

*The Jesus of the Gospels: An Introduction*  
© 2020 Andreas J. Köstenberger

Published by Kregel Academic, an imprint of Kregel Publications, 2450 Oak Industrial Dr. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49505-6020.

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ISBN 978-0-8254-4536-1

*Printed in the United States of America*

20 21 22 23 24 / 5 4 3 2 1

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# INTRODUCTION

*Who is Jesus?* No question is more important or consequential than this. At a critical juncture during his time on earth, Jesus asked his followers, “Who do you say that I am?”<sup>1</sup> Centuries later, classics professor and Christian apologist C. S. Lewis argued that there are only three legitimate ways to answer this vital question: Jesus is a lunatic, a liar, or Lord.<sup>2</sup> So who do *you* say Jesus is? You may say, “Jesus is Lord. I’m one of his followers.” Great! You may say, “He’s a lunatic or liar.” Or you may say, “I’m not sure. How can I know who Jesus is?” To find out, you’ll want to take a closer look at the best ancient sources we have at our disposal regarding Jesus—the Gospels.<sup>3</sup>

In the first century, several of Jesus’s followers and some of their associates composed accounts of Jesus’s life and the things he said and did. Among these were Matthew (also known as Levi), a former tax collector called by Jesus to be one of his twelve apostles (messengers); Mark, a mentee and associate of Simon Peter, a fisherman and Jesus’s most outspoken follower; Luke, a physician and close associate of Saul (also known as Paul), the undisputed leader of the early church; and John, a leading member of the Twelve and the last surviving apostle. The church put its stamp of approval on these four Gospels and affirmed that they provided one Gospel according to four witnesses, the fourfold Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Matthew 16:15; Mark 8:29.

2. See C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 56. For helpful background and discussion, see Justin Taylor, “Is C. S. Lewis’s Liar-Lord-or-Lunatic Argument Unsound?” February 1, 2016, <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/justintaylor/2016/02/01/is-c-s-lewiss-liar-lord-or-lunatic-argument-unsound>. True to his skeptical ways, Bart Ehrman has proposed a fourth alternative: Jesus as legend. But see the convincing refutation by Charles L. Quarles, “Lord or Legend: Jesus as the Messianic Son of Man,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 62 (2019): 103–24.

3. Gospel (*euangelion* in the original Greek) means “good news”; more on that shortly.

4. On the compilation of the various New Testament books into a collection of writings that eventually came to be known as the Christian “canon,” see Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crow*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H, 2016), chapter 1.

This brings our initial question—Who is Jesus?—into even sharper focus. We can now ask, Who is the *Jesus of the Gospels*? Since we have in our Bibles one Gospel according to four witnesses, the Jesus of the Gospels will turn out to be a composite sketch by the four evangelists. As we'll see, Matthew presents Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, descendant of Abraham and David; Mark depicts him as the authoritative, miracle-working Son of God; Luke portrays him as the compassionate healer and Savior for all people; and John, last but not least, shows him to be the God-man and revealer of God the Father. If this were a multiple-choice question, we wouldn't have to choose: Jesus is all of these things! The correct answer would be "All of the above."

### THE GOSPELS AS EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY

At the very outset, it's important to understand that the Gospels in our Bibles claim to be based on eyewitness testimony.<sup>5</sup> If you open your Bible and read any of the Gospels, therefore, you can read a firsthand account of Jesus's story written by those who saw him with their own eyes, heard him with their own ears, or conferred with those who did.<sup>6</sup>

That's what you'll want. You'll want your faith to be based on reliable testimony rather than on mere hearsay or some secondhand report that may not be historically accurate.

The bottom line, therefore, is this: if you're interested in knowing who Jesus really was, you should read one or several of the four Gospels. Better still, read all of them! In this way, you'll get a well-rounded picture of the most important person who ever lived—Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah and Son of God—painted by those who knew him best or talked to those who did.

### A COMPANION TO THE GOSPELS

Over the years, scholars have debated questions such as these: Are there any other Gospels that rival the four included in our Bibles? How can the four Gospels be viewed as objective, given that they were written by followers of Jesus? Were the Gospel writers biased? Do the Gospels ever contradict one another?

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5. See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017). Note, however, that Bauckham doesn't believe Matthew or John wrote their respective Gospels.
  6. See 1 John 1:1 (NIV): "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life."

Important as these questions are, here we won't be unduly detained by such concerns.<sup>7</sup> Rather, I want to encourage you to read through each of the Gospels—or any one of them—for yourself first and form your own opinion, unclouded by the views of others. I want you to come face-to-face with Jesus and read the accounts of the four preeminent witnesses to the life of Jesus.

In this way, you can examine the evidence for yourself to come to an informed opinion regarding the one who asks you, “Who do *you* say that I am?” Or, if you're one of his followers already, reading the Gospels—or reading them again—will help you get to know him even better.

