



Panorama of the New Testament

Stephen J. Binz
with Little Rock Scripture Study staff



*A ministry of the Diocese of Little Rock
in partnership with Liturgical Press*

Nihil Obstat for the commentary text by Stephen J. Binz: Reverend Robert C. Harren, J.C.L., *Censor deputatus*.
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St. Cloud, Minnesota. June 7, 2016.

Cover design by Ann Blattner. Interior art by Ned Bustard.

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ville, Minnesota 56321. Printed in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Library of Congress Control number: 2018956719

ISBN 978-0-8146-6374-5 ISBN 978-0-8146-6398-1 (e-book)



DIOCESE OF LITTLE ROCK

2500 North Tyler Street • P.O. Box 7565 • Little Rock, Arkansas 72217 • (501) 664-0340 Fax (501) 664-6304

Dear Friends,

The Bible is a gift of God to the church, the people gathered around the world throughout the ages in the name of Christ. God uses this sacred writing to continue to speak to us in all times and places.

I encourage you to make it your own by dedicated prayer and study with others and on your own. Little Rock Scripture Study is a ministry of the Catholic Diocese of Little Rock. It provides the tools you need to faithfully understand what you are reading, to appreciate its meaning for you and for our world, and to guide you in a way that will deepen your own ability to respond to God's call.

It is my hope that the Word of God will empower you as Christians to live a life worthy of your call as a child of God.

Sincerely in Christ,

✠ Anthony B. Taylor
Bishop of Little Rock



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Welcome	7
What materials will you use?	7
How will you use these materials?	8
Lesson One (The Gospels of Matthew and Mark)	11
Lesson Two (The Writings of Luke and John)	35
Lesson Three (The Pauline Letters)	57
Lesson Four (Other New Testament Writings)	77
Praying with Your Group	96
Reflecting on Scripture	98

Wrap-up lectures are available for each lesson at no charge. The link to these free lectures is LittleRockScripture.org/Lectures/PanoramaNewTestament.

Welcome

The Bible is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It is the Spirit-inspired word of God for us. It reveals to us the God who created, redeemed, and guides us still. It speaks to us personally and as a church. It forms the basis of our public liturgical life and our private prayer lives. It urges us to live worthily and justly, to love tenderly and wholeheartedly, and to be a part of building God's kingdom here on earth.

Though it was written a long time ago, in the context of a very different culture, the Bible is no relic of the past. Catholic biblical scholarship is among the best in the world, and in our time and place, we have unprecedented access to it. By making use of solid scholarship, we can discover much about the ancient culture and religious practices that shaped those who wrote the various books of the Bible. With these insights, and by praying with the words of Scripture, we allow the words and images to shape us as disciples. By sharing our journey of faithful listening to God's word with others, we have the opportunity to be stretched in our understanding and to form communities of love and learning. Ultimately, studying and praying with God's word deepens our relationship with Christ.

Panorama of the New Testament

The resource you hold in your hands is divided into four lessons. Each lesson involves personal prayer and study using this book *and* the experience of group prayer, discussion, and wrap-up lecture.

If you are using this resource in the context of a small group, we suggest that you meet four times, discussing one lesson per meeting. Allow about 90 minutes for the small group gathering. Small groups function best with eight to twelve people to ensure good group dynamics and to allow all to participate as they wish.

WHAT MATERIALS WILL YOU USE?

The materials in this book include:

- Commentary by Stephen J. Binz, which has also been published separately as *Panorama of the Bible: New Testament* (Liturgical Press).
- Occasional inserts 🔥 highlighting elements of the New Testament. Some of these appear also in the *Little Rock*

Catholic Study Bible while others are supplied by staff writers.

- Questions for study, reflection, and discussion at the end of each lesson.
- Opening and closing prayers for each lesson, as well as other prayer forms available in the closing pages of the book.

In addition, there are wrap-up lectures available for each lesson. Your group may choose to purchase a DVD containing these lectures or make use of the audio or video lectures online at no charge. The link to these free lectures is: LittleRockScripture.org/Lectures/PanoramaNewTestament. Of course, if your group has access to qualified speakers, you may choose to have live presentations.

Each person will need a current translation of the Bible. We recommend the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*, which makes use of the New American Bible, Revised Edition. Other translations, such as the New Jerusalem Bible or the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, would also work well.

HOW WILL YOU USE THESE MATERIALS?

Prepare in advance

Using Lesson One as an example:

- Begin with a simple prayer like the one found on page 11.
- Read the assigned material in the printed book for Lesson One (pages 12–31) so that you are prepared for the weekly small group session. You may do this assignment by reading a portion over a period of several days (effective and manageable) or by preparing all at once (more challenging).
- Answer the questions, Exploring Lesson One, found at the end of the assigned reading, pages 32–34.
- Use the Closing Prayer on page 34 when you complete your study. This prayer may be used again when you meet with the group.

Meet with your small group

- After introductions and greetings, allow time for prayer (about 5 minutes) as you begin the group session. You may use the prayer found on page 11 (also used by

individuals in their preparation) or use a prayer of your choosing.

- Spend about 45–50 minutes discussing the responses to the questions that were prepared in advance. You may also develop your discussion further by responding to questions and interests that arise during the discussion and faith-sharing itself.
- Close the discussion and faith-sharing with prayer, about 5–10 minutes. You may use the Closing Prayer at the end of each lesson or one of your choosing at the end of the book. It is important to allow people to pray for personal and community needs and to give thanks for how God is moving in your lives.
- Listen to or view the wrap-up lecture associated with each lesson (15–20 minutes). You may watch the lecture online, use a DVD, or provide a live lecture by a qualified local speaker. This lecture provides a common focus for the group and reinforces insights from each lesson. You may view the lecture together at the end of the session or, if your group runs out of time, you may invite group members to watch the lecture on their own time after the discussion.

Above all, be aware that the Holy Spirit is moving within and among you.

Panorama of the New Testament

LESSON ONE

The Gospels of Matthew and Mark

Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

Prayer

Jesus Christ, you are the Word that reveals the Father. As we study the good news of your life, death, and resurrection, may what you reveal to us take root in our hearts and give life to our church and to our world.

Read the Preface and pages 12–31, Lesson One.

Respond to the questions on pages 32–34, Exploring Lesson One.

The Closing Prayer on page 34 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

PREFACE

As we continue this panorama of the Bible, moving into the New Testament, we continue to survey the narrative of God's people from Genesis to Revelation, from creation to the renewal of all things in the new creation for which we are destined. This story of God's family told around the table is essentially one unfolding drama. Although we are tempted to think that the New Testament moves us to an altogether new story with new themes and a new plot, we will see that the same themes are interwoven through both testaments and that the same plot that began to develop in Genesis carries on through the life of Jesus and his church.

We will continue to view the big picture so as to understand how the whole Bible fits together. Set against the backdrop of God's design for creation and of human rebellion against that design, the New Testament continues and completes the narrative of God's redemption of the world. The wide variety of books and types of literature in the New Testament continue to tell the one story of salvation.

Learning to take this panoramic view of the Bible, we are better able to understand that this is our story. We can enter into the narrative more personally and view our lives as participants in this great drama of salvation. The better we grasp the big picture and the whole narrative, the better we will embody Scripture, find our own place in the story, and become participants in the mission of God.

The biblical scholar N. T. Wright describes the Bible and our role within it with an analogy. He imagines that the script of a lost Shakespearean play is somehow discovered. Although the play originally had five acts, only a little more than four have been found—the first four acts and the first scene of act five. The rest is missing. The play is given to Shakespear-

ean actors who are asked to work out the rest of act five for themselves. Immersing themselves in Shakespearean language and in the narrative of the partial script that has been recovered, they improvise the missing parts of the fifth act, allowing their performance to be shaped by the trajectory of the story as they have come to understand it. In this way they bring the work toward the conclusion that its author had indicated previously in the play.[†]

Wright says that this analogy may help us understand how the Bible can shape our own lives now. The biblical drama of redemption unfolds in five acts: (1) creation, (2) the fall into sin, (3) Israel's story, (4) the story of Jesus, and (5) the story of the church, leading to the consummation of God's plan of redemption. We know that the Author of the drama, the Divine "Playwright," has given the gift of his own Spirit to the "actors." So we must live our lives within the trajectory of the story as it has been told up to the first part of the final act. We have been entrusted to perform the continuation of the biblical drama within the mission of Jesus and his church, moving the story forward to the conclusion that God has already imagined.

