation. He shows "Satan" can never cast out accusation: violence cannot cast out violence (the demonic). It reaffirms itself and must always grow worse. He demonstrates the meaning of Satan as the crisis of violence itself.

2. Matt. 4:1-11 is the great instance which appears to show "Satan" as a supernatural being. But if we follow the threefold temptation back to Genesis 3:6 and its triple structure of desire, and identify the third, "to be desired for...wisdom," we see Jesus is undoing the story of Eden. Wisdom is identified with rulers, especially Solomon who created an empire and attracted "satans" against him (1 Kgs.11:14ff), including the Queen of Sheba who came to tempt him (same Gk word) with hard questions (1 Kgs. 10:1). Jesus resists this desire mobilized by rivalry ("satan"). He refounds desire on a new and faithful basis. Cf. Phil. 2:5--11.

3. Interpreting the pivotal statement at Lk.10:18 we can say that now the role of the accuser has been deconstructed; it has fallen from its imperial role in the cosmos. Lk. also accents the role of the "satanic" in producing physical sickness (13:10-16). It is the structure of human violence, including accusation and scapegoating, which produces the conditions for illness. Lk. also makes plain the role of the satan within the church. He is the writer to include "the satan has demanded to sift you (plural) like wheat" (22:31), where just before the disciples had shown themselves rivals for power within the emerging organization.

4. The theme of satan leads naturally to demons ("by the prince of demons he casts them out..."). In O.T. "demon" is a name for foreign gods (Ps. 106:36-37). Phenomenon of "personal" demons in N.T. suggests extreme social and spiritual stress, to extent of a parallel spirit with your own (hence "unclean spirit") becoming standard explanation. Mk.9:9ff is a key. The crowd/mob figures largely, mentioned three x, suggesting mimetic crisis projected on the boy. The Gerasene demoniac (Mk.5:1-20) is textbook: all contextual Roman violence (Legion=military mob) is loaded on this man who fragments in defensive imitation.

5. Matt.'s temptation narrative translates Mk's "the satan" as "diabolos/devil," which is of course the accuser/adversary. It was very easy in polytheistic culture to hear "satan," later transliterated devil, as a supernatural being, rather than an existential role. John's gospel avoids the trap by always relating satan to human violence. Thus 6:70 "one of you is a devil," i.e. Judas Isacariot into whom, later, "the satan entered" (13:27). At 8:44 Jesus declares the generativity of his enemies in their "father the devil...a murderer from the beginning." This just as easily refers to Cain as to a supernatural being and in any case reveals human violence.

CYCLE SIX

JESUS' WAY OF TALKING

1. "Parable" is transliterated in Latin, then English, from Greek, translating Hebrew "mashal," a riddle, word-picture, discourse. Jesus excelled at word-picture teaching. It's calculated there are just 9 of the type in O.T., up to 72 in the gospels. The word was reproduced in Latin b/c there was no Latin genre to match. The form suited radical novelty of what Jesus was doing, confronting a crisis to its roots but without violence, bending the minds of his hearers. Its meaning could easily be missed. In Mk. 4 the use of "seed" as master image suggests something new, organic to the earth, capable of astonishing, unstoppable growth.

2. Jesus' way of talking fit his teaching, abandoning violence as a human way. Sermon on Mount, in particular the "antiheses" (Matt. 5:17-37) makes this unmistakable. A crucial aspect is the emphatic "I", repeated six times. Jesus' "I" or self stands behind what is otherwise impossible, not being angry, turning the other cheek etc. This transformed "I" underpins later doctrine of Jesus' divine person, a transcendent self come into the world, to which we relate. He also gives anthropological teaching, the single eye (6:22-23) telling us to avoid the second eye which checks out others mimetically. Our eye must be fixed on his "I."

3. Scattered references to Jonah suggest this was a semi-private code for Jesus' self-understanding. Evangelists had no clear idea what it meant. Lk.11:29-32 is two sayings, the first ending at 30 where sign of Son of Man is simply compared to sign of Jonah. The Matt. parallel at 12:40 is an editorial explanation; Matt. 16:1-4 again just has "sign of Jonah." Jesus' choice of lake of Galilee as base of operations, together with parallels between stories of Jonah and storm on lake (Mk 4:35-41), suggest

Jesus (and a very primitive trad. directly from him) saw himself as one "thrown overboard" to rescue humanity from its violence.