This book, as mentioned, is not intended as a substitute for reading the Gospels but rather as a companion to them.<sup>8</sup> In the following pages, we'll follow the story of Jesus as told by the four Gospel writers. What you'll find is that these four accounts paint beautiful portraits of Jesus the Jewish Messiah, the miracle-working Son of God, the compassionate healer and Savior of the world, and the divine-human revealer.

## THE GOSPELS AS GOOD NEWS

It's now fashionable to read the Gospels as stories. This practice is certainly commendable, as the Gospels are narratives—literary compositions that are carefully crafted to provide a coherent account of a historical character, Jesus of Nazareth. What's more, as historical narratives, the Gospels, as mentioned, contain reliable information corroborated by eyewitnesses.

In fact, ancient Jewish laws called for a minimum of two or three witnesses to support any given claim.<sup>9</sup> In our Bibles, we don't have merely two or three witnesses; we have four! While each evangelist tells the story of Jesus in his own distinctive way, all four Gospels are grounded in the historical fabric of events making up the life of Jesus.

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7. If you're interested in those kinds of questions, you may want to consult Andreas Köstenberger, Darrell Bock, and Josh Chatraw, *Truth Matters: Confident Faith in a Confusing World*, or in greater depth, *Truth in a Culture of Doubt: Engaging Skeptical Challenges to the Bible* (both Nashville: B&H, 2014). See also the resources provided on my website, [www.biblicalfoundations.org](http://www.biblicalfoundations.org). Cf. Peter J. Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), who discusses matters such as non-Christian sources for Jesus, the Gospel writers' factual accuracy, undersigned coincidences among the Gospels, the reliability of the New Testament text, and alleged contradictions.

8. I recommend the *ESV Reader's Gospels* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), featuring the English Standard Version, but there are many other fine English versions and study Bibles on the market. For a helpful compendium of geographical essays on the Gospels, see Barry J. Beitzel, ed., *Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2017).

9. See Deuteronomy 19:15.

## Introduction

And yet the Gospels are more than stories. They're even more than true, historically accurate accounts. What makes the Gospels so precious and worth reading and sharing is that they're good news. In fact, that's what "gospel" literally means in the original Greek: "good news"!

That said, calling the gospel *good* news is the greatest understatement of all time. Yes, the Gospels convey good news, but they do much more: they contain amazing, terrific, life-giving news worthy to be celebrated and broadcast far and wide. As you read the Gospels, please remember that they're a lot more than mere stories: they're news that have the potential to radically change people's lives.

You may ask, exactly how are the Gospels good news? Well, let's look and find out! You can read the Gospels in any order; they all give an accurate portrait of who Jesus is. For our purposes, we'll follow the order in which the Gospels are found in our Bibles and start with the Gospel of Matthew.

As we read Matthew's account of Jesus, let's ask ourselves the question: How is what Matthew tells us about Jesus good news? Sound good? All right, then, we're almost ready to get started. But first let's locate our study in the history of Jesus research. After all, we're not the first who set out on a journey to get to know the Jesus of the Gospels.<sup>10</sup>

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10. Then again, if you can't wait to jump right into your own reading and study of the Gospels, by all means feel free to skip the next chapter and go straight to chapter 2!

## WHO DO PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM?

*The life of Jesus is not primarily a life to be contemplated or even admired; it's a call to response and action.*<sup>1</sup> As mentioned, Oxford don C. S. Lewis memorably argued that Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord.<sup>2</sup> If he's a liar or lunatic—or, as a skeptic by the name of Bart Ehrman recently suggested, a legend—then of course we can readily dismiss him as a fraud or hold him at arm's length as a fable. Yet I ask you: Is this really the most credible conclusion to draw from reading the primary sources we have about Jesus, the four New Testament Gospels? In order to find out, we need to read the Gospels and do so with an open mind and with a sound strategy. But as we'll see, in the history of Gospels and Jesus scholarship, that's something many unfortunately haven't done.

What's more, if Jesus is in fact Lord and has supreme authority over the universe and all of humanity, this means that you and I shouldn't approach him merely with interested curiosity but with a readiness to obey and an eagerness to follow him. As Jesus told his followers, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."<sup>3</sup> At a critical juncture in his messianic mission here on earth, Jesus took his closest followers aside and asked them, "Who do people say that I am?" When his disciples reported to him a variety of responses, he followed up with an even more pointed, deeply personal question: "But who do *you* say that I am?"

So, who do *you* say Jesus is? Before I became a Christian, I spent much of my time trying to solve the world's (i.e., everybody else's!) problems, quick to diagnose what was wrong with those around me while being slow to take the log out of my own eye. But when I encountered Jesus, I came to realize that he called me to decide: Who did *I* think he was? How would *I* respond to the one who died for me on the cross to offer me forgiveness and salvation out of sheer love and grace? By his mercy, I realized that I desperately needed what he had to offer and chose to follow him. But, of course, I was not the first to encounter Jesus (and many of you have had similar journeys of faith). For now, I hope you'll join me on a brief tour of the history of Jesus research. Who did scholars over the past few centuries say Jesus was? And what can we learn from their quest for the historical Jesus as we read the Gospels today?