We are each invited to enter into the plot as it stands, continually poring over and immersing ourselves in the earlier acts, and learning to understand how the threads can be drawn together. We then improvise, speaking and acting creatively, yet in a way consistent with the story of Israel, Jesus, and the early church. We each imaginatively yet faithfully live out the narrative impetus given in Scripture in the new historical and cultural situations in which our lives are placed by God.

Standing as we do between Pentecost and the completion of God's plan for creation, our mission is to witness to the reign of God over the whole world. When we understand that the Bible is our literature, we can better recognize how we fit into this great story of God and humanity. As we survey in this volume the

[†] N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 143.

story of Jesus and the story of his early church, we will comprehend ever more clearly how our individual lives are being shaped by this inspired literature and how we are each being molded into the persons we are created to be.

As we grasp how the world's redemption has been accomplished in Jesus, we will understand the mission of the church and our own mission within it to participate in God's bringing redemption to its completion.

THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST

On the third day following the crucifixion of Jesus in Jerusalem, two disciples are traveling on the road to Emmaus, talking to each other about his life and death. Despite the teachings of Jesus, they have failed to comprehend how the narrative of his life continues the narrative of Israel from the Scriptures. They are “slow of heart” to believe what the prophets spoke, failing to understand the drama of redemption, so they are filled with gloom and despair.

Then the risen Jesus joins the two disciples on the road and responds to their hopeless state. He takes the disciples back through the Scriptures of Israel, showing them God’s purpose and plan: “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27). Jesus provides the interpretation of Scripture that relates the ancient texts to himself. He offers them the panoramic view, opening up the plot and showing them how God’s saving plan is accomplished in himself.

Jesus’ opening the Scriptures to these disciples leads them to the table for Sunday dinner. In the eucharistic meal, their eyes are opened and they recognize their risen Lord. As he vanishes from their sight, they say to each other, “Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32). In word and sacrament, Jesus has given them an experience of God’s saving design for their own lives and for the world.

When these disciples run back to Jerusalem to join the others, Jesus appears to the whole group. Again, in the context of a meal, Jesus says to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). Then, the gospel writer says, “He opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” The risen Lord, gathered with his disciples, shows them how he is the heart and center of the great narrative of Scripture.



The Torah, the prophets, and the psalms are all filled with anticipation of the Messiah. The Old Testament is most fully understood in the light of Christ; and the significance of Jesus and the meaning of his life can be seen only through these ancient texts. With their minds open to understanding and their hearts on fire, the disciples are now able to see the big picture—the panorama of Scripture.

The Good News of God’s Redemption

Although God is the source and cause of all things, the Creator of the world, God’s creation is defiled by rebellion and contaminated by sin. But God has shown a relentless determination to redeem the world, to restore it to what God always intended it to be. The history of ancient Israel tells of God’s plan to save all people by choosing one nation as a demonstration of what it means to be in covenant with God. God would free them from bondage, dwell in their midst, reign as their king, and give them a future full of hope. Through this chosen people, God would bring a new creation and the blessings of salvation to all the nations of the world.

Yet, the accomplishment of God’s plan continues to be disfigured by the rebellion and sin

of his people, and the fulfillment of God's saving will is continually delayed into the future. Israel is taken into exile in Babylon and scattered throughout the earth so that restoration of God's plan seems impossible without a new intervention of God to fulfill the divine promises to Israel and to the world. Beginning with Babylon, as Daniel the prophet has announced, four different kingdoms will rule over God's people until God brings about the coming of his own kingdom. Then the time of the Messiah will put an end to the captivity of God's people and usher in the reign of God.

The prophet Isaiah has kept alive the hope of the exile's end and the new creation that God will accomplish. The beleaguered Jews of first-century Palestine hold these prophecies closely and they recognize when they are being fulfilled. Isaiah evokes the hope of his listeners with the image of a messenger, an evangelizer bringing "good news." Speeding across the mountains, he carries and announces the good news, proclaiming that God's promises are being fulfilled.

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the one bringing good news,
Announcing peace, bearing good news,
announcing salvation, saying to Zion,
"Your God is King!"
Listen! Your sentinels raise a cry,
together they shout for joy,
For they see directly, before their eyes,
the LORD's return to Zion.
Break out together in song,
O ruins of Jerusalem!
For the LORD has comforted his people,
has redeemed Jerusalem.
The LORD has bared his holy arm
in the sight of all the nations;
All the ends of the earth can see
the salvation of our God. (Isa 52:7-10)

The bearer of good news announces the heart of his message, "Your God is King!" And this reign of God brings about "salvation." The scene is one of great joy in which the sentinels on the crumbled walls of Jerusalem and even the ruins themselves form a jubilant chorus.

They see beyond the messenger and realize that the LORD himself is returning to the city to live with his people. God has "comforted" his people, ending their sorrow and bringing relief from their pain and grief. God also has "redeemed" his people, accomplishing their release and restoration.

The good news that God returns, reigns, and redeems will ultimately benefit "all the nations." The good news spreads from the messenger to "all the ends of the earth." The word of God opens outwardly from a word directed to Israel to a word with universal scope. God's word becomes good news for all people, a promise of salvation to the world.

The good news of Isaiah's prophecy is ultimately the good news of Jesus the Messiah. Centuries after Isaiah's prophecy during the exile in Babylon, the words on the ancient scroll of the prophet are now ringing in the ears of the Jewish people. God is returning to rule! Redemption is at hand! The time of salvation has come!

The Kingdom of God Has Come

In the first century, there is a widespread expectation among the Jewish people that God is about to act in order to free his people, renew creation, and bring his reign over the earth. But how are they to live in anticipation of that time? How can they rid themselves of the hated Roman oppressors and hasten the messianic age? What is God asking of them?

Four different answers to these questions take the form of four movements among the Jewish people: the Zealots advocate revolution and overthrow of the Romans; the Sadducees espouse compromise with the Roman authorities; the Pharisees promote cultural and religious separation from the Romans; and the Essenes practice complete withdrawal. But each of these has in common an abhorrence for the Gentiles, an entrenched suspicion of peoples outside of God's covenant with Israel.

The Jews of the first century describe the kingdom of God as a life without subjugation

and oppression in which God's peace will reign. In this fullness of time, the forces of evil will be conquered, God's people will be reunited, their sins will be purged and their sickness healed, and a restored and glorified Jerusalem will stand at the heart of the kingdom. The kingdom of God is the time of God's salvation.

Jesus announces that the long wait is over. At the beginning of his public ministry he proclaims: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). The kingdom of God is at the heart of Jesus' ministry. It is the time of God's decisive intervention into human history. What the prophets had preached and the people had longed for is now a reality. Jesus casts out demons, works miracles of healing, and calls to himself the outcasts and sinners—all signs that the kingdom of God is at hand, that the final age of God's plan is dawning.

Jesus comes with a marvelously different way from that of the Zealots, Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes. His is the way of love of enemies instead of vengeance, readiness to suffer rather than retaliation, unity instead of separation, and engagement rather than withdrawal. It is the path of love, suffering, and peacemaking. His disciples come to recognize that Jesus himself both proclaims and embodies the kingdom of God on earth.

The early church realizes that the kingdom of God is both a present and a future reality. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and in the coming of the Holy Spirit, believers know that God's reign has come. But they also recognize that they still await the full expression of God's kingdom. They already live in the Spirit, but they know that the forces of evil in the world are still alive. They realize that God has been finally and fully manifested in Jesus Christ, yet they are oriented toward the future, when God's promises for all people will be complete.

Despite this future dimension of God's kingdom, its New Testament proclamation is no longer about waiting for the future but

about recognizing its presence among us. It focuses on the arrival of the kingdom in Jesus. The distance between God and his people caused by sin and experienced as exile has been eliminated. God is now actively involved in the world and dynamically in relationship with people. The prophets of old, filled with God's spirit, saw it dimly; disciples of Jesus, living in God's kingdom, now see it clearly. What Israel's history had pointed toward has now broken into human history and is made evident in the story of Jesus told by the gospels.

