The Four Faces of Jesus
by Virginia Smith

In compiling and stylizing the material they would use in their Gospels, the four Evangelists—Mark, & Matthew, Luke & John—present us with four very different portraits of Jesus. Drawn with words instead of an artist’s lines and colors, these portraits are sometimes intriguing, sometimes perplexing. How can four such diverse descriptions characterize the same person? It may seem clearer if we recall that we ourselves, are seen quite differently by various people who know us well. And public figures whose portraits are painted by four talented artists often find marked differences in each portrayal.

In describing Jesus, the Gospel writers were faced with a unique challenge: How do you portray someone who is both completely human and completely divine. Throughout history, explanations have ranged from one end of the pendulum swing to the other. For instance, before Vatican 11 many Christian writers emphasized Jesus’ divinity while after Vatican II the focus for many shifted to his humanity.

The Gospel writers also had their respective audiences to consider just as we often do when writing to friends. The four evangelists tried to choose those words and deeds from Jesus’ life which would be most relevant to their particular audience. These audiences differed dramatically in religious background, culture and ethnic origin.

All of this and more is reflected in the portraits of Jesus drawn by the Gospel writers. Which Gospel is the most authentic? Which best reflects the historical Jesus’? They all do. Together, like a great prism, they refract the pure light of Christ in a manner that gives each a separate and distinct coloration. As the prism colors splash against our minds and spirits in reading the Gospels, a Jesus emerges from the four accounts who possesses greater depth, breadth and height than any single narrative could provide.

Mark’s Human Jesus: harried, hurried, & suffering.

Consensus among modern Scripture scholars designates Mark as the earliest of the Gospel writers. It is generally thought that Mark wrote somewhere between 65-70 C.E., shortly after scores of Christians including many first-generation eyewitnesses, perished in Rome under Emperor Nero’s persecution. Two of the most illustrious names in that early roster of martyrs were Peter and Paul. Possibly because of the demise of so many leaders. Mark deemed it necessary to produce a written record of Jesus: who he was, what he did, what he taught. The rapid spread of Christianity throughout the Mediterranean area is another development suggesting the need for an organized account of Jesus’ life.

It is almost easier to identify the author of this Gospel by what he was not rather than what he was. He was not one of the Twelve Apostles. Three listings of the names of Jesus’ inner circle are given to us (Mt 10:2-4, Mk 3:14-19, Lk 6:13-16). Mark’s name appears on none of them. He was quite likely not an eyewitness either. The fact that Mark was the most common masculine name in the Roman Empire in the first century doesn’t help narrow the field. Nevertheless, the Mark of this Gospel has traditionally been associated with the “John Mark” mentioned three times in the Acts of the Apostles (12:12. 12:25. 15:37). This would make him a cousin of Barnabas (Col 4:10) and, for a time, a companion of Paul (Acts 12:25).

Longstanding tradition has Mark, later in his life accompanying Peter to Rome. That makes it very probable that the Big Fisherman became an excellent eye-witness source of information about Jesus which Mark subsequently incorporated into his account. In truth, Mark’s Jesus sounds like Peter’s idea of Jesus.
Mark’s Jesus is a man in a hurry. If this Gospel were dramatized, Jesus would hit the stage running and never stop. It has been said of this first description of Jesus’ public life that if Jesus ever sat down, Mark failed to record it. There is no mention of Jesus’ birth or childhood and none of his young adulthood. The curtain on Mark’s drama whips open to introduce a no-holds-barred John the Baptist who baptizes Jesus prior to his 40-day desert experience—all this in the first 13 verses of the first chapter. Things don’t slow down much from there. Before the first chapter ends, Jesus has called his first disciples, performed his first cure (followed by two more) and set off for Capernaum.

Reading Mark leaves one often out of breath. All too frequently, this impression of Jesus style is lost or considerably diminished by hearing the Gospel read a short excerpts during the Sunday liturgy. The way to assimilate Mark is in a single gulp: Sit down and read all 16 chapters as you would any other book. Forget about footnotes and cross references. Simply read it whole and entire in one sitting, and you’ll be introduced to a Jesus you may not have met before.