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1. Charles Spurgeon quote on page 17: Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 24 (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1878), 459. I owe this reference to my student Ed Romine.
  2. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 56; cf. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 100–101.
  3. Luke 9:23. See the classic work by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1948; orig. ed. Munich: Kaiser, 1937).



## LIVES OF JESUS AND GOSPEL HARMONIES

The centuries following the Enlightenment period, which witnessed the rise of human confidence in autonomous critical reason, saw an increasing proliferation of so-called “lives of Jesus.” These were accounts of the life of Jesus that often owed considerably more to the imagination and philosophical outlook of the person writing the account than to the actual life of Jesus, the first-century Palestinian Jew portrayed in the canonical Gospels. Albert Schweitzer, the German biblical scholar and later medical doctor, humanitarian, and Nobel Peace Prize–winner, masterfully chronicled this phenomenon in his work *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Schweitzer believed that “the greatest achievement of German theology is the critical investigation of the life of Jesus.”<sup>5</sup>

As Schweitzer noted, “We are dealing here with the most vital thing in the world’s history. There came a Man to rule over the world; He ruled it for good and for ill, as history testifies. . . . He continues, notwithstanding, to reign as the alone Great and alone True.”<sup>6</sup> Schweitzer shows how the practitioners of the quest for the historical Jesus sought to rediscover the “Jesus of history” by peeling off layers of theological tradition, enlisting the historical Jesus “as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma.” In that noble pursuit, however, Schweitzer discovered, “each individual created Him in accordance with his own character.” In fact, “there is no historical task,” Schweitzer continued, that “so reveals a man’s true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus.”<sup>7</sup> This pronouncement should give anyone who endeavors to write a life of Jesus pause.

In conceiving of a game plan for the present volume, I had to ask myself the honest question: How am I going to do any better than those scholars whom Schweitzer had surveyed? What makes me think that I can improve on these earlier scholars who recreated Jesus in their own image? Is it not likely that I will do the same? The answer, I concluded, lies largely in being faithful to the available sources for the life of Jesus. If I was going to adhere closely to the contours of revelation provided in the canonical sources—the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in their final canonical form—this was my best, if not only, hope, because adhering closely to these sources alone would keep me from imposing onto the data my own reconstruction that then, in effect, would replace the actual first-century accounts.

Remarkably for a critical scholar, Schweitzer observed that our sources for the life of Jesus are remarkably rich: “There are few characters of antiquity about whom we possess

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4. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1911).

5. Schweitzer, *Quest*, 231.

6. Schweitzer, *Quest*, 2.

7. Schweitzer, *Quest*, 4.

so much indubitably historical information, of whom we have so many authentic discourses.” What’s more, unlike other historical figures, Jesus “stands much more immediately before us, because He was depicted by simple Christians without literary gift.”<sup>8</sup> At the same time, Schweitzer contended, the first three Gospels provide only a sampling of anecdotes, while John includes a mere selection of events and discourses; “yawning gaps” remain.<sup>9</sup> Schweitzer may have exaggerated the incomplete nature of the Gospel witness to the life of Jesus, but it’s true that the gaps in the various biblical accounts do invite a certain amount of speculation that has the potential of distorting our study of Jesus.

In the remainder of his book, Schweitzer proceeded to probe the nature of Jesus’s messianic consciousness and to bemoan the difficulty, even impossibility, of reconstructing a full-fledged life of Jesus—understood as a blow-by-blow account—given the incomplete information provided by the four canonical Gospels. Like Adolf Schlatter, he expresses commendable reserve against allowing “historical imagination” to fill in what is left unaddressed in the sources, resulting in scholarly “fables.”<sup>10</sup> Surveying the (then-recent) history of scholarship on the historical Jesus, Schweitzer diagnosed that no real progress had been made in the preceding century from David Friedrich Strauss (writing in 1835) until the 1890s.<sup>11</sup> So much for the illusion of progress in biblical scholarship! If anything, scholars had been looking themselves in the mirror and described what they saw.

Strauss, in fact, had popularized the idea that the category of history must be replaced with the notion of myth; miracles have no place in modern scientific investigation. Later, the Tübingen school bequeathed on subsequent scholarship the Markan-priority hypothesis and the conviction that the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are far superior to John as historical documents.<sup>12</sup> Not only was Mark the first to write his Gospel, scholars concluded, but his Gospel alone provided a historically intelligible (though not necessarily infallible) portrait of the life of Jesus. In his own attempt “to bring order into the chaos of the Lives of Jesus,”<sup>13</sup> Schweitzer proceeded to discuss Jesus as a first-century Jewish apocalyptic prophet who believed that the end was near and preached a message of the impending kingdom of God, only to be ambushed by one of his closest followers (Judas) and end up on a Roman cross. In the ultimate analysis, therefore, Schweitzer found the “historical Jesus” to be strangely elusive.