Jesus Gathers a Community

As Jesus announces that the kingdom of God is at hand, he calls individuals to respond with repentance and faith: "Repent, and believe in the gospel." The gospel is the "good news," the joyful announcement, proclaimed by Isaiah's message, that God reigns and has come to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. Repentance means turning from false views of the world and embracing the presence of God's kingdom in Jesus. Believing means trusting that God's liberating and healing power is present in Jesus.

After Jesus' appeal to repent and believe, he issues the invitation to "follow" him. Jesus wants disciples to come and be with him, to learn from him, to become participants in his divine mission in the world. Disciples must center their lives on him with full commitment and total loyalty to God's kingdom.

The people of Israel were called to exist as a nation in covenant with God, but they failed to live this calling and were scattered to the other nations. But through the prophets God promised that Israel would one day be restored and brought together again under God's reign. The growing community of Jesus' disciples is the beginning of restored Israel, the renewal of God's people.

From among his disciples, Jesus deliberately appoints twelve who spend their lives with him. These Twelve, who represent the twelve tribes of Israel, are the nucleus of God's

restored people. His choosing them proclaims that God is calling Israel back to the original purpose of God's people. It is a prophetic action that portrays his gathering of the nation. And his later sending out the Twelve to share in his mission expresses the renewal of Israel in the age of God's kingdom.

But the redemption that God brings to his people will not be limited to Israel. Although Israel is the first to be gathered and renewed, all the nations will be gathered to Israel to share in its deliverance. Isaiah develops two prophetic images to describe this universal salvation. First, Israel becomes a great light to which all the people of the world are drawn. God's chosen ones must be this light to the nations, so that God's salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. Second, Israel hosts a great banquet that God provides. This feast of rich food and choice wines is offered for all nations, removing the tears of sorrow and the veil of death from all people.

Jesus will develop these prophetic images of light and feasting as he teaches his disciples. As he opens the kingdom of God to increasingly wider groups of people, he teaches his followers to be witnesses to others, letting their light shine before all people so that all may give praise to God. And as Jesus demonstrates his way of life to his followers, he does so in table fellowship with increasingly more diverse groups. The banquet becomes an image of God's kingdom realized in the eucharistic communion of his church.

Within Jesus' community, he includes a diverse multitude. Among his closest collaborators, Jesus includes a tax collector, who worked for the Roman oppressors, and a zealot, who actively sought to overthrow them. He draws to himself the poor, the sick, and the lost. Sinners and prostitutes are welcome among his company. In his parable of the Great Banquet, the master directs his servants to bring in the poor and the crippled, the blind and the lame. All of the outcasts who are shunned by much of Jewish society are warmly welcomed by Jesus into the kingdom of God.

Jesus Teaches about the Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God that comes into the world with Jesus does not look anything like the kind of military and triumphal monarchy that many expect. When Jesus announces that the kingdom is at hand, nothing major seems to happen. Their world doesn't seem changed much at all by the things that Jesus is saying and doing. The Romans still patrol the streets, the Jews are still oppressed, and no one appears liberated. So the teachings of Jesus, especially his parables, are designed to help his disciples understand the nature of God's kingdom. Jesus tells these parables so that those who repent and believe will learn to comprehend the mystery of the kingdom of God.

First, Jesus says that the kingdom is like the seeding of a field by a farmer (Mark 4:1-12; Luke 8:4-10). Only that seed that lands on fertile soil will grow and produce a harvest. The word of God, like the seed, must be patiently planted in the lives of those who are willing to take away the obstacles to its growth. Although many believed that the Messiah would come with conquering power that no enemy could resist, he comes with the humility and simplicity of a farmer sowing seeds. The kingdom is hidden in humble form and comes into the world in seeming weakness. The message of the kingdom can be received or rejected. But for those who receive the word of God into a receptive and believing heart, the seed of the gospel will produce the harvest of the kingdom.

Second, Jesus teaches that the kingdom is already here, but not yet in its fullness. The parable of the mustard seed (Matt 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19) suggests that God's kingdom is present among us like a growing plant. The tiny mustard seed grows to be the largest of plants, putting out large branches for all the birds of the sky to nest within it. So the kingdom is small and seems insignificant, but it is destined to be immense and valuable for all. Likewise, the parable of the yeast (Matt 13:33; Luke 12:20) teaches that the kingdom does not come all at once. Like the yeast in the dough that creates a powerful rising effect in

the whole loaf, God's kingdom penetrates the world in slow but wondrous ways.

Third, Jesus shows in parables how the kingdom is not separate from this world. Jesus' disciples are rejected and imprisoned, and it seems that the forces that oppose them are more powerful than the message of the kingdom. When weeds are sown with the wheat and begin to spring up in the field, the workers want to root out the weeds immediately (Matt 13:24-30). But the owner instructs them to allow the wheat and weeds to grow together until harvest. Jesus teaches that the powers of evil and the kingdom of God exist together until God's final judgment.

Fourth, Jesus teaches that the kingdom requires us to be faithful and ready. Although many believed that God's judgment and wrath would fall swiftly on the faithless, many of the parables show that the judgment they expect does not fall immediately but is reserved for the end of time. Jesus offers the parable of the Ten Virgins (Matt 25:1-13), five of whom keep extra oil for their lamps and are ready to enter the wedding feast when the bridegroom comes. The parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30) shows how two servants invest their master's wealth and one does not. Upon their master's return, the two resourceful servants share their master's joy and the other is left in the darkness. The parable of the Division of the Sheep and Goats (Matt 25:31-34) demonstrates that those who care for those in need receive eternal life, while those who neglect the needy inherit eternal punishment.

Fifth, several parables demonstrate the patience of God in delaying the full expression of the kingdom until many more have entered it. In the parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14:15-24), the host suspends the feast until the lost and forgotten ones can be invited to share in it. Likewise, the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son (Luke 15:1-32) portray God's mercy in seeking out the lost and celebrating when they are found.

In all of these parables and in many more, Jesus teaches the true reality of God's kingdom, in contrast to the misunderstandings and false

expectations of his listeners. When we begin to appreciate the reasons God hides the kingdom's glory and power, why the kingdom is concealed from many, and why God delays the kingdom's completion, we better understand our own place in the biblical story and our mission for the time between Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom and its full and final revelation.



A **parable** is a saying or story that provides a descriptive metaphor for the "kingdom of God" or imparts a moral perspective. Only Mark and Matthew have parable chapters, large collections of Jesus' parables joined into one long discourse (see Mark 4 and Matt 13). Scholars agree that Jesus used parables as a special teaching technique, but most parables would have been spoken as individual sayings given at different times and in different settings.

Jesus Works Mighty Deeds

Jesus reveals the kingdom of God both in words and in deeds. As he announces the kingdom, God is actively at work establishing divine rule over the world. What Jesus teaches about the kingdom is concretely demonstrated by his mighty deeds. The kingdom is not just a timeless reality; Jesus shows its immediate, personal, and saving power.

In the first type of mighty deed that reveals the kingdom, Jesus casts out the spirit of evil through the Spirit of God. After Jesus heals a demoniac, he says, "If it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt 12:28). Jesus' ministry launches an attack on evil in all its manifestations. The kingdom shows God's power in Jesus and by the Spirit to overturn the reign of evil in the world.

In a second type of mighty deed, Jesus cures sickness. Disease and its attendant suffering and ostracism are a type of bondage. Jesus' deeds of power over disease are unmis-

takable evidence of God's liberating power at work through him. When Jesus heals the blind, the lame, those mute and deaf, and lepers, people see God's renewing power flowing into the world to end the reign of sickness and pain.

When John the Baptist is imprisoned and begins to wonder whether Jesus really is the Messiah and if God's kingdom has come in him, he sends his followers to ask if Jesus is the one to come. Jesus tells them to report back to John that God's redemptive power is visibly at work.

And [Jesus] said to them in reply, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them." (Luke 7:22)

The healing power of God's kingdom has come upon the earth. Surely he is indeed God's anointed king, the expected Messiah. His deeds of power demonstrate God's reign flowing into human history.

In a third kind of mighty deed, Jesus frees people from the power of sin through divine forgiveness. This seems to promote the strongest response from his opponents. When Jesus tells the paralytic "your sins are forgiven," the scribes declare, "He is blaspheming. Who but God alone can forgive sins?" (Mark 2:7). Although in this encounter Jesus forgives the individual sins of the man, the gospels make it clear that sin takes personal, communal, and corporate forms, corrupting all areas of life. The authority of Jesus challenges unjust social structures that relegate people to the peripheries of society, maintain poverty, and retain power through violence. Jesus confronts these distortions of human life by changing hearts and promoting reconciliation.