You’ll meet a Jesus who is earthly and easy to relate to; a Jesus with whom most of us would be very comfortable, a Jesus who is quite approachable providing you can catch up with him, a Jesus constantly hemmed in by crowds. The word “crowd” or “crowds” is used 42 times in the New American Bible translation of Mark’s Gospel.

In Mark, we meet the most human Jesus. We identify with him readily because he is a person whose feelings are obvious and much like our own. When a leper, totally ostracized from society, came to Jesus, he was exceptionally bold. Bold enough to approach and bold enough to remind Jesus that he could make him clean if he wished. “Moved with pity, he [Jesus] stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, I do will it. Be made clean.” (Mk 1:41. But if he could turn soft at the sight of suffering. Mark’s Jesus could turn a flinty eye toward those who lacked his compassion, as in the case of the Pharisees who questioned Jesus about healing on the Sabbath: Looking around at them with anger and grieved at their hardness of heart.” Mk 3:5

As his earthly life drew near its close and he and his closest friends were assembled at Gethsemane, He took with him Peter, James, and John and began to be troubled and distressed. Then he said to them. My soul is sorrowful, even unto death. Mark 14:33-34 The range of emotions shown by Jesus in this Gospel endears him to those of us who see the same emotions in ourselves and those whose lives touch ours everyday.

**Matthew’s New Moses: Jesus, the teacher**

If Mark wrote for Roman followers of Jesus, most of whom had come to Christianity from pagan backgrounds, Matthew had a different audience entirely. A likely locale for the writing of Matthew’s Gospel is Antioch, Syria. a bustling hub of activity in the early Christian world (...it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians’ Acts 11:26). The Gospel of Matthew post-dates that of Mark by at least a decade which would place its composition somewhere in the 80’s of the first century. Because Syria was positioned immediately north of Palestine, its cities were home to sizable Jewish populations, and it was from these groups that the majority of Matthew’s congregation came. Matthew takes full advantage of his people’s extensive Hebrew background to pound home the good news that Jesus is without doubt the long-awaited Messiah, the fulfillment of all that is written in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Jesus emerges here as the new Moses. Unlike Mark, Matthew is very interested in Jesus’ origins and launches into his account with a rundown of Jesus’ family tree, a tree whose more illustrious branches include names such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Ruth, David, Solomon and Joseph. Properly speaking, this is Jesus’ foster father’s lineage which is in keeping with Matthew’s tendency to make Joseph the central figure of his infancy narrative.
With the stories of Jesus’ birth, Matthew begins to draw parallels between the Messiah and Moses. Only Matthew tells how Herod’s jealousy and hatred forced Joseph and his family into Egyptian exile. Matthew thereby establishes that, just as Pharaoh feared and loathed the Hebrews in Moses’ time, so Herod treated Jesus and his family. Herod’s phobia is seen spilling over onto the innocent young boys of Bethlehem in another episode exclusive to Matthew, the slaughter of the innocents (Mt 2:16-8). Just as male Hebrew infants were doomed under Pharaoh (Ex 1:15-22) so these young Jews fell victim to Herod. Jesus, like Moses, is saved from such authoritarian wrath and, in due time, will come forth, like Moses, from Egypt.

Gentiles were also entering Matthew’s Church, requiring the author to pave the way among Jewish converts with accounts of the Magi, who were certainly of Gentile origin (Mt 2:1-12), and with Jesus’ comment, “..many will come from the east and the west, and will recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the banquet in the kingdom of heaven...” (Mt 8:11).