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8. Schweitzer, *Quest*, 6. We will return to this question later in this introduction.

9. Schweitzer, *Quest*, 7.

10. Schweitzer, *Quest*, 8. Cf. Adolf Schlatter, *The History of the Christ: The Foundation of New Testament Theology*, trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 20.

11. Schweitzer, *Quest*, 9. Cf. David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus* (originally published in 1835).

12. Schweitzer, *Quest*, 10.

13. Schweitzer, *Quest*, 12.

Ironically, Schweitzer clearly perceived the shortcomings of the historical-critical method. “We modern theologians are too proud of our historical method, too proud of our historical Jesus, too confident in our belief in the spiritual gains which our historical theology can bring to the world,” he writes. A Jesus pressed to conform to the constraints of the historical method is “too small,” he observed, lamenting how then-recent portraits of Jesus had recast his denial of the world into people’s acceptance of it. This in turn robbed Jesus’s message of its power: “Many of the greatest sayings are found lying in a corner like explosive shells from which the charges have been removed.” Jesus was not a nineteenth- or twentieth-century German theologian; he was a first-century Jew. In effect, scholars had retrojected their own thoughts back into history and had made them speak to them out of the past.<sup>14</sup>

Schweitzer’s closing remarks regarding the historical Jesus are worth quoting in full: “He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me!’ and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.”<sup>15</sup>

With admirable consistency, Schweitzer subsequently abandoned any further scholarly pursuits and spent the rest of his life in the African jungle as a medical doctor.<sup>16</sup> While he couldn’t penetrate the inscrutable mystery of the true identity of Jesus, he sought to obey his call to self-sacrificial, self-denying service.

It would be too convenient to dismiss Schweitzer’s musings as the confused ramblings of a scholar caught up in his own time and culture. While I for one am not prepared to embrace Schweitzer’s dire verdict, or his Christ-mysticism, I do believe that those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.<sup>17</sup> When it comes to the study of Jesus, Schweitzer has rightly drawn our attention to some of the challenges we face.

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14. Schweitzer, *Quest*, 398. We see a similar phenomenon in our day: see Andreas J. Köstenberger and Michael J. Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Contemporary Culture’s Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010). If the subtitle hadn’t already been long enough, we would have added “Jesus” to it, like this: “How Contemporary Culture’s Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of *Jesus* and Early Christianity.” Thus, we find that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Or, as the ancient sage put it, “there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

15. Schweitzer, *Quest*, 403.

16. For a brief biographical sketch, see “Albert Schweitzer,” Biblical Foundations, accessed September 21, 2015, <http://www.biblicalfoundations.org/albert-schweitzer>.

17. The original quote is commonly attributed to the Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana (1863–1952). Winston Churchill changed the quote slightly in a 1948 speech to the British House of Commons.

To begin with, we're confronted with limitations in our historical sources (including the four Gospels in our Bibles). John, for his part, frankly acknowledges that he must be highly selective.<sup>18</sup> Historical-critical scholars—including the infamous Jesus Seminar—have by and large sought to solve this dilemma by engaging in historical reconstruction, undergirded by a strong dose of anti-supernaturalism. This has typically resulted in a truncated picture of Jesus, excising his miracles and even the resurrection. It has also opened a gaping rift between history and theology.<sup>19</sup> Schweitzer himself sought to overcome this rift by appealing, as was common in his day, to the “spirit” of Jesus that still speaks to us through the Gospels and calls us to follow.<sup>20</sup> Others, like Martin Kähler, dichotomized between the “historical Jesus” and the “Christ of faith.”<sup>21</sup> Yet others, such as the famous German scholar Rudolf Bultmann, following in the tradition of David Friedrich Strauss, opted to engage in a dubious program of demythologization, stripping off the supernatural from the life of Jesus in order to recontextualize it for an “enlightened” modern readership.<sup>22</sup>

However, I submit that we don't need to succumb to skepticism toward the Gospel records. If the Gospels are reliable, albeit not exhaustive, we needn't separate the Jesus whose story they tell, each in their own distinctive way, from the existential impact he has had on those who have followed him during the days of his earthly mission and beyond.

For this reason, rather than embarking on a quest for the Jesus of history, we should engage in a study of *the Jesus of the Gospels*. It is not that the Jesus of the Gospels is an unhistorical Jesus simply because he is the literary (or, perhaps better, the canonical or textual) Jesus. Rather, as we'll discuss further below, if the Gospels represent accounts penned by reliable eyewitnesses, then the textual Jesus and the historical Jesus will closely cohere (though you might say that the Gospel portraits of Jesus are refracted through the perception of the four evangelists, like multiple artists may each paint their own distinctive portrait of a given individual).

