**Christmas in the Four Gospels**

**2021 Advent Study**

Opening Quiz

1. Which Gospel does not contain any reference to Jesus’ birth?
2. Which Gospel places more of a focus on Joseph (the earthly father of Jesus)?
3. Which Gospel places more of a focus on Mary?
4. Which Gospel narrates the journey that brought Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem?
5. Which Gospel presents Jesus as the new and greater Moses?
6. Which Gospel traces Jesus’ lineage back to Abraham and David?
7. Which Gospel traces Jesus’ lineage back to Adam?
8. Which Gospel gives special attention to Jesus’ ministry with excluded persons?
9. Which Gospel was (presumably) written by a Gentile (i.e., a non-Jewish person)?
10. Which is the shortest of all the Gospels?
11. Which Gospel seeks to present an “orderly account” of the life and ministry of Jesus?
12. Which Gospel is (likely) the first Gospel written?
13. Which two Gospels were (presumably) authored by apostles?
14. Which two Gospels were not authored by apostles but have apostles associated with them?
15. Which apostles are associated with the above two Gospels?
16. In which Gospel do shepherds appear at the birth of Jesus?
17. In which Gospel do the Magi (Wise Men) appear?
18. What were the gifts the Magi presented to Jesus?
19. How many Magi brought gifts to Jesus?
20. Which Gospel portrays a Roman centurion declaring Jesus to be the Son of God?
21. Which Gospel captures the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt?
22. What are the synoptic Gospels?
23. What is Pastor Chris’ favorite Gospel?

If you were not sure of the answers to some or most of the above, then pay special attention to what follows. 😊

What is a Gospel?

Gospel is a genre of literature that we associate with the opening books of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Gospel comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, which means “good news.” (It’s also where we get the English word “evangelist.”) The Gospels present to us the “good news” of Jesus.

**This is the Good News [*euangelion*] about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. Mark 1:1 (NLT)**

While the Gospels contain biographical elements, they’re not biographies in the modern sense of the term. That’s because they don’t give us a full account of the life of Jesus.

The Gospels are more interested in making sure that we, as the readers, know the *necessary* stuff about Jesus – that he was crucified, dead, and buried, and that he rose again from the dead.

Recap of Christmas in Mark

Mark, the shortest of all the Gospels, does not include a birth narrative. If Mark were our only Gospel, we would have no knowledge of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus.

Why doesn’t Mark include a birth narrative? Two possible reasons.

* He doesn’t know a birth narrative.
  + Mark doesn’t have knowledge of what took place during Jesus’ birth.
* A birth narrative isn’t necessary to Mark’s theological agenda.
  + Mark’s main concern is making sure we know that **Jesus is the suffering Son of God**. Mark writing style is terse and to the point. His entire narrative pushes toward – and culminates at – the cross.

Recap of Christmas in Matthew

Matthew was likely the second Gospel composed – written shortly after Mark. Matthew writes as a Jewish Christian whose chief intent is to show that **Jesus is a fulfillment of all the promises God made to Israel**. Simply put, Matthew situates Jesus firmly in the story of Israel.

* Matthew’s genealogy begins with Abraham and David, two pivotal figures for Judaism.
* Matthew makes heavy use of Moses typology throughout his Gospel, showing us that Jesus is a new and greater Moses. (Moses is the main figure of the Hebrew Scriptures.)
* The story of the Magi (Wise Men) reminds us of Jesus’ royal status, which is fitting for a descendant of King David.
* The story of the flight into Egypt shows how God called Jesus out of Egypt just like God called Israel out of Egypt. (In this sense, Jesus embodies the story of Israel.)

Recap of Christmas in Luke

Luke was likely the last of the three Synoptic Gospels – composed sometime after the Gospel of Matthew. According to Church tradition, Luke, a travelling companion of Paul, wrote this Gospel. As such, Luke is the only Gentile writer of whom we know in Scripture.

**Luke writes as a historian whose main intent is to present an “orderly account” of the life of Jesus. Additionally, Luke wants us to know that Jesus is the universal Son of God who has come for all – not just for Jews, but for Gentiles, too.** **Finally, special attention is paid in Luke to social outcasts.**

* Luke gives extensive details of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus (e.g., Gabriel’s message to both Zechariah and Mary, Mary’s visit with Elizabeth, the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem) and identifies historical persons to situate this birth in history.
* Luke’s genealogy begins with Adam, the universal father of all human beings.
* Mary, an unwed teenage mother from a poor village, is given an elevated role, and poor shepherds are present at the birth of Jesus.
* Jesus’ birth is identified as “good news for *all* the people.”

