**Christmas in the Four Gospels**

**2021 Advent Study**

The Genres of the Books of the New Testament

The 27 books of the New Testament can be divided up into one of 4 literary genres:

1. Gospel (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John)
2. Historical Narrative (Acts)
3. Epistle/Letter (13 Letters of Paul, Hebrews, and the 7 Universal Letters)
4. Apocalyptic Literature (Revelation)

Within each genre, other genres also exist. For example, the four Gospels contain sayings of Jesus (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount) as well as parables (e.g., the Parable of the Good Samaritan). Sayings and parables are genres in and of themselves.

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 – his life, teachings, and, especially, his death and resurrection.

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

***It is important to note that while the Gospels contain biographical elements, they are 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.

* Two of the Gospels (Mark and John) do not include a birth narrative.
* Luke only gives us a brief snippet of Jesus as a teenager (Luke 2:41-52).

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

In addition to the four canonical Gospels, there are Gospels outside of the New Testament. These latter Gospels are considered “non-canonical Gospels” because they’re not in the Bible (e.g., the Gospel of Judas, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, etc.).

It’s worth noting that the non-canonical Gospels were written much later (in the 2nd or 3rd century AD), while the canonical Gospels were written much earlier (before the end of the 1st century AD). Further, the extra-canonical Gospels paint a portrait of Christ *vastly different* from the canonical Gospels.

Ironically, the non-canonical Gospels all claim apostolic authorship, whereas the canonical Gospels do not.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are considered the “Synoptic Gospels” (synoptic means “similar”), because they generally follow the same “flow” in the presentation of their material. John’s Gospel, however, is vastly different.

* In John, Jesus doesn’t speak in parables. Instead, he delivers 7 “I AM” statements (“I am the bread of life, “I am the resurrection and the life”, etc.).
* In John, Jesus enjoys the Last Supper *before* the beginning of Passover, whereas in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus enjoys the Last Supper *during* Passover. Even the early Christians conceded ***John is more spiritual than chronological in nature*.** Indeed, they found symbolism laden throughout John. For example, in John the Passover doesn’t happen until Good Friday, because John’s intent is to show that Jesus is the Passover Lamb who’s been sacrificed for our sins.

Christmas in Mark

The Gospel of Mark

* Written sometime around 65AD (shortly after the death of Peter in 64AD).
* An anonymous document (like all the gospels). However, Church Tradition claims the 1st century Christian, Mark, wrote it.
  + Eusebius of Caesarea, who was a 4th century historian, says Mark wrote the Gospel in Rome, having received all his information from the apostle Peter.
  + Peter is the one who gives this Gospel “apostolic authority.”
* Mark is kind of like the police detective who says, “Just the facts.” He presents just what he needs and not much more.

* + No birth narrative, no Sermon on the Mount.
  + The Gospel ends on an abrupt note, which is probably the early Christians inserted Mark 16:9-20 (to give the Gospel more “closure”).
  + Frequent use of the word “immediately,” which implies a sense of urgency throughout the Gospel.

Mark’s Presentation of Jesus

Mark begins his Gospel as such:

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

What does Mark mean by “beginning”?

Mark begins his gospel by talking about John the Baptist.

In the ancient world, the arrival of a monarch required a herald, someone who would announce that the monarch was coming. The herald (or messenger) was the press release, Facebook post, or tweet of the ancient world. Back then, a guy was sent into the city to say, *“Heads up—monarch sighting! Sweep the streets and clean up your act!”* This is exactly what happens with John the Baptist.

**1 This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. It began 2just as the prophet Isaiah had written:**

**“Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
    and he will prepare your way.   
3He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,  
‘Prepare the way for the Lord’s coming!  
    Clear the road for him!’”**

**Mark 1:1-3 (NLT)**

So John’s message is, *“Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming! Clear the road for him!”*

John preached this message out in the wilderness, where large crowds came to hear him.

**4This messenger was John the Baptist. He was in the wilderness and preached that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. 5All of Judea, including all the people of Jerusalem, went out to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River.   
Mark 1:4-5 (NLT)**

Some scholars believe John was part of a Jewish sect called the Essenes. They believed (among other things) in the imminent end of the age and the coming of the messiah.

John invited people to prepare for the messiah by repenting (*metanoia*, the Greek word for “repent” literally means to do a 180…to turn around and completely change one’s behavior). The outward sign of this “repentance” (Jewish culture is very visual) was baptism.   
  
Washed in the water of the River Jordan, the people were ready to start their lives with God anew. Some scholars suggest that this act of going through this water was to remind people of how God led their ancestors out of slavery and into freedom by passing through the water of the Red Sea.

Among those who came to John for baptism was Jesus from Nazareth.

**9One day Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River.**

**Mark 1:9 (NLT)**

If baptism was primarily about repentance from sin, why did Jesus, who never sinned, need to be baptized?

Some have suggested that Jesus made sure he was baptized because he wanted to demonstrate his *identification* with sinners; he identified with the very people he came to save.

The above is certainly possible, but what is also important is that Jesus received his identity as God’s Son at his baptism.

**10As Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens splitting apart and the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11And a voice from heaven said, “You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy.”**

**Mark 1:10-11 (NLT)**

This identity preceded anything Jesus did.

We, too, receive our identity as God’s children at baptism.

Following his baptism, the same Spirit that descended on Jesus in dove-like form *drove* him into the wilderness.