Matthew’s comparisons to Moses continue in his account of Jesus’ most famous discourse, the Sermon on the Mount. In reporting this sermon, Matthew places the stamp of divinity on Jesus, situating him above Moses having him quote from the Law of Moses brought down from Mount Sinai and expand its meaning by his own authority from a mountain site of his own: “You have heard that it was said to your ancestors. ‘You shall not kill: and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment...” (Mt 5:21-22)

If Mark’s is the action Gospel, presenting an on-the-go Jesus and what he does. Matthew’s is a more thoughtful Gospel, spotlighting a more reflective Jesus and what he says. To make his teaching easier to follow, Matthew organized it into five major components. So successful has he been that his Gospel has sometimes been referred to as a catechism. Catholicism has used Matthew’s Gospel, probably more than any other, in its teaching ministry. On almost every page we meet Jesus the teacher, the rabbi.

In five principal areas, Matthew has assembled much of what Jesus had to say on a given topic and made a single discourse of it. Each of the five is preceded by a narrative section that focuses on the same theme, and each discourse is neatly concluded by some variation on the phrase. “When Jesus finished these words...” (Mt 7:28, 11:1, 13:53,19:1). In wrapping up the fifth and last discourse, the ending is slightly different: “When Jesus finished all these words...” (Mt 26:1). The discourses are as follows:

- The Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:3—7:27)
- The Missionary Discourse (Mt 10:5-42)
- The Parable Discourse (Mt 13:3-52)
- The Church Community Discourse (Mt 18:3-35)
- The Eschatological (Last Times) Discourse (Mt 24:4—25:46)

In this Gospel, Jesus is frequently addressed as Teacher (8:19, 9:11, 12:38, 19:16, 22:16, 22:24, 22:36, 26:18). Often, this form of address is used by his opponents. Jesus instructs the entire community as Moses did before him, but he does not go to the mountain to receive authority: He preaches sometimes from the mountain by his own authority. Where Mark’s Jesus has much to show us. Matthew’s Jesus has much to tell us. Luke’s Jesus does both, but from a different perspective.

**Luke’s compassionate, forgiving Jesus**

The portrait of Jesus that may come closest to the one most people envision is given us by Luke. Luke, like Mark, sought out others in compiling his portrait for he, himself, was not one of the Twelve. He opens his account with the admission that he was not an eyewitness Lk 1:1-31. Luke was a Greek convert who wrote for an audience of Gentiles much like himself. He must have composed his Gospel in Achaia, a southern province of modern Greece, at about the same time Matthew was writing in Syria. In Luke, we encounter the
most masterful writer of the New Testament — some would say, of the entire Bible. His skill allows him to balance a diversity of themes without confusing his readers.

Among the titles given Luke’s account of Jesus life and ministry are:

1. **The Gospel of Women:** In Luke, women have a prominent role, one that puts them on a par with their male counterparts. Luke likes to parallel two individuals: a man and a woman, in certain episodes: Mary and Zechariah in the annunciation sequences Lk 1:5-38; Anna and Simeon at the presentation Lk 2:22-8; the man with the lost sheep and the woman with the lost coin Lk 15:1-10.


3. **The Gospel of Universal Salvation:** Writing for the Gentiles from which he came, Luke notes that Jesus’ salvation is available to everyone, not just Jews: “...and all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Lk 3:6).

4. **The Gospel of Mercy and Forgiveness:** It is here that Luke’s portrait of Jesus receives its strongest focus. Luke sees Jesus as friend and advocate of those whom society ignores or turns from in distaste: the poor, handicapped persons, public sinners, and all who found themselves relegated to the fringes of the community. The Lucan Jesus has great compassion for all of these. None bore the brunt of ostracism more than Samaritans. For nearly a thousand years, these people had been spurned by their Jewish neighbors who felt that both Samaritan blood and Samaritan religion had been tainted by pagans and their practices. Samaritans are seen as heroes in two of Jesus’ parables told by Luke. Only Luke tells the story of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37), and the cleansing of the 10 lepers in which only the Samaritan returns in gratitude (Lk 17:11-19).

The most famous of Jesus’ parables on forgiveness is so familiar that many think it is related by all of the Gospel writers. It is, however, Luke’s alone. The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32) might more aptly be titled the Parable of the Forgiving Father, for in it the mercy of God is graphically portrayed. The father, grieveously wounded by the actions of his younger son, not only hopes and prays for his repentance and return, but stands daily peering down the road for the slightest sign of the boy’s reappearance. When he finally catches sight of him, he runs to meet him, brushing aside the young man’s prepared speech of penitence and calling for a “welcome home” party, the likes of which his neighbors had never seen.