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18. John 20:30–31; 21:24–25.

19. Made famous by the German philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), who spoke of the “ugly ditch” of history that, he argued, cannot be used to prove the contingent truths of reason. “On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power,” in *Lessing: Philosophical and Theological Writings*, ed. and trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 87.

20. By “spirit” Schweitzer didn't mean the Holy Spirit but the abstract notion of a person's influence as postulated by individuals such as the German idealist philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) in his work *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, in development of another German intellectual giant, the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804).

21. Martin Kähler, *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*, trans. Carl E. Braaten (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1964; original German edition 1892).

22. See Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 1–14 and throughout (original German edition 1941).

What's more, the manuscript evidence we possess indicates that the text of the Gospels has been faithfully preserved and transmitted since their composition by the original authors, so that we can have a high degree of confidence that the Gospels in our Bibles—faithful translations of the Greek original—are accurate representations of what the Gospel writers wrote.<sup>23</sup> History and literature thus work in tandem as vehicles of divine revelation regarding Jesus.<sup>24</sup>

What this means, then, is that, in our quest to get to know the real Jesus, we must place our trust in the Gospels as reliable witnesses to the life of Jesus. For some of us, this will be a big step. It can be unsettling to think that our knowledge of Jesus boils down to trust, but the Scriptures reassure us that the information provided about Jesus in the four Gospels is rock-solid and backed up by firsthand personal experience.

The unrivaled authority of the four biblical Gospels also means, I believe, that the whole enterprise of historical Jesus research is fundamentally misguided. Whenever a scholar attempts to provide a reconstruction of the life of Jesus in distinction from, or even opposition to, the canonical Gospels, the danger looms large that this reconstruction takes the place of the biblical Gospels themselves. This, I would argue, is the case even when such a reconstruction is not undergirded by a historical-critical agenda but is conceived in more constructive terms, as in the case of a harmony approach to the life of Jesus.<sup>25</sup>

## THE APPROACH TAKEN IN THIS BOOK: FIVE THESES

It follows that those who would like to examine the witness of the Gospels regarding knowing Jesus as he truly revealed himself should read the Gospels that we have as they have come down to us. I say this for the following five reasons:

1. God chose to provide us with four canonical, inspired Gospels, and the church recognized this by including these four Gospels in its canon. As a matter of fact, the church fathers strongly contended that there could only be four Gospels, just like there is north and south, east and west. The New Testament boasts no harmony of the life of Jesus.<sup>26</sup>

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23. If you're interested in this question, you may want to read chapter 8, "Tampering with the Text: Was the New Testament Text Changed along the Way?" in Köstenberger and Kruger, *Heresy of Orthodoxy*.

24. On the "hermeneutical triad" of history, literature, and theology, see Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011). Second edition forthcoming in 2021.

25. See further below.

26. Thus, the approach taken in this volume differs from that of Darrell Bock, who uses a harmony approach for the Synoptic Gospels; see Darrell L. Bock with Benjamin I. Simpson, *Jesus according to Scripture: Restoring*

## Chapter 1

2. We should recognize that the Gospels each provide accurate and distinctive yet personal and complementary accounts of Jesus's life. We should appreciate the historical, literary, and theological insights they provide without pitting them against each other as if diversity necessarily meant contradiction or disparity.<sup>27</sup>
3. We should read all four Gospels rather than preferring one or several of them to the others. Among other things, this means that we should affirm the historical value of John's Gospel alongside that of the other Gospels and read all four accounts to derive the maximum benefit when learning about the canonical witness to the life of Jesus.<sup>28</sup>
4. Out of respect for the New Testament canon, it's best to discuss the Gospels in their canonical order: first Matthew, then Mark, Luke, and John.<sup>29</sup> I believe this is true regardless of the order in which the Gospels were written. Mark may well have been the first to do so. But in the end, the Bibles we have put Matthew first, and this is how we should proceed as well.

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*the Portrait from the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017). Craig L. Blomberg opts for both a survey of individual gospels and a harmony presentation; see *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H, 2009).

27. This is the problematic assumption underlying the work by Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (And Why We Don't Know about Them)* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010); see the critique in Köstenberger, Bock, and Chatraw, *Truth Matters*.
28. While Friedrich Schleiermacher still affirmed the historical value of John's Gospel, subsequent scholarship routinely disparaged John's historicity, preferring the Synoptic Gospels and here particularly Mark. Increasingly, even Matthew and Luke were relegated to secondary status. More recently, some scholars have sought to remedy this negative view of John's historical value by positing a two-strand tradition, Mark and John, each of which may be of historical value—but not both at the same time! This is a doubtful remedy, as it still forces us to choose between one or the other, Mark or John, who cannot both be reliable. Hence, such scholars continue to uphold the view that the New Testament Gospel accounts are contradictory. See, e.g., D. Moody Smith, *The Fourth Gospel in Four Dimensions: Judaism and Jesus, the Gospel and Scripture* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008). Paul N. Anderson, in *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus: Modern Foundations Reconsidered*, Library of New Testament Studies 321 (London: T&T Clark, 2006) and other works, calls for a "fourth quest" of the historical Jesus and a rehabilitation of the historicity of John's Gospel, which is very commendable, but his reconstruction of the emergence of the Gospel tradition is highly conjectural and still does not escape some of the problems encountered by modern critical scholarship.
29. This differs from Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*; Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007); and Richard B. Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), all of whom discuss Mark first on the basis of Markan priority.