Christmas in John

The Gospel of John

* Written sometime around 90AD.
* An anonymous document (like all the Gospels). However, the author speaks of a “disciple whom Jesus loved” and then reveals himself as this person.

**20Peter turned around and saw behind them *the disciple Jesus loved*—the one who had leaned over to Jesus during supper and asked, “Lord, who will betray you?” 21Peter asked Jesus, “What about him, Lord?”  
22Jesus replied, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? As for you, follow me.” 23So the rumor spread among the community of believers that this disciple wouldn’t die. But that isn’t what Jesus said at all. He only said, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?”  
24*This disciple is the one who testifies to these events and has recorded them here.* And we know that his account of these things is accurate.  
John 21:20-24 (NLT emphasis added)**

* Church tradition has associated writer with John.
  + Eusebius, a fourth century Church historian, claims that John wrote this Gospel.
  + John is the one who gives this Gospel “apostolic authority.”
* Different in overall makeup from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke).
* John makes heavy use of double meaning, where things have a surface-level, literal meaning and then a deeper, spiritual meaning (e.g., Jesus’ foot-washing).
* Fully developed Christology which shows Jesus to be the eternal Son of God.

The Pre-existence of Jesus

In the opening of his Gospel, John makes clear that Jesus is the eternal Word of God, who has always existed with God the Father.

**1 In the beginning the Word already existed.  
    The Word was with God,  
    and the Word was God.  
2He existed in the beginning with God.****3God created everything through him,  
    and nothing was created except through him.  
4The Word gave life to everything that was created,   
    and his life brought light to everyone.  
5The light shines in the darkness,  
    and the darkness can never extinguish it.  
John 1:1-5 (NLT)**

John uses metaphorical language (light, life) to talk about the pre-existence of Jesus.

John uses the Greek word *logos* (Word) in reference to Jesus. This harkens back to the Creation story in Genesis.

**1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.****2The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.  
3Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. 4And God saw that the light was good. Then he separated the light from the darkness. 5God called the light “day” and the darkness “night.”  
Genesis 1:1-3 (NLT)**

God creates, and the way God creates in Genesis is through *speaking*. In other words, God creates through God’s Word. John is making clear that Jesus is the source of Creation’s existence.

**3God created everything through him,  
    and nothing was created except through him.  
John 1:3 (NLT)**

After identifying the Word as “light” in verse 5, John begins by talking about John the Baptist, whose ministry was to testify to the light. John then reveals that this light took on flesh in Jesus.

**14So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son.  
John 1:14 (NLT)**

The 7 “I AM” Statements

John doesn’t contain any parables. However, he does include seven “I AM” statements from Jesus. These statements reveal an important aspect of Jesus’ identity, but they also take us back to God’s conversation with Moses at the burning bush when God revealed God’s name.

**13But Moses protested, “If I go to the people of Israel and tell them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ they will ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what should I tell them?”  
14God replied to Moses, *“I am who i am.* Say this to the people of Israel: I am has sent me to you.” 15God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: Yahweh, the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.  
This is my eternal name,  
    my name to remember for all generations.  
Exodus 3:13-15 (NLT)**

By referring to himself as “I AM,” Jesus is essentially equating himself with God.

1. “I am the bread of life.” ([John 6:35, 41, 48, 51](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+6%3A35%2C+41%2C+48%2C+51&version=NKJV))
2. “I am the light of the world.” ([John 8:12](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+8%3A12&version=NKJV))
3. “I am the door of the sheep.” ([John 10:7,9](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+10%3A7%2C9&version=NKJV))
4. “I am the good shepherd.” ([John 10:11, 14](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+10%3A11%2C+14&version=NKJV))
5. “I am the resurrection and the life.” ([John 11:25](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+11%3A25&version=NKJV))
6. “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” ([John 14:6](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+14%3A6&version=NKJV))
7. “I am the true vine.” (John 15:1, 5)

Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman (John 3-4)

In John 3-4, John pairs two different encounters of Jesus back-to-back: Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus (the Pharisee), and Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman. John intends for us to note the similarities and differences between these two encounters.