In another kind of mighty deed, Jesus restores people from death to life. When he raises Jairus's daughter, the widow's son, and Lazarus, we see the power of God's conquering even death. In bringing these back to life, Jesus

demonstrates that death is not annihilation and that death no longer has ultimate control over life.

In a final kind of mighty deed, Jesus restores even the natural world from the distortions caused by sin. When Jesus calms the stormy sea, feeds the hungry crowd with a few loaves and fish, and directs an extraordinary catch of fish for tired fishermen, he demonstrates God's desire to restore the world to its original harmony. These local miracles are like windows through which we catch glimpses of a totally renewed creation.

The saving power of God's kingdom is directed against everything that opposes God's good and gracious reign over creation. Jesus reverses all the consequences of evil in the world: sin, guilt, demonic possession, disease, food scarcity, exploitation, abuse, and the powers of death.

Seeing the consequences of God's reign through these mighty deeds of Jesus, we may be tempted to wonder why Jesus didn't just cure all the sick and raise all the dead. Why didn't the Messiah solve all injustices and heal all the problems of the world? The answer becomes clearer at the end of Jesus' life and in the establishment of his church. Jesus has indeed established God's reign in the world and conquered the powers of sin and death. Yet, the full consequences of God's salvation of the world in Jesus continue to remain incomplete. It is that fullness toward which we work as his disciples and for which we hope in the fullness of God's plan for the new creation.



The **miracle stories** (or **mighty deeds**) in the gospels generally share a familiar structure. Some thirty-five miracles are recorded in the gospels. Their form provides testimony to the oral tradition that helped to preserve them. There are often five parts to a miracle story:

- (1) Description of a condition that needs healing
- (2) Dialogue between Jesus and the one(s) needing to be healed

- (3) The miracle effected through physical touch, prayer, or a gesture
- (4) Testimony on the part of the one(s) healed, sometimes accompanied by Jesus' statement that the recipient's "faith" has effected the healing
- (5) Reaction of bystanders and/or the one(s) healed

From the Scriptures of Israel to the Gospel of Jesus Christ

For Jesus and his disciples, the Scriptures are the books of the Torah, prophets, and writings, what Christians will later name the Old Testament. Soon however, the early Christians begin to produce their own writings, some of which are recognized by the church as inspired and come to be considered as part of the Scriptures. These inspired Christian writings begin to be read alongside the ancient writings of Israel in the church's worship.

These new writings are not simply commentaries or reflections on the ancient literature, nor do they replace or supersede the Jewish writings. They serve the community with their own distinct character, centered on the person of Jesus Christ.

The early Christians gradually come to perceive this new sacred literature as the New Testament, as distinct from the Old Testament. The Scriptures of Israel retain their own uniqueness and their own independent value. But something new and final has happened; the ancient Scriptures have been fulfilled and completed by the new event of salvation—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So now, as St. Augustine expressed it, "the New Testament lies hidden in the Old, and the Old Testament is made plain in the New" (*On the Spirit and the Letter* 15.27).

The Old and New Testaments are intimately united with one another because the God of Israel is the God and Father of Jesus. The old and the new form one divine plan of salvation for the whole world. Jesus, Mary, John the Baptist, and all the apostles are Jews,

and the feasts and traditions of Israel form the setting of the life of Jesus and the early church. Both testaments are rooted in the themes and vocabulary of the Israelites, with quotations, references, and allusions from their ancient faith. Theological themes like covenant, salvation, faith, sacrifice, and forgiveness cannot be fully understood without a knowledge of both testaments. For Christians, the divine promises and Israel's hopes for salvation are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, yet both testaments look toward the same future, to the full manifestation of God's presence in the coming kingdom.

The early Christian community, guided by the Holy Spirit, realizes that the persons, events, and institutions of the Old Testament foreshadow the coming of Jesus Christ. Adam prefigures Christ; the promises made to Abraham and Sarah find their completion in the new covenant; the fullest exodus is the death and resurrection of Jesus; the ancient temple, priesthood, and sacrifices are fulfilled in the person and cross of Christ; and the psalms of Israel can be sung about him, through him, and with him. And the words of the prophets, as well as their suffering and martyrdom for justice, are brought to fruition in Jesus.

In the Acts of the Apostles, as Peter proclaims Jesus to the crowds in Jerusalem, he shows them how the children of the ancient covenant inherit the blessings promised by their ancestors. The coming of Jesus continues and completes the narrative of God's redemption of the world.

Moreover, all the prophets who spoke, from Samuel and those afterwards, also announced these days. You are the children of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your ancestors when he said to Abraham, "In your offspring all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Acts 3:24-25)

The word "gospel" in the New Testament refers to the entire message and ministry of Jesus culminating in his passion, death, and resurrection. It is the "good news" of salvation to be believed, proclaimed, and lived. But as the decades advance for the early Christians,

the oral proclamation of the gospel develops into a new literary form. This good news of Jesus becomes crystallized in the form of four unique portraits of Jesus, the gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Among the twenty-seven books of the New Testament literature, the four gospels are pre-eminent. They occupy a position in Christianity somewhat similar to the Torah or Pentateuch for Israel. The four gospels stand at the head of the New Testament as unique literary works that tell the story of Jesus from the perspective of the faith of the early Christian communities. And they are written to strengthen the faith of believers and help them know more fully who Jesus is and what his coming means.

Four Unique Portraits of Jesus

The four gospels developed gradually within the community of Jesus' followers. This process may be described as a series of stages from the coming of Jesus to the gathering of the four gospels into the New Testament.

The first stage includes the entire earthly life of Jesus. This first period includes roughly the first third of the first century. It includes his public ministry, his teaching and mighty works, and culminates in his death and resurrection. This is the good news, the original living gospel.

Through his preaching and teaching, Jesus brings people to an urgent awareness of God's presence and invites them to respond. He ministers to human need, healing the sick in body, mind, and spirit, by awakening faith in those who have lost hope. He teaches with a new authority and challenges people to rethink their entrenched ideas and attitudes. He calls people to repentance and conversion, and he assures them of forgiveness. When Jesus dies on the cross, his followers are disillusioned, but with the resurrection, defeat changes to victory. With the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the community of disciples, they begin to realize that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is God's great act of salvation. The

Spirit enables them not only to remember the life of Jesus but also to understand its meaning for themselves and others.

The second stage comprises the oral proclamation and teaching of the good news of Jesus by his followers. This period begins with the death and resurrection of Jesus and continues through the middle portion of the first century. During this time, the disciples begin to spread the Gospel.

As they recall the words and deeds of Jesus, the tradition about Jesus begins to take on pattern and form. Every time a story about the life of Jesus is passed on through the spoken word, the speaker highlights its immediate relevance to the listeners by selecting, rearranging, simplifying, emphasizing, explaining, and dramatizing it. The disciples gradually formulate very effective methods for teaching his life and message as they apply his words to the lives of their audiences in various parts of the Roman world.

The third stage is the earliest writings of the Christian community. By mid-century, elements of the preaching, teaching, and worship of the early church begin to take written form. Collections of prayers, testimonies, hymns, professions of faith, passion narratives, and teaching summaries express the faith of the early Christians about Jesus Christ. These writings vary as they express the words of many different people, communities, periods of time, and points of view.

In the fourth stage, authors gather these oral and written traditions about Jesus to form four different gospels. In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we have the good news of Jesus Christ as witnessed by four different evangelists within the context of four different communities in four different parts of the Mediterranean world. Each author selects material from oral accounts and various writings, reducing and synthesizing some materials and expanding others with explanations according to the unique needs of the community being addressed. These four gospels took their final forms during the final third of the first century.

Each of these four portraits of Jesus helps us to see different aspects of who Jesus is for us. The words and deeds of Jesus' life vary from one gospel to another, and the events of his life are written in a different order in each gospel. Early attempts to harmonize the differences in these four and condense them into one version were strongly resisted by the early church. These four evangelists were primarily interested not in giving us a chronological biography of Jesus but, rather, in showing us who Jesus is and the meaning of his life.