5. We should affirm, as the early church did, that the four canonical Gospels are in fact “the fourfold Gospel”—that is, *one* gospel according to *four* witnesses, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.<sup>30</sup> This attests to the essential unity among the Gospels regarding the key events in Jesus’s life, particularly his crucifixion, burial, and resurrection.

What we should *not* do is reduce the fourfold gospel witness to a skeleton (minus the supernatural), such as in the famous “Jefferson Bible,” or a harmony of key events in the life of the historical Jesus. Nor should we substitute a historical timeline of events in Jesus’s earthly ministry for reading the actual Gospel narratives.<sup>31</sup>

For these reasons, what I’ve chosen to do in this book is to provide a resource for reading the four canonical Gospels by closely tracking with their respective story lines and theological emphases. In addition, I’ve suggested some proper points of application along the way, since, as I mentioned, the life of Jesus is not merely a proper object of study but first and foremost a call to action, a call to follow Jesus and to become more like him, both in our own character and in the way we relate to others.

This approach also promises to help us develop a better grasp of how the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ is central to the fourfold Gospel witness. Rather than dichotomizing between the elusive “Jesus of history” and the existential “Christ of faith,” we’ll be able to come to know *the Jesus of the Gospels*—and thus of the gospel!—and be equipped to follow the one who calls us. This will help us not only to recognize him as Savior and Lord but also to join him on mission: to take up our cross on a daily basis and to identify with him in a world that desperately needs to see and hear that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”<sup>32</sup>

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30. Cf. Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000). See also Hays, *Reading Backwards*, who places a special emphasis on reading the Gospels in view of Israel’s Scriptures; and Jonathan Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), chapters 4 and 5.

31. Some may argue that we should do both: read the four Gospels individually and in conjunction with one another *and* provide a survey of the overall Gospel timeline. However, it’s hard to see how this completely avoids the problems mentioned above regarding reconstructing a harmony from the existing Gospels. While it’s certainly the case that as we read the four Gospels we form a mental composite of the various events and teachings in the life of Jesus, it’s best to hold this conglomerate construct as tentatively as possible and to subordinate it to the cumulative impact of the fourfold Gospel witness.

32. John 3:16.

## READING THE GOSPELS TODAY

How, then, should we read the Gospels? Let me share with you four ways of reading the Gospels that will help us get to know the real Jesus of the Gospels.

### Reading the Gospels as a Unified Witness

In keeping with the early church's understanding, as mentioned, we should understand the individual Gospels as unified documents within the larger rubric of the fourfold Gospel. When you look at your English Bible—or, if your language proficiency permits, your Greek New Testament—you'll notice that the actual title of the individual Gospels is *not* "The Gospel of Matthew," "The Gospel of Mark," and so forth, but "The Gospel *according to* Matthew," "The Gospel *according to* Mark," and so forth.

Thus, in a sense, we don't have *four* Gospels but *one* Gospel according to four witnesses—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This is not merely a pedantic point; in fact, it's exceedingly important for us to let the implications of this insight sink in. The church doesn't have four gospels; it proclaims one, and only one, unified gospel. Therefore, let's not divide or separate what God has brought together (to recontextualize Jesus's saying regarding divorce) in the church's canon of Scripture.<sup>33</sup> We may not always be able to read through a given Gospel in our Bibles in one sitting, or even in multiple subsequent ones. But we should never lose sight of the fact that the one gospel, given to us in the canon in form of a fourfold witness, is unified.

What's more, the Gospels constitute not merely a canonical, or literary, unity; they represent a unity in every sense of the term, including a historical and theological one. In other words, the Gospels are not merely a unified literary and canonical document; they also attest to the same historical set of events and teachings in the life of Jesus and reflect unified theological convictions expressed by Jesus and embraced by the biblical authors and the early church.<sup>34</sup> And while the titles of the four Gospels are not themselves part of these Gospels (they are what scholars call "para-text"), they were affixed to the Gospels at a very early stage and clearly reflect the church's common understanding of their role and function in the life of the early church.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, we should embrace a both-and rather than either-or mentality in reading the Gospels. We should sit at the feet of each of the four Gospel witnesses to arrive at a full-orbed understanding of who Jesus is. And we should resist the notion that reading the Gospels confronts us with the challenge of choosing between mutually contradic-

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33. Cf. Matthew 19:6.