4. If in the synoptics Jesus spoke in taut sayings full of shock how credible are the long dense monologues of John's gospel full of self-reference? John's discourses are a work of daring faith, giving voice to the Risen Jesus in his earthly life, as if the Risen One were already there in the prepaschal setting. They establish Jesus' transcendent authority. Yet John's Christ is still in essence the earthly Jesus. He discoursed with the woman at the well because he was open to Samaritans. His multiple "I am" sayings are based in the redemptive "I am" at Mk. 6:50. He is the good shepherd who spoke loving parables about sheep.

5. Gnostic gospels represent another Jesus way of talking, none more so perhaps than the Gospel of Thomas, an entirely sayings gospel (and because we don't usually look at apocryphal gospels a longer note given to it here). Discovered in a leatherbound codex at Nag Hammadi Egypt in 1945 it contains 114 sayings, about 65 unique in whole or part to Thomas, plus multiple recognizable sayings, scattered throughout, with parallels in one or more of the four canonicals. Because there is no narrative it has served to underline speculation that Jesus was purely a sayings teacher, something proposed also on the basis of the apparently independent sayings trad., common to Matthew and Luke, known as Q. This understanding promoted by the Jesus Seminar. Jesus' tone and manner in Thomas is similar in its sovereignty to John's gospel, but it lacks both John's drama and compassion. The date of the actual gospel must be, at earliest, toward middle of second century if it includes sayings parallel to John (John's tradition written at end of 1st century and unknown to Matt. and Luke and other NT writers). It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Thomas is a potpourri of sayings sifted from the canonicals and fitted within a gnostic (salvation=knowledge) frame. It covertly depends for its authority on the dynamic of the canonical gospels. Jesus without a narrative is an implausible Jesus. (As an interesting sidenote, the Girardian academic organization started as a breakaway from the Westar institute which produced the Jesus Seminar.)

CYCLE SEVEN

JESUS' JOURNEYS

1. Journeys take us away yet also bring us to ourselves. At Matt.15:21 Jesus "withdraws" to district of Tyre and Sidon--same word at 2:12 for Magi escaping Herod. Jesus is "disappearing" to avoid political attentions after apparently building power-base feeding 5000 (14:13; cf. John 6:15). His first response to the pagan woman is harsh, yet he is following his own policy of a message strictly for Israel (10:5). She persists and her witty and passionate insistence changes his mind. Jesus crosses a border, opening himself to Gentiles. Thus in parallel Mk. 7:31 he continues to journey in pagan areas, to Sidon then Decapolis.

2. Continuing in Mark we see after 7:31 there is another feeding of a crowd, further ministry, then another trip in the area of a pagan city, Caesarea Philippi. Founded by Phillip, son of Herod, it was dedicated to Caesar Augustus. Jesus' choice of this place to put the key question "who do you say I am?" is acutely pointed. It could only cast the shadow of Roman power and automatically prompt the need of a "Messiah" to set Israel free. Jesus leads his disciples to the anti-imperial answer, but at once subverts it by saying he must go on to suffer nonviolently. This is the only way both to defeat and welcome the Gentiles.

3. Lk.'s gospel is built on a journey motif: from 9:51 the entire thing is traveling to Jerusalem. Acts, by Lk, is a mirror, narrating Paul's journeys ending in Rome. Lk. omits Tyre & Sidon trip b/c from the beginning at 4:18 everything is already geared toward Gentiles; Jesus does not discover it on the way. The point of his Jerusalem journey is given at 9:31 as "exodus," a liberation, and then editorially at 9:51 as "being taken up." Lk. has both human transformation and Christ's exaltation as his central theme (Jesus is final goal of human history). How this works is shown at once at 9:52-56 with Jesus' nonviolent response to rejection.

4. In John's gospel Jesus travels to Jerusalem to attend/re-interpret festivals: a shift in religious meaning, rather than physical space. At 2:13 and 13:1 he attends Passover, driving the sacrificial animals from the Temple and becoming himself the Passover Lamb, protecting all from the angel of death. At 7:2 & 10 he attends Booths, an ingathering festival of blessing where Jesus is the living water (see Zechariah 14 prophecy of end-times Booths). At 10:22-28 he attends Hannukah, festival of the militant Hasmoneans, and insists on his disciples as sheep, crucial metonym for humans saved from sacrifice and violence.