The final stage is the formation of these four gospels into the canon or collection of the New Testament. By the mid-second century, the church recognizes that these four gospels express a unique and irreplaceable revelation from God. Even though other so-called gospels were written later, called apocryphal or "hidden" gospels, the four gospels of the New Testament form the earliest and most reliable narratives of Jesus and his significance for the world.

The earliest lists of New Testament books, from the last decades of the second century, include all of the major books of today's Bible. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are listed first, followed by the Acts of the Apostles and the thirteen letters attributed to Paul. In addition, these lists include the letter of Jude, the first and second letters of John, Hebrews, the first letter of Peter, and Revelation. Only the letter of James, Second Peter, and Third John continue to be disputed for another

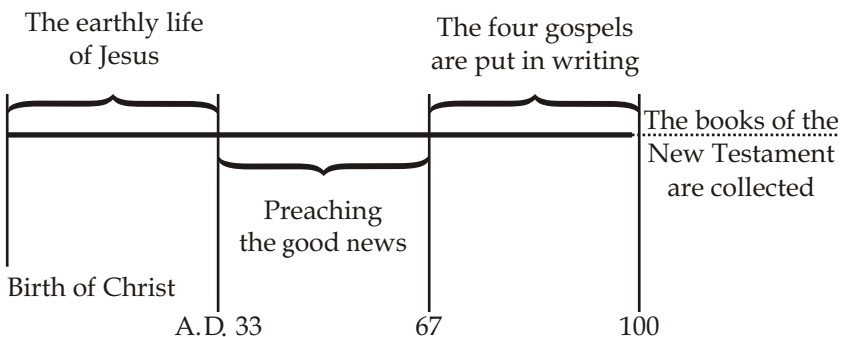
century or so. Through this gradual but steady process, the authoritative leadership of the church has selected twenty-seven books of the New Testament as its norm of faith.

The proclamation of the kingdom of God is the core of the good news brought by Jesus. This reign of God marks the completion of all the works and promises of God made known through the Scriptures of Israel. The teachings and mighty deeds of Jesus express the meaning and presence of God's kingdom as it is manifested in him. Gradually, the good news asserted by the early church becomes solidified into four distinct portraits of Jesus in the form of the written gospels.

In the chapters that follow, we will preview each of these gospels and discover the unique characteristics of each. We will also see how the gospel becomes incorporated into the letters and other writings that make up the New Testament. All of these writings were composed to be read in the context of the Christian community gathered for worship. So, like the disciples walking with Jesus to Emmaus, let us allow our hearts to catch flame as Jesus opens these Scriptures to us and speaks God's word to us along the way.

THE SYNOPTIC TRADITION

When we read the four gospels, we realize that in some ways they are similar to one another and in other ways they are different from



one another. If these gospels were simply a recounting of all the events and teachings of Jesus' life, we would expect them to be almost identical. If, on the other hand, they were merely the interpretation of the life of Jesus by different people at different times, we would expect them to be very different. In fact, the gospels do both: they recount the words and deeds of Jesus, and they interpret those words and deeds in order to communicate their meaning.

So the gospels are both history and inspired interpretation. In light of the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit, the disciples of Jesus come to understand the meaning of his teachings, his life, and his death. The gospels certainly communicate information about the life of Jesus, but more importantly, they lead us into the experience of his life, death, and resurrection so that it can impact our lives.

Three Similar Gospels

As we study each gospel, we realize that the first three—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are most similar to one another. These three are often called the “Synoptic Gospels,” which means they have a common view. The reason for their similarities, and even word-for-word exactness in some parts, is due to the fact that they share sources in common. Most biblical scholars acknowledge that Mark’s gospel was written first, and that Matthew and Luke use Mark’s writing as the foundation of their works. This explains why nearly all the events contained in the Gospel of Mark are also contained in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Scholars also speculate that Matthew and Luke drew from another source—namely, a document containing sayings and teachings of Jesus. This source no longer exists, but the similarities of Matthew and Luke, apart from Mark’s gospel, account for speculation about this lost source. To study the similarities and differences of these gospels more clearly, a reference book called a *Synopsis of the Gospels* or *Gospel Parallels* can be quite helpful. This handy tool shows each passage of the gospels in par-

allel columns. The reader can then see very clearly which words and phrases are the same and which are different from one gospel to another.

It should not be too surprising that there are differences from one gospel to another in the presentation of narratives or teachings. Jesus does not require a precise accounting of his deeds or a verbatim repetition of his teachings from his followers. He emphasizes, rather, a personal understanding of himself and his mission. For this reason, each gospel writer uses the oral and written traditions available in different ways. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the evangelists creatively structure and rewrite the material according to the unique purposes of each in order to meet the needs of their readers in different places in a variety of cultures.

The Composition of Each Gospel

There are three principles at work in the evangelists’ composition of each gospel: selection, arrangement, and adaptation. First, each writer selects from the oral and written sources those narratives and teachings that best express the mission of Jesus and the purpose of his life. Examples of this selection on the part of the author can be seen in the following: only Matthew narrates Jesus giving the keys of the kingdom to Peter; only Mark recounts the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida; only Luke tells about the women disciples who minister to Jesus—and yet all the gospels narrate the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Each evangelist selects the parts of the tradition that best form his unique gospel.

Second, each writer arranges the material he receives differently. For example, Matthew gathers many of the teachings of Jesus and places them in the setting of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Mark describes the episodes of Jesus’ life in a rapid-fire string of events that lead to his suffering on the cross. Luke forms many of Jesus’ words and deeds into a travel narrative, marking his path from Galilee to

Jerusalem. In these ways, each evangelist shapes his narrative in a unique way.

Third, each writer adapts the material he receives according to his own particular purposes. An example of this adaptation can be seen in the gospel scene in which the crowds ask Jesus for a sign and Jesus responds with frustration in their inability to understand. Although this event is recorded in all the Synoptic Gospels, each writer adapts it differently. In Mark's gospel, Jesus states simply that no sign will be given, but in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus states that only the sign of Jonah will be given. However, Matthew and Luke interpret that sign differently from one another. For Matthew the sign of Jonah is the death of Jesus and his resurrection on the third day, while for Luke the sign of Jonah is the preaching of repentance by a prophet of God.

We see, then, that the selection, arrangement, and adaptation of the tradition by each author results in three very similar but unique gospels. Many of the so-called discrepancies in the gospels can be understood not as troublesome problems but as the result of the authors' artistic and theological use of the oral and written tradition. While faithfully transmitting the words and deeds of Jesus, the evangelists interpret his life so that we can understand and experience its richness.

Mark Announces the Gospel of Jesus Christ

For many centuries in the church, the Gospel of Mark was neglected and unappreciated among the four gospels. Since nearly every verse contained in Mark is also included in Matthew's gospel, a previous age thought it unnecessary to pay much attention to Mark. But in recent decades, there has been a rediscovery of Mark's literary genius. In fact, Mark is most probably the originator of the literary genre that we call "gospel."

Mark is a gifted writer in that he takes what was available to him from the oral and written tradition and writes a narrative that also con-

tains his own insights into the meaning of Jesus' life. Mark gathers clusters of Jesus' sayings, collections of miracle stories, exorcism accounts, and compilations of parables, weaving them into a continuous narrative that culminates in the passion account of Jesus. His narrative of the life of Jesus is full of colorful, down-to-earth detail. More than any other gospel, he helps us appreciate the real humanity of Jesus by presenting his emotion, passion, and conviction.

Mark announces his gospel in the opening verse: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The Greek word *euangelion* is "gospel" in English, meaning "good news" or "glad tidings." Mark will communicate to his readers why it is such a wonderful thing that Jesus has come among us. The gospel will communicate the life of Jesus in such a way that it becomes good news for those who read it, enabling us to encounter him personally and experience his invitation to share his life.

Mark shows that the coming of Jesus Christ is both the continuation and the decisive culmination of God's saving plan for the world. He begins with a reference to Isaiah the prophet, yet these brief verses recall the entire book, especially the later parts of Isaiah in exile on which his gospel will be built. Mark is proclaiming that what Isaiah announces is now unfolding in its fullness. It is the news of comfort, the glad tidings that a way is being prepared in the wilderness for God's decisive return to his people.

Comfort, give comfort to my people,
says your God.
Speak to the heart of Jerusalem, and proclaim
to her
that her service has ended,
that her guilt is expiated,
That she has received from the hand of the
LORD
double for all her sins.