34. I've tried to elaborate on this point together with Michael Kruger in *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*.

35. Martin Hengel, "The Titles of the Gospels and the Gospel of Mark," in *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (London: SCM, 1985), 64–84.



tory accounts: either we embrace, say, Mark's account while discarding John's, or vice versa (or holding that both are wrong). This may have the appearance of enlightened critical scholarship but is clearly not the way in which the original writers intended their Gospels to be read, nor in which the early Christians themselves conceived of the relationship between the Gospels.

### Reading the Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony

From the vantage point of history, we should read the Gospels as eyewitness testimony. Of the four Gospels, it is particularly John who stakes a strong claim to being an eyewitness. Ironically, as mentioned, many Enlightenment thinkers disputed this claim, in part because John's account is rather different from the other three canonical Gospels and in part because they conceived of history and theology in disjunctive rather than complementary terms.<sup>36</sup> This is not the place to provide a thorough vindication of John's historical reliability, though several reputable scholars have attempted to do so in recent years.<sup>37</sup> Suffice it to say that anyone who approaches John's Gospel with an open mind will likely conclude that John is interested in both history and theology and that these two dimensions should not be pitted against each other. In fact, the truth of John's theology rests in large part on his historical reliability.<sup>38</sup>

Luke, for his part, claims in his opening preface that his account is based on eyewitness testimony.<sup>39</sup> He frankly acknowledges that he himself was not an eyewitness but notes that he, as a good historian, carefully researched his subject matter by accessing accounts of those who were eyewitnesses in compiling his own narrative. In this way, Luke is honest and transparent and, while not himself an eyewitness, makes a virtue out

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36. The first such frontal challenge to John's historicity came from the German scholar Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider in a work called *Probabilia de evangelii et epistolarum Ioannis Apostoli indole et origine cruditorum iudicii modeste subiecit* in 1820. Bretschneider wrote in Latin; the work has never been translated. Translated into English, his title reads: *Probability Concerning the Character and Origin of the Gospel and Epistles of John, the Apostle, Modestly Submitted to the Judgment of the Erudite* (see William J. Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, vol. 1: *From Deism to Tübingen* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 312). Bretschneider backed away from his criticism only two years later (1822), but the seeds of doubt and criticism had been sown, and many others followed in his footsteps in the decades that followed. See my critique, "Frühe Zweifel an der johanneischen Verfässherschaft des vierten Evangeliums in der modernen Interpretationsgeschichte," *European Journal of Theology* 5 (1996): 37–46; English translation: "Early Doubts of the Apostolic Authorship of the Fourth Gospel in the History of Modern Biblical Criticism," in *Studies in John and Gender: A Decade of Scholarship*, *Studies in Biblical Literature* 38 (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), chapter 2.
37. See, e.g., Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).
38. As argued in the still-valuable work by Leon Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), esp. his essay "History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel," 65–138.
39. Luke 1:1–4.

of necessity; rather than compiling, or drawing on, one eyewitness account, he bases his Gospel on multiple eyewitness accounts to which he had access. As Richard Bauckham observes in his landmark work *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Luke's procedure here is fully in keeping with first-century standards for historiography (history writing), which must be based on eyewitness testimony to be credible.<sup>40</sup> Matthew and Mark, likewise, can be shown to have followed accepted conventions for history writing in the first century.

### Reading the Gospels as Narratives

From a literary vantage point, we should read the Gospels as narratives. This means that we should come to appreciate them as self-contained literary works, consisting of literary units and subunits, complete with plots, subplots, a set of major and minor characters, and so forth. As mentioned, this is vital, particularly since this is the form in which information regarding the life of Jesus has come down to us. Respecting Scripture, therefore, also means respecting the literary boundaries and characteristics attached to the respective Gospel accounts. Conflating these into a hypothetical reconstruction of the life of Jesus, no matter how well intentioned, is therefore counterproductive if not misguided and most likely misleading. In fact, in the hands of critical scholars, such a project will likely result in a truncated portrait of Jesus, whether stripped of the miraculous, demythologized into existential categories, or subjected to various other modifications. Establishing the likely historicity of key events in the life of Jesus may be of limited apologetic value in dealing with modern-day skeptics<sup>41</sup> but is an inadequate substitute for reading the four canonical Gospels as coherent and complementary accounts reflecting eyewitness testimony.

Recent literary scholarship has given us vital and valuable tools for reading the Gospels as narratives. In the past few decades, scholars have increasingly come to appreciate the fact that the Gospel accounts display a large variety of literary features that can be studied with great profit by students of Scripture.<sup>42</sup> This includes their overarching plotline, characterization, setting, and various literary structuring or other devices.<sup>43</sup>

40. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017); See also Craig S. Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019).

41. For a largely positive example, see Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb, *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus: A Collaborative Exploration of Context and Coherence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

42. Classic works include David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982; 3rd ed. David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie [Philadelphia: Fortress, 2012]); Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); and R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

43. See, e.g., chapters 5 and 9 (on Old and New Testament narrative, respectively), in Köstenberger and Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*.