**12The Spirit then compelled Jesus to go into the wilderness, 13where he was tempted by Satan for forty days. He was out among the wild animals, and angels took care of him.  
Mark 1:12 (NLT)**

The identity that Jesus received at baptism was tested while he was in the wilderness – just like our identity as God’s children is tested in difficult times.

When he returned to Galilee, Jesus began preaching about the kingdom/reign of God, which was the main theme of his preaching ministry.

**14Later on, after John was arrested, Jesus went into Galilee, where he preached God’s Good News. 15“The time promised by God has come at last!” he announced. “The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!”**

**Mark 1:14-15 (NLT)**

After announcing his message, Jesus calls the disciples and begins a ministry of teaching and healing. By the end of Chapter 1, Jesus is surrounded by crowds eager to his message. They are anxious as well for healing. For Mark, Jesus’ acts of healing aren’t just miracles; they are demonstrations of power. They point to the truly good news that God is more powerful than suffering and death.

No Christmas Story?

Of course, the obvious question we raise in our study of Christmas in the Four Gospels is this: *why doesn’t Mark include a Christmas story?*

Some think Mark doesn’t include a story about Jesus’ birth because **he** **doesn’t** **know one.** Mark is writing about thirty years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Tradition says that by this time Peter and Paul have already been put to death in Rome. Other eyewitnesses are surely dying off. Mark wants to capture the story as it is being told in small communities of believers around the Mediterranean. He is the first one to commit this story to writing. ***Perhaps*** he just doesn’t know the part about Jesus’ birth.

Some think that Mark may have been a companion or protégé of Paul. As we know, Paul is **famously uninterested** in the details of Jesus’ life and ministry.

**22For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.**

**1 Corinthians 1:22-24 (NRSV)**

Perhapsit is this theology – focused on the cross and resurrection – that shapes Mark’s writing.

Some have even called Mark’s Gospel ***“a passion narrative with a long introduction.”***

The Messianic Secret

The Gospel of Mark is structured around two connected motifs:

1. Jesus’ concealment of his messianic identity
2. Jesus’ announcement of his death.

First, throughout this Gospel, Jesus continually conceals his true identity as the Messiah and Son of God.

**21 Jesus and his companions went to the town of Capernaum. When the Sabbath day came, he went into the synagogue and began to teach…23 Suddenly, a man in the synagogue who was possessed by an evilspirit cried out, 24 “Why are you interfering with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” 25 But Jesus reprimanded him. “*Be quiet!* Come out of the man,” he ordered.   
Mark 1:21, 23-25 (NLT, emphasis added)**

**40 A man with leprosy came and knelt in front of Jesus, begging to be healed. “If you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean,” he said. 41 Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out and touched him. “I am willing,” he said. “Be healed!” 42 Instantly the leprosy disappeared, and the man was healed. 43 Then Jesus sent him on his way with a stern warning: 44 “*Don’t tell anyone about this*…”  
Mark 1:40-44 (NLT, emphasis added)**

**27 Jesus and his disciples left Galilee and went up to the villages near Caesarea Philippi. As they were walking along, he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”   
28 “Well,” they replied, “some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say you are one of the other prophets.”   
29 Then he asked them, “But who do you say I am?”   
30 Peter replied, “You are the Messiah.” *But Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.***

**Mark 8:27-30 (NLT, emphasis added)**

Second, Jesus is upfront and transparent about the fact that he is eventually going to die.

**31Then Jesus began to tell them that the Son of Man must suffer many terrible things and be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but three days later he would rise from the dead.  
Mark 8:31 (NLT)**

**30Leaving that region, they traveled through Galilee. Jesus didn’t want anyone to know he was there, 31for he wanted to spend more time with his disciples and teach them. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of his enemies. He will be killed, but three days later he will rise from the dead.”  
Mark 9:30-31 (NLT)**

**32They were now on the way up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. The disciples were filled with awe, and the people following behind were overwhelmed with fear. Taking the twelve disciples aside, Jesus once more began to describe everything that was about to happen to him. 33“Listen,” he said, “we’re going up to Jerusalem, where the Son of Man will be betrayed to the leading priests and the teachers of religious law. They will sentence him to die and hand him over to the Romans. 34They will mock him, spit on him, flog him with a whip, and kill him, but after three days he will rise again.”**

**Mark 10:32-34 (NLT)**

Both motifs build toward this dramatic conclusion at the end of Mark.

**39When the Roman officer who stood facing him[Jesus] saw *how he had died*, he exclaimed, “This man truly was the Son of God!”**

**Mark 15:39 (NLT, emphasis added)**

Why did Jesus conceal his true identity as the Messiah and Son of God?

Most likely because ***the people, including the disciples, had the wrong expectations of what it meant for Jesus to fill these roles.***

The people assumed that, as the Messiah and Son of God, Jesus would overthrow the Roman government and set up an earthly kingdom. They had no idea of what it actually meant for Jesus to be the Messiah and Son of God – that he had come to suffer and die. Indeed, it is not until the cross that these two motifs – the Messianic Secret and Jesus’ announcement of his death – come together.

Ironically, a Roman Officer – and not just a Roman officer, but the very officer who participated in the crucifixion – becomes the first person in Mark to appropriately call Jesus the Son of God! In doing so, he creates what biblical scholars call an “inclusio” – he brings this Gospel to full circle.

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