A voice proclaims:
In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD!
Make straight in the wasteland a highway
for our God!

Every valley shall be lifted up,
 every mountain and hill made low;
 The rugged land shall be a plain,
 the rough country, a broad valley.
 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
 and all flesh shall see it together;
 for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.
 (Isa 40:1-5)

The Jewish community at Qumran, the desert site associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls, understood its own mission as fulfilling these words of Isaiah. The discovery of the scrolls has led to speculation that John was for a time a member of the Qumran community. He preaches and baptizes in the wilderness near the Dead Sea, and becomes the one sent to “prepare the way” for the Messiah. As the last of Israel’s prophets and dressed like Elijah, John challenges the people to look at their lives and prepare their hearts for Jesus Christ.

John’s “baptism of repentance” offers God’s forgiveness and is so attractive that the whole countryside and all Jerusalem come to him. The place of John’s ministry, the wilderness and the Jordan River, evoke God’s saving history with Israel. In the wilderness God prepared a people for the liberated life he offers them, and the Jordan River is the way through which God’s people entered the Promised Land. John’s baptism was a way for the Jews to reaffirm their identity as God’s people—to come to the wilderness once more and to reenter the land of God’s promises through the water.

When Jesus is baptized and comes up from the water of the Jordan, he sees the heavens being “torn open” as the Holy Spirit comes down upon him (Mark 1:10). Mark uses the same verb at the end of his gospel when describing the veil of the temple, torn open from top to bottom at the death of Jesus (Mark 15:38). This will complete the removal of the barrier between God and humanity—a removal that begins here at Jesus’ baptism.

God is fulfilling the promises made through the prophet Isaiah: “The spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him” (Isa 11:2). The descent of the Spirit anoints Jesus for his ministry. Through

the prophet, God’s servant has spoken, “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me” (Isa 61:1). God is bringing the expectations voiced in ancient times to their completion in the life of Jesus the Messiah.

Here is my servant whom I uphold,
 my chosen one with whom I am pleased.
 Upon him I have put my spirit;
 he shall bring forth justice to the nations.
 (Isa 42:1)

Accompanying the descent of the Holy Spirit is the voice of the Father, addressing Jesus in words that echo Isaiah’s prophecy: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). What Mark has said about Jesus in his opening proclamation—“the gospel of Jesus Christ, the [Son of God]” (Mark 1:1)—is now confirmed by God himself. Jesus is truly the Christ—which means “the Anointed One”—and he is God’s Son.

However, Mark gives no indication that anyone but Jesus feels the Spirit descend or hears the divine voice. Jesus’ exalted identity is hidden for now, though Mark’s readers are privy to the mystery of this exchange between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Readers might expect Jesus, as God’s anointed Servant and Son, to reign triumphantly and vanquish the powers of evil. Yet, Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness for the final preparation for his mission. There he lives in a hostile environment with wild beasts for forty days and is tempted by Satan (Mark 1:13). The ministering angels who support Jesus in the desert recall the angel who guarded and guided the Israelites in the desert (Exod 23:20) and the angel who supplied nourishment to Elijah in that same desert (1 Kings 19:5-8). With his resolve tested, Jesus proves himself faithful in trial and ready for his messianic mission.

A Gospel Fashioned in Persecution

When Mark begins to write, the church has already expanded throughout the empire all

the way to Rome. The magnificence of the imperial city at the height of its power disguises the terrible suffering of its Christian community. When the city of Rome burns in AD 64, Nero the emperor blames the Christians and unleashes a great persecution. Mark composes his gospel during this dreadful time.

Mark forms his portrait of Jesus amid the trials of the Roman church and the challenging questions of its members. Why is Jesus so powerfully attractive yet so violently opposed? If he has such power, why does he allow us to suffer so? How do we follow him while undergoing unbearable persecution? These are the questions in Mark's mind as he draws together the life of Jesus to hand it on to others.

Mark writes a fast-paced gospel that seems to be designed to create a sense of urgency. Jesus' ministry begins with the proclamation of God's reign now: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). The time for the completion of God's plans for the world is upon us. The message demands an urgent response.

Jesus moves quickly from place to place, taking the lead and determining the direction of the narrative. As the shortest of the four gospels, Mark's work lacks many of the lengthy teachings that fill the others.

The style and emphasis of Mark's gospel correspond to the situation of crisis in which it is written. The church in Rome is perplexed by its seeming failure and suffering, besieged with faintheartedness and fear. In this context, Mark writes a gospel that stresses the affliction of Jesus in which the entire narrative leads to the passion and cross. He wants to correct any notion that following Jesus leads to a triumphant life. He emphasizes that discipleship means self-denial, that following Jesus means taking up the cross.

The Structure of Mark's Gospel

Mark fashioned his gospel in order to enable his readers to answer two fundamental

questions: Who is Jesus? and How do I follow him? The gospel is about understanding Jesus and understanding discipleship. Mark's gospel gradually reveals the identity of Jesus: through his preaching and teaching, through his miracles, and finally through his suffering and cross. And the gospel gradually teaches readers how to be disciples: through the good example of those called by Jesus to follow him and also through their many failures.

The gospel reaches its climax in the passion account. There Mark shows us that we cannot know who Jesus is unless we understand the necessity of the cross in his life, and we cannot know how to follow Jesus until we accept the necessity of the cross in our lives. If we are to understand the meaning of Jesus' life, we must see him as the suffering Messiah. If we are to truly be his disciples, we must know what it means to take up the cross and follow in his way.

The opening verse, in which Jesus is proclaimed with the titles Christ (*Messiah*) and Son of God, previews the whole gospel. These two titles must become for the church the response to the question Jesus asks midway: "Who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29). This is the central question Jesus asks his original disciples; it's the question that Mark's gospel asks of the early church; it is the question that all of us must answer for ourselves if we are to understand Jesus and follow in his way.

In the immediate response to the question, Peter answers Jesus, "You are the Messiah." Peter proclaims that Jesus is the anointed one, the one anticipated to fulfill the hopes of God's people. But Peter's response, while true, presents only a partial understanding of who Jesus is. It becomes clear quite quickly that Peter does not understand the role of the cross in Jesus' identity. The remainder of the gospel is spent teaching Peter, along with all of Mark's readers, a deeper comprehension of who Jesus is.

Throughout the second half of the gospel, Jesus instructs his disciples that he must suffer, die, and rise, providing them with a richer insight into his mission as the Messiah. Finally, toward the end of the gospel, as Jesus dies on the cross, the narrative climax is reached. The

central question of the gospel, “Who is Jesus?” can be answered fully only at the cross. Ironically, the response comes from the lips of a Roman officer who sees the manner of his death. “Truly this man was the Son of God!” the soldier proclaimed (Mark 15:39), making the announcement that Jesus’ disciples should have been there to make.



Mark exhibits a curious feature that scholars have dubbed **“the messianic secret,”** or perhaps more accurately, “the secret of Jesus’ identity.” After many miracles, Jesus instructs the recipient(s) not to tell anyone; they abruptly ignore the command and spread the news of Jesus’ miraculous ministry! This may be a literary technique to show how the characters in the story fail to comprehend fully the true goal of Jesus’ ministry. He is destined to suffer and die on the cross for the sake of “ransoming” sinful humanity. Christian readers understand this meaning, but the centurion standing at the cross is the only human character in Mark to exclaim, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (15:39). The “secret” is finally revealed (by a Gentile!) who watches Jesus’ death.

Learning the Way of Discipleship

Mark’s gospel shows how closely the two fundamental questions are related: Who is Jesus? and How do I follow him? An understanding of discipleship requires a clear and correct understanding of Jesus. The more a person is able to comprehend the meaning of Jesus’ life, the more that person is able to grasp what it means to follow him as a disciple.

In the second half of the gospel, as Jesus begins to teach his disciples that he must suffer, die, and rise, he also teaches them about discipleship. Whenever Jesus predicts his own passion, his words are met with misunderstanding and resistance on the part of his dis-

ciples. Jesus responds each time by teaching them the intimate connection between who he is and what it means to follow him. This pattern is repeated three times as Jesus travels with his disciples from Galilee toward Jerusalem.