CYCLE EIGHT

APOCALYPSES

1. An apocalypse is a way of describing and living into a world both ending and beginning anew. Mk's "Little Apocalypse" (chap. 13) deals with temple, wars, persecution, destruction of Jerusalem, coming of Son of Man, all linked. Jesus enacted destruction of temple (see 14:58) and so provokes the end of the time, destroying cosmic order, unleashing its violence, and persecution of Jesus' followers who proclaim gospel in interim. The "Markan wink" (13:14) suggests present-tense expectation of the Roman-Jewish war, to be followed (v.24) by cosmic signs and reign of Son of Man (new humanity). The key message is: stay ready!

2. Matt. expands Mk's material, adding three parables of delay in master's return (chap. 25). A context (post Roman-Jewish war, see 22:7) where coming of Son of Man has not happened and so need to underscore sense of expectation. At end of 25 there is judgment of nations, a powerful scene,

expansion of 16:27, with Matthean elements (Son of Man=king, concern for little ones, c.f. 18: 6-14). Physical identification of Jesus and disciples (25:40) belongs to time of church. This is largely Matthean creation, arguing for solidarity in Christian community. "Eternal punishment" is indefinite time horizon ("on and on"), not metaphysical difference from time.

3. If Matt. created a classic consciousness of expectation Lk. re-ordered the cosmos with Christ now in charge. Compare Lk. 22: 69 to Matt. 26:64: now Christ is not "coming," but simply "seated at the right hand..." Lk. also extends the time markers: "the end will not follow immediately" (21:9), and there is "the times of the Gentiles" during which Jerusalem "will be trampled" and which extend into an open future (21:24). The signs become contemporaneous with the open future and include ecological and psychological elements (25-26). After that, the Son of Man will come. The teaching seems also to take place in the temple (37), making it effectively "religious."

4. John's gospel arises from the Beloved Disciple about whom Jesus said he "would remain until I come" (21:22-23). At first this was understood as the B.D. would not die before Jesus came (the apocalypse), yet later he did die. Then "remain" comes to mean either that in death the B.D. is still in the same place as Jesus, while awaiting resurrection; or the figure of the B.D. is continually represented in the community, dwelling in the same transformed human space opened by Jesus, and continually making that available to others. This sense fits with 5:24-25 where the judgment and resurrection have already in a sense occurred. In John the revelation of total transformation of the earth has already happened!

CYCLE NINE

END OF STORY. (How a gospel ends tells you a lot about its message.)

1. Any study bible will reference the tortuous manuscript history at the end of Mark. Both the mss. and internal content show the "short ending" and the "long ending" were added from the end of the 2nd century, to soften the abrupt ending at 16:8. If we accept that ending as original--fear and shock before the empty tomb--we discern Mark's purpose. The gospel is radically dissonant to the way of the world and must be understood as such. The disciples already knew the same emotions following Jesus (10:32). Jesus himself went through them, facing his destiny (14:33-41), while his disciples (humanity) would rather sleep.

2. Matt. introduces the new element of the appearance of the Risen One, but he keeps it simple, and the shocking thing is that it is to women, not qualified men. By now Christian belief in Jesus' resurrection is public knowledge and there is the obvious counter claim of disciples stealing the body. Matt. gives a strange rebuttal, of guards posted precisely to prevent this--but how could their bribed

testimony in defense be at all plausible if they were indeed asleep? The best witness is the amazing authority of the Risen One on the mount in Galilee, reaffirming the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount for all nations.

3. Lk. is the source of standard motif of Ascension after resurrection, but it is to the Acts of the Apostles (1:9-11) this is clearly traced. At Lk. 24:51 Jesus simply "withdraws" ("carried up into heaven" is not in all mss.: likely introduced to harmonize with Acts). Lk. needs a clean break for "the time of the Gentiles" (21:24) which is epoch of the Holy Spirit. Jesus lifted up into a cloud ("the heaven") is a way of demarking the new time. Meanwhile the withdrawing of Jesus happens at Bethany which sources say means "house of paupers" (there is a trad. of a house for lepers in that area). Jesus rises among the poor!

4. John has two clearly different endings. Chap. 20 first gives critical prominence to Mary Magdalen. The Risen Christ shares with her, and through her with all other disciples, his own relationship with the Father. Chap. 21 recommences with male disciples in Galilee. The Beloved Disciple recognizes Jesus from the boat. There follows the conversation with Peter which recalls his betrayal while granting him pastoral responsibility. Meanwhile the B.D. "abides." The many layers of the two chapters suggest a group of disciples around M.M. and the probability the B.D. is a theological role which is filled by many individuals including perhaps a scribe-disciple, the author of the gospel. The gospel provides for an alternative source for "beloved" Christian existence in the world, other than hierarchical organization.