Similarities:

* Both Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman take what Jesus says too literally, thereby missing the deeper spiritual meaning.

Differences:

* Nicodemus comes to Jesus of his own volition; Jesus seems to seek out the Samaritan woman.
* Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night; Jesus meets with the woman at noontime.
* Nicodemus is named; the woman is unnamed.
* Nicodemus is Jewish; the woman is a Samaritan.
* Nicodemus is a male religious insider; the woman is a female religious outsider.
* Nicodemus claims to know more about Jesus than he does; the Samaritan woman does not claim to know much but actually knows more than she thinks.
* Nicodemus doesn’t seem to make progress in his understanding of Jesus; the woman makes progress and, by the end, becomes a disciple and witness to Jesus.

These two encounters illustrate what we might call a “kingdom reversal”:

***The outsiders are made insiders, and the supposed insiders don’t get it!***

Symbolism

As mentioned earlier, John makes heavy use of symbolism throughout his Gospel. To put it simply, things that appear literal often have a deeper, spiritual meaning.

Jesus’ healing of the blind man (John 9)

In John 9, Jesus heals a man blind from birth. The physical healing leads the man to receive spiritual healing and recognize Jesus as the Son of God. The Pharisees, on the other hand (who can literally see), remain stuck in their spiritual blindness.

**35When Jesus heard what had happened, he found the man and asked, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”  
36The man answered, “Who is he, sir? I want to believe in him.”  
37“You have seen him,” Jesus said, “and he is speaking to you!”  
38“Yes, Lord, I believe!” the man said. And he worshiped Jesus.  
39Then Jesus told him, “I entered this world to render judgment—to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind.”  
40Some Pharisees who were standing nearby heard him and asked, “Are you saying we’re blind?”  
41“If you were blind, you wouldn’t be guilty,” Jesus replied. “But you remain guilty because you claim you can see.  
John 9:36-41 (NLT)**

Jesus washes the disciples’ feet (John 13)

**Before the Passover celebration, Jesus knew that his hour had come to leave this world and return to his Father. He had loved his disciples during his ministry on earth, and now he loved them to the very end. 2It was time for supper, and the devil had already prompted Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. 3Jesus knew that the Father had given him authority over everything and that he had come from God and would return to God. 4So he *got up from the table*, *took off his robe*, *wrapped a towel around his waist*, 5and *poured water into a basin*.  
John 13:1-5 (NLT emphasis added)**

John refers to four actions on Jesus’ part. Again, there is more going on here than we tend to realize.

1. Jesus got up from the table.

Jesus “got up from the table” just like he got up from his throne in heaven and came to earth.

1. Jesus took off his robe.

In the ancient world, a robe was more than an article of clothing. A robe was a symbol of status and honor. It meant something if you were wearing a robe – it meant that you were somebody!

**3Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other children because Joseph had been born to him in his old age. So one day Jacob had a special gift made for Joseph—a beautiful *robe*.  
Genesis 37:3-4 (NLT emphasis added)**

**22“But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest *robe* in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet.  
Luke 15:22 (NLT emphasis added)**

John uses physical language to describe a spiritual act: Jesus emptied himself of his divine prerogatives and relinquished the “benefits” that came with his status as God.

**7Instead, *he gave up his divine privileges*;  
    he took the humble position of a slave  
    and was born as a human being.  
When he appeared in human form,   
8    he humbled himself in obedience to God  
    and died a criminal’s death on a cross.  
Philippians 2:7-8 (NLT emphasis added)**

***He left His Father’s throne above,  
So free, so infinite His grace;  
Emptied Himself of all but love,  
And bled for Adam’s helpless race:*(Charles Wesley, “And Can It Be that I Should Gain?” 1738)**

Jesus washes the disciples’ feet (continued)

1. Jesus wrapped a towel around his waist.

Jesus “wrapped a towel around his waist” just like he wrapped himself in human flesh when he became a human being.

1. Jesus poured water into a basin.

Jesus “poured water into a basin” and went onto wash his disciples’ feet – an incredibly humbling act that prefigures his death on the cross.

**8“No,” Peter protested, “you will never ever wash my feet!”  
Jesus replied, “Unless I wash you, you won’t belong to me.”  
John 13:8 (NLT)**

Jesus reminds Peter that unless he dies for him, Peter can’t remain as a disciple.