Following Jesus’ first passion prediction, Peter rebukes him because he cannot accept the idea of a suffering Messiah. Jesus then teaches that whoever chooses to be disciples must deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow him (Mark 8:31-34). Following Jesus’ second prediction of the passion, the disciples begin to argue over who is the greatest. Then Jesus teaches them that a disciple is to be the last of all and the servant of all (Mark 9:31-35). Following Jesus’ third and final prediction of the passion, James and John request places of honor when Jesus enters his glory. But Jesus responds by dramatically reversing the way that power is exercised in the world and showing that the suffering Servant of Isaiah—the one who gives his life for others—is the model for both his life and his disciples (Mark 10:33-45).

In the account of Jesus’ passion (Mark 14–15), Mark demonstrates the failures of the disciples most strikingly. The closest followers of Jesus fall asleep at Gethsemane as Jesus prays. Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss. The confident Peter denies Jesus three times. All his disciples leave him and flee at this darkest hour. No disciple stands at the foot of the cross in Mark’s gospel. Every one of them has good intentions and a desire to follow Jesus to the end. Yet, they do not yet understand Jesus’ continual teaching about the necessity of the cross.

Oddly enough the minor characters of the gospel respond best to the demands of discipleship. The blind man Bartimaeus follows Jesus to Jerusalem. The woman at Bethany anoints Jesus despite the protests of his disciples. The Gentile centurion at the cross proclaims the faith that the disciples should have understood. The women who followed Jesus from Galilee continue to minister to him in life and in death. A member of the Jewish council, Joseph of Arimathea, is the only one courageous enough to approach Pilate and give Jesus a proper burial.

Readers of Mark's gospel in every age readily identify with the disciples. They reflect the enthusiasm, misunderstandings, and failures characteristic of the church in Mark's community and of the church in every succeeding generation. Just as the grumbling and rebellion of the Israelites in the desert were written down for the instruction of each succeeding generation, so the incomprehension and failures of Jesus' disciples are written down for our instruction. When Jesus calls his disciples to follow him, he is calling us. When Jesus rebukes his disciples for their failure to understand, we stand convicted. When the disciples betray, deny, and abandon Jesus, we know that we have done the same. Yet, with the resurrection of Jesus, we are also offered his forgiveness and the hope of another chance to follow him.

The Unique Orientation of Matthew's Gospel

Matthew's description of a Christian scribe, as one who "brings from his storeroom both the new and the old" (Matt 13:52), may be an autobiographical statement of how he sees his role as a writer of the gospel. For more than any of the other evangelists, Matthew integrates both the life of Jesus (the new) and the Torah and prophets of Israel (the old). He presents references to God's word and work in the Old Testament and places them in relation to God's new word and work in Jesus Christ. This unique presentation of the old and the new makes Matthew's gospel the ideal first book of the New Testament. His presentation of the good news provides the entryway from the ancient covenant to the new, leading the believer from the history of Israel into the proclamation of the gospel to all the nations.

The way Matthew selects, arranges, and adapts the oral tradition and written material he receives to form his gospel can tell us something about the audience to whom he is writing. The gospel's Jewish perspective indicates that Matthew is a Jewish Christian, who writes within a community composed mostly, though

not exclusively, of Jews who believe in Jesus. The frequent quotations from the Scriptures of Israel and the recurrent references to Jewish practices indicate a community concerned with the meaning of Jesus' life in the context of the tradition of Israel. This indicates that Matthew wrote to help Jewish Christians understand that their faith in Jesus is entirely consistent with their Jewish heritage. And, in fact, the messianic movement centered in Jesus is the most authentic way of living out the tradition of Israel in the later decades of the first century and beyond.

Matthew's gospel, like that of Mark, offers us a clear overture in the opening verse: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." The word translated "genealogy" is the Greek word *genesis*, and may be also translated as "beginning" or "origin." It is quite possible that Matthew chose the word "genesis" for his gospel's opening verse to evoke associations with the first book of the Bible. As Genesis is about the origins of creation, humanity, and Israel, so Jesus is a new beginning for creation, humanity, and Israel. What God is doing in Jesus is a fresh, definitive, creative action for the sake of the world. All that God has planned and promised throughout the Scriptures is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ.

Matthew's first verse offers us the most important titles or descriptors of Jesus' identity. Christ (*Messiah*), son of David, and son of Abraham—these three titles are the key to Matthew's expression of Jesus' identity. Each is an honored title within the tradition of Israel and links Jesus with Israel's history and with all the hopes of God's people.

Christos is the Greek word and *Messiah* is the Hebrew word. They both mean the "anointed" of God. Originally the word referred to one designated by God for a chosen role, such as a king, a priest, or a prophet. In later writings, Messiah is a royal title, designating a future ruler who will play a decisive role in fulfilling God's plan for Israel. Based on prophecies given to King David, the Messiah will free God's people from oppression and usher in a new age. Matthew's

gospel will clarify what it means to call Jesus the Christ, the Messiah.

“Son of David” is a messianic title used frequently for Jesus throughout Matthew’s gospel. It highlights the fact that the Messiah comes from the royal line of King David. He is a descendant of David to whom God has promised an everlasting reign. This Son of David will use his royal power to heal the needy and to bring about God’s rule of justice upon his people. His messianic reign will be revealed not through force and conquest but through self-sacrificing love and service.

“Son of Abraham” links Jesus with the beginning of God’s covenant with Israel, a covenant initiated with Abraham. He is the father of all believers, the head of Israel’s royal lineage leading to David and to Jesus. The title portrays Jesus as the one who culminates God’s plans that originated in Abraham. God has pledged to Abraham that his call and obedience will bring God’s blessings to all the peoples and nations of the earth. What God accomplishes in Jesus as Son of Abraham fulfills that promise for the whole human race.

What follows in Matthew’s first chapter is a theological genealogy that links the coming of the Messiah with the ancient history of the people of Israel. The long list of names, of both men and women, begins in the earliest history of God’s covenant with his chosen people. This genealogy writes the fathers and mothers of Israel into the family tree of Christians. It demonstrates that the history of Jesus did not begin in Nazareth or Bethlehem, but with the stories of ancient patriarchs, prophets, kings, and generations of men and women leading up to “Joseph, the husband of Mary.”

The Gospel of Christ’s Church

Matthew’s gospel, written after the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70, reflects the growing tensions between Christian Judaism, represented by the community Matthew addresses in the gospel, and rabbinical

Judaism, the emerging Judaism represented by the scribes and Pharisees. Both forms of Judaism claim to be the legitimate heir of the tradition of ancient Israel. This is a debate between two groups of Jews, not a conflict between Jesus and Jews, or between the Christian church and Judaism. Jesus and his disciples, as well as Matthew and the community to which he writes the gospel, are all Jews, seeking to be faithful to the tradition in which God has led them. When the Gospel of Matthew is read in later non-Jewish cultures, it can easily be misinterpreted as a Christian polemic against Jews, as history has sadly demonstrated. The reader of the gospel today, then, has the responsibility to consider the original context of the gospel, lest it fuel the kind of anti-Judaism that has so dreadfully distorted Christian history.

On the one hand, Matthew’s gospel emphasizes the Jewish tradition of Jesus and his disciples, insisting on the continuity of Jesus with the Old Testament. On the other hand, the gospel is marked with debates and conflicts between Jesus and many of the Jewish leaders of his day. In light of this conflict between Christian Jews and rabbinical Jews, Matthew shows that Jesus and his divine mission are the culmination of the history of salvation manifested through ancient Israel. Jesus has completed the Torah and the prophets, inaugurated the long-awaited kingdom, and will lead his church to the end of the age.

The gospel shows great interest in the church, the organized community of disciples continuing the mission of Jesus in the world, and much of the gospel is concerned with teaching members of the church how life should be lived within the community. The church is not God’s kingdom, but the kingdom is present in the church because of the abiding presence of the church’s Lord. Jesus is with his church when the storm strikes on the waters, when his disciples are welcomed or rejected when preaching his kingdom, and wherever two or three are gathered in his name.

Because he is writing for the church, Matthew gathers the various teachings of Jesus into five blocks of teaching. These great discourses

are the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7), the sermon to the apostles (Matt 10), the sermon on the kingdom (Matt 13), the sermon on leadership (Matt 18), and the sermon on the last things (Matt 24–25). These five discourses have been compared to the five books that compose the Torah of Israel, and they seem to be designed to meet the catechetical needs of the growing church. Jesus instructs the church on how to live within the new covenant, to be humble, to seek out those who stray, to settle disputes, and to offer forgiveness. In this context, Jesus’ fierce criticism of the religious leaders is not so much an attack on his Jewish opponents within Judaism as a warning to the future leaders of the church. The hypocrites and blind guides, who do not practice what they preach, who fail to offer mercy and refuse to listen to the prophets of their day, are not worthy to lead God’s people. Unworthy leaders will leave the church as desolate as Jerusalem and its temple.