As Luke’s Gospel nears its climax and Jesus hangs in agony from the cross, we hear him pray. *Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.* Lk 23:34. And when the man on the cross next to him pleads, *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,* Jesus replies, *“Amen. I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise”* Lk 23:42-43. These touching incidents are also recorded only in Luke.

The gentle, forgiving, compassionate Jesus who emerges from the pages of Luke is given greater emphasis by Luke’s own writing style. Repelled by violence, strong language, and raw emotion, Luke often softens these when he uses Mark as source material. Toning down Mark’s blunter media style gives Luke’s Gospel an aura of kindness and peace even amid tumultuous events, such as Jesus’ crucifixion and death.

**John’s noble, majestic, divine Jesus**

The first three accounts of Jesus’ life and teaching have a certain commonality, resulting in their being termed the Synoptic Gospels, meaning “seen together,” but the Gospel of John is like entering a whole new world. Gone is Mark’s tired and probably sweaty Jesus, hemmed in by crowds. In his place, John sets a Jesus of great nobility who deals with individuals: Nicodemus Jn 3:1-21; the Samaritan woman Jn 4:4-42; the man
born blind Jn 9:1-41; and Lazarus Jn 11:1-44.

John’s Jesus inspires awe from the opening verse of chapter one. Not for John are stories of mangers and shepherds, stars and magi. John wants his audience to see Jesus’ origins as divine, co-existent with the Father: “In the beginning [reminiscent of the opening of Genesis] was the Word Iesus. and the Word was with God. and the Word was God” Jn 1:1. From this point on, John makes it clear that he is speaking of someone whose humanity is undeniable, but who possesses another greater nature: divinity. The oneness of Jesus and his Father is a theme returned to again and again by John. Jesus says at one point to the Pharisees: “You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me. you would know my Father also” Jn 8:1. And, to Philip at the Last Supper: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” Jn 14:9.

This majestic figure portrayed by John is totally in control of the situation at all times, even his own death: “I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me. but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again” Jn 10:17-18. Aware of the thoughts and plans of others, the stately Jesus neatly sidesteps or challenges them: “Since Jesus knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain alone” (Jn 6:15): “Jesus, knowing everything that was going to happen to him, went out and said to them. ‘Whom are you looking for?’ They answered him. ‘Jesus the Nazarene.’ He said to them. ‘I AM’” (in 18:4-5).

In formulating his answer with those two terse but powerful words. Jesus again proclaims his divinity. The “I AM” passages sprinkled throughout John’s Gospel are intended to remind the reader of Moses’ encounter with God in the burning bush centuries before. When Moses asked who God was, the answer from the bush came “I am who am” Ex 3:14.

At his trial, Jesus’ divinity surfaces yet again. Bewildered because Jesus refuses to answer his questions. Pilate says: ‘Do you not know that I have power to release you and I have power to crucify you’ Jesus answered. ‘You would have no power over me if it had not been given to you from above Jn 19:10-11. Sublime to the end. Jesus’ final words from the cross as recorded by John are simply. “It is finished” (Jn 19:30)

**Which portrait do we choose?**

Can all of these aspects be representative of the same individual! They can and they are. Jesus, the God-man, is more than any one person can adequately describe. That each evangelist chose to bring certain of his attributes to the fore is totally understandable. Each was aware of those facets of Jesus’ personality, teachings and deeds which would draw his community into deeper faith in the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. And so, the Gospel accounts form a prism, a clear medium through which the pure light of Christ can be refracted in diverse and beautiful ways. Four faces of Jesus — are these the only portraits which might be drawn? By no means. All Christians are called, to portray the face of Jesus in their own lives, to be living gospels: facets of the great prism through which the light of Christ shines out to a waiting world.

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