Without imposing modern-day categories onto the biblical text, we can benefit from reading the biblical Gospels as literary wholes rather than compartmentalizing them into smaller, possibly even disparate, units. This holistic reading of narratives will enable us to appreciate their character as coherent stories (without implying lack of historicity) both on their own terms and in relation to other accounts.

This balanced, empathetic reading will also enable us to keep the literary and theological diversity of the four evangelists in tension with their underlying unity and will keep us from jumping to the conclusion that they stand in necessary contradiction. In fact, reading all four accounts in relation to one another will provide us with a theological richness that is simply unattainable by reading only one or two Gospel accounts. What many have called the “Synoptic problem,” therefore, at a closer look turns out to be a “Synoptic opportunity,” if not a “Synoptic blessing.” The same goes on a broader scale for reading the Synoptics in conjunction with John’s Gospel.

### Reading the Gospels One at a Time

How, then, should we read the Gospels? Like eating an elephant, as the saying goes (one bite at a time), it’s best to read the Gospels one at a time (vertically), tracking with their plotlines and with the ways in which they characterize their one major character, Jesus, with regard to what he did (his actions) and what he said (his teachings).<sup>44</sup> All of this is part of the biblical portrait of Jesus’s messianic mission, which in turn is rooted in a long stream of prophetic predictions that, in Jesus, have come to fulfillment.<sup>45</sup> The life of Jesus can’t be understood apart from the first days of Jesus (e.g., the virgin birth) or the final days of Jesus (his crucifixion and resurrection).<sup>46</sup>

And yet the middle of this story—the story of Jesus’s three-and-a-half-year earthly ministry centering on his training of the Twelve and his eventual crucifixion and resurrection—is pregnant with meaning and significance and promises to repay rich dividends for those who engage in this study with open minds and hearts. Who knows, the Spirit of Jesus may perform open-heart surgery on you as you read the pages of this

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44. That said, it is of course also appropriate to read the Gospels horizontally—that is, enjoy the Gospels in all their richness and gather what we can glean from *all* the Gospels about a given event or topic. While our primary focus in this book is on reading the Gospels vertically (one at a time), on a secondary level we will occasionally comment on how a given event in one Gospel is supplemented by information in another, or even how to reconcile apparently contradictory information in multiple Gospels.

45. See Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander E. Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015). This is also the primary thesis underlying the treatment of Hays, *Reading Backwards*.

46. See Köstenberger and Stewart, *First Days of Jesus*; Andreas J. Köstenberger and Justin Taylor with Alexander Stewart, *The Final Days of Jesus: The Most Important Week of the Most Important Person Who Ever Lived* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

book and as you read the Gospels themselves as they, with one voice, testify to Jesus the Messiah, who has staked a claim also on your life as your only rightful Savior, Master, and King.<sup>47</sup>

The early church assigned symbols to each of the Gospels taken from Ezekiel's vision reflected in the book of Revelation: a man, a lion, a bull, and an eagle.<sup>48</sup> The church father Jerome writes that Matthew starts out his Gospel with a man: "Jesus, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Mark begins with a voice roaring like a lion: "A voice of one shouting in the desert, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'" Luke features Zechariah the priest, making the bull a fitting sacrificial symbol. John rose up on eagle's wings, "hastening toward higher matters," presenting Jesus as the preexistent Word of God.<sup>49</sup>

While not directly grounded in Scripture, these symbols stir the imagination as we set out to explore each of the Gospels individually.<sup>50</sup> They help us realize that each of the Gospels was written by a different evangelist, and that each Gospel has a different personality, as it were, just as we today recognize different personality types. Few would argue that there should only be one personality type—that would be boring! It is similar with the Gospels. Let's therefore enjoy the richness, variety, and diversity reflected in the Gospels as the personality of each Gospel writer shines through in the way they paint a unique portrait of Jesus.

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47. While space doesn't allow me to reproduce the Gospel texts themselves in this volume, I'd strongly urge you to read each of the Gospels in their entirety. Toward that end, I'd highly recommend the *ESV Reader's Gospels* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

48. Ezekiel 1:5, 10; cf. Revelation 4:6–9.

49. See Matthew 1:1; Mark 1:3; Luke 1:5; John 1:1. Cf. St. Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, The Fathers of the Church 117 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 55. Note that Irenaeus assigns the four symbols differently (Mark as eagle, John as lion; *Against Heresies* 3.11.8 [*Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1.428]), while Augustine proposes a yet different arrangement (Matthew as lion, Mark as man; *Harmony of the Four Gospels* 1.9; see Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, 55n37).

50. Cf. Richard A. Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014). Burridge discusses the Gospels in the order Mark—Matthew—Luke—John, following the narrative contours in broad strokes. His "symbolic reading" is grounded in the ancient symbols for the Gospels.