Peter’s confession of Jesus’ identity as it is preserved in Matthew 16:13–20 is important for Roman Catholic tradition. The church interprets this passage as the founding of the church by Jesus. This is the only one of the four gospels in which the word “church” (Greek, *ekklesia* = “assembly, those called”) is used. The symbol of the keys given to Peter, the image of the rock as a firm foundation, and the promise that evil will never bring it down come together in a strong image of the church as the chosen people of God.

The Enduring Presence of Jesus with His Church

By presenting Jesus as the authoritative teacher of his church, Matthew’s gospel helps Jewish Christians understand how to be loyal to the old covenant with Moses while engaging

with new believers among the Gentiles. It confirms the continuity of the church with God’s past promises to Israel while also validating the members’ new loyalty to Jesus and his saving mission. As such, the gospel becomes an effective pastoral tool for the church’s preaching, teaching, and worship.

To emphasize the divine presence of Jesus with his church, Matthew frames his entire gospel with this theme. In the first chapter, Jesus is called Emmanuel, which means “God is with us” (Matt 1:23). In the last verse of the gospel, the risen Jesus assures his community with the pledge, “And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). As the people of the kingdom living in the new age of salvation, the church is able to live in the world with confident trust as it embodies the living presence of its risen Lord.

As the historical Jesus formed his disciples to be his church, the Jesus presented in Matthew’s gospel forms the church throughout time to live as disciples in the time between the resurrection and his glorious return. In every period of Christian history, the Gospel of Matthew has brought direction and hope for Christ’s disciples, inviting them into an ever-deeper relationship with Jesus, who promises to remain always with his church.

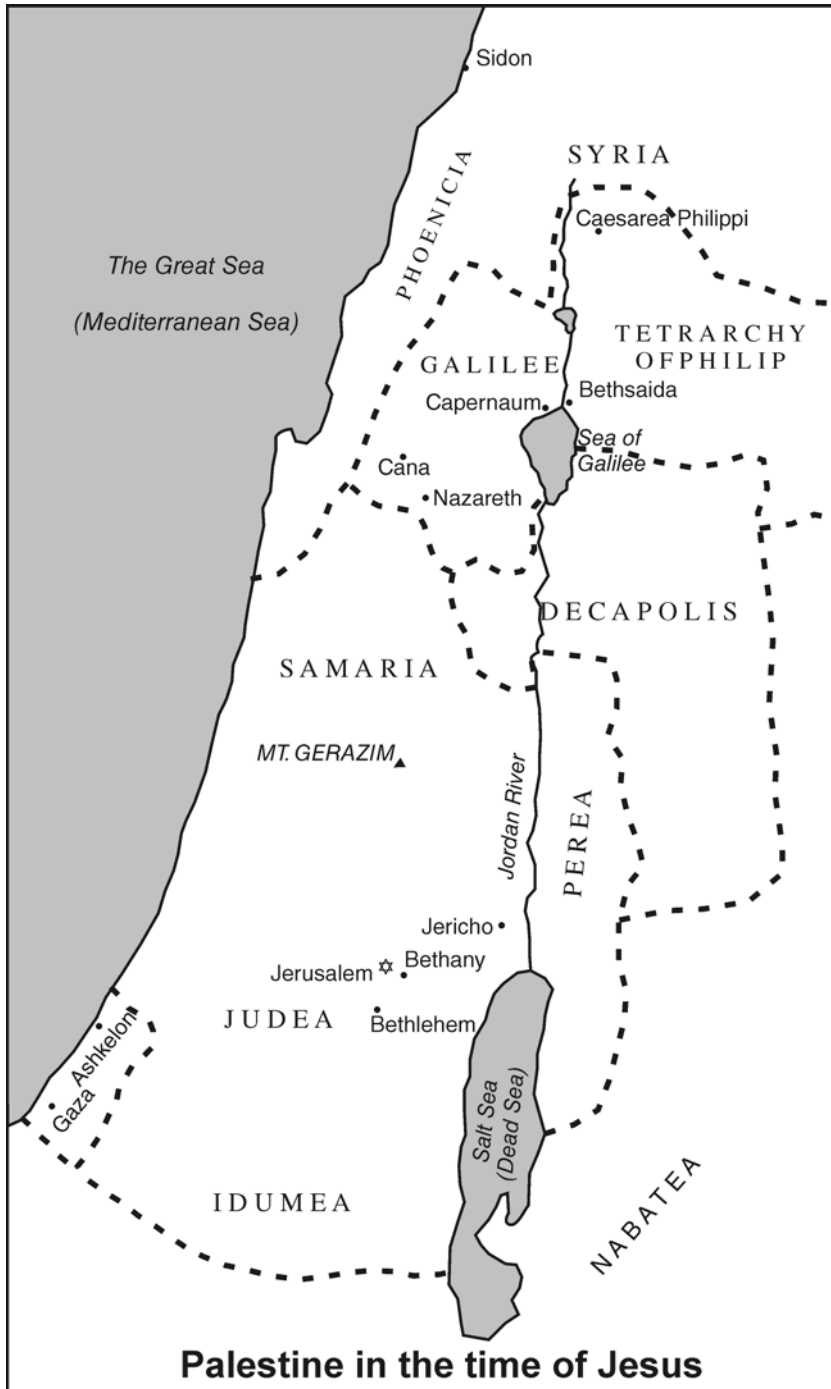
Despite the many similarities between the three Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—each is written with a distinct purpose, to a particular group of Christians in different places and cultures. For this reason, they each recount the words and deeds of Jesus and they interpret those words and deeds in ways that communicate their meaning in differing contexts.

Because Jesus desires neither verbatim repetition of his teachings nor a precise accounting of his deeds but, rather, a personal understanding of himself and his mission, each gospel offers us a unique perspective. Each

gospel offers us a portrait of Jesus in light of his resurrection and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

In this chapter we have looked carefully at the uniqueness of the gospels of Matthew and

Mark. In the next chapter we will examine the third of the Synoptic Gospels—the Gospel of Luke. Together these Synoptic Gospels give us three unique proclamations of the good news of Jesus Christ.



EXPLORING LESSON ONE

1. a) What was the first century Jewish understanding of the kingdom of God?

b) How is Jesus' ministry a fulfillment of this expectation (Mark 1:15; Luke 4:16-21; 7:22)?

c) How would you explain to someone in your own words how the kingdom of God is both a present and a future reality?

2. A central message of Jesus' preaching is: "Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). Briefly describe each key component of this message: *repentance*, *belief*, and *gospel*.

3. The commentary summarizes some of Jesus' parables about the nature of the kingdom of God. Of those mentioned in the commentary, which one resonates with you the most? Why?

4. What are the five types of “mighty deeds” that we see in Jesus’ ministry? How do these saving acts demonstrate the presence of God’s kingdom?

5. How would you explain the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament? What value does the Old Testament have for you?

6. How would you describe the process of the formation of the four gospels, from the “living gospel” to the gathering of the gospels into the New Testament?

7. How is a gospel different than a chronological, historical biography? What does this difference tell us about how we should approach the gospels?

8. In Mark’s Gospel, there is a clear relationship between Jesus’ identity and the nature of discipleship. How does understanding who Jesus is help us to understand how we must follow him (Mark 8:31-34; 9:31-35; 10:33-45)?

Lesson One

9. After reading through the descriptions of Mark and Matthew in the commentary, what distinct traits of each do you recall, and what unique situations within their communities account for some of these differences?

CLOSING PRAYER

Prayer

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring glad tidings to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.”*

(Isa 61:1-2; read by Jesus in the
synagogue in Nazareth in Luke 4:18-19)

Lord Jesus, in your ministry as God’s anointed one, you proclaimed good news, healed the sick, raised the dead and forgave sins. As faithful disciples, may we also be signs of good news, healing, life and forgiveness in our homes and communities. We pray today for those in need of any type of healing, especially . . .