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THE FOUR

a survey of
the Gospels

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INTRODUCTION

Christology appears to be one of the most complicated, technical, jargon-ridden areas of Christian theology. Beginning with the church fathers, theologians developed a sophisticated conceptual apparatus and vocabulary for dealing with Christological issues. To get it right, we need to distinguish between person and nature, know the difference between substance and subsistence, know that there can be union without mixture and distinction without separation, and believe that the Word is en-hypostatically related to an an-hypostatic human nature.

Even those who agree with the orthodox formulas of Nicea and Chalcedon do not always function within the same Christological framework. J. N. D. Kelly long ago distinguished the mainly Alexandrian Word-flesh Christologies from the mainly Antiochene Word-man Christologies. The former tend to maximize the confession that the Word of God was the subject of the story of Jesus and to minimize the full humanity of Jesus, and at the heretical margins turned into Apollinarianism (which denies that Jesus has a human soul). Since the Eternal Son acts in Jesus for our salvation, Word-flesh Christologies are soteriologically monergistic, but since they tend to minimize the historical Jesus they lean toward docetism, characterizing salvation as escape from the material world. Word-man Christologies

insist on the full humanity of Jesus, but tend to divide the human nature from the divine nature, and at the margins turned into Nestorianism. Soteriologically, Word-man Christologies lean toward synergism, since salvation is the product of the cooperative work of the divine Word and the human nature. Neither the Word-man nor the Word-flesh is heretical or orthodox in itself, but both have tendencies toward one or another heresy.

Chalcedon's formulation of the relation of the two natures in the one person has been particularly difficult to manage, no doubt because the council was an effort, not always or altogether coherent, to combine different strains of patristic Christology. Among the many disputed questions is, Does the Word constitute a single Person by uniting divine nature and human nature, or does the one Person of the Word precede the incarnation and remain the same Person in the incarnation? Is the incarnation about two natures coming together to *form* a single Person, or is it about a single Person taking on a second nature? Is the formula, Divine Nature + Human Nature = the one Person of the God-Man? Or is it, Person of Word + Human Nature = the one Person of the God-Man?

Chalcedon's creed appears to answer the question straightforwardly:

[O]ne and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion,

without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but *rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence*, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the Fathers has handed down to us (emphasis added).

The fathers at Chalcedon say that the one person is *formed* by the addition of a human nature to the divine nature of the son: “coming together to form one person and subsistence.” That’s been the opinion of many orthodox Christians since the fifth century, but it was definitely *not* the opinion of Cyril of Alexandria, the great opponent of Nestorius. For Cyril, nearly everything hinged on the continuity of the Person of the Word from the pre- to the post-incarnate state; it all depends on the fact that the God-man is not some “new” Person, but the very Son of God in the flesh.

The sixteenth century contributed to Christological conflict as well. Reformation debates between Calvinists and Lutherans added new intensity to traditional questions about the *communicatio idiomatum*, the communication of attributes from one nature to the other. Do the attributes of one nature become the attributes of the other nature? Does the human nature of Jesus become omnipresent and omnipotent? Conversely, does the nature of God the Son take on human attributes of limitation, finitude, weakness? Or, as Calvinists argued, do we *attribute* the characteristics of each nature to the single *Person* of the God-man, without any *actual* “transfer” of attributes across the boundary of the natures? If we say, “The Son of God was finite,” are we simply saying, “The human nature is finite, but since that

THE NEW COVENANT

One night in the second year of his reign, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon has a puzzling dream that leaves him sleepless the rest of the night. In the morning, he calls together his wise men and magicians and demands that they recount the dream to him and interpret it. They stall, and the king eventually gets so enraged that he orders the commander of his bodyguard, Arioch, to execute all the wise men.

Earlier, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Palestine and brought back some Jews to train for service in his kingdom. Daniel is one of the young men from Jerusalem studying at the Babylonian court. He is one of Nebuchadnezzar's wise men. When Arioch comes to execute Daniel, Daniel turns to Yahweh for help. Daniel has his own vision in the night (Dan. 2:19) in which Yahweh reveals the mystery of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Daniel saves the day by telling Nebuchadnezzar that in the dream God shows Nebuchadnezzar what He is going to do in the "end of days," the "latter days" (Dan. 2:28).

Yahweh also reveals to other prophets what He plans to do in the "latter days." According to Isaiah, during the latter days the mountain of Jerusalem will become the "chief of the mountains" and the destination for Gentile worshipers (Is. 2:1-4; cf. Mic. 4:1-5). Under Yahweh's orders, Hosea lives out the story of Israel, loving an adulteress as Yahweh has loved adulterous Israel. In this way, Hosea prophesies

that Israel “will come trembling to Yahweh and to His goodness in the last days” (3:5). Jeremiah rejects false prophecies of peace and warns that Yahweh’s anger would continue until “He has performed and carried out the purposes of His heart.” But he promises that in the “latter days” Israel will come to understand the purpose of her exile (Jer. 23:20). Ezekiel prophesies that Gog will assault Israel in the “latter days” (38:16), but He assures Israel that Yahweh will blaze up to judge him with pestilence and blood (vv. 17–23).

Jeremiah 31 describes this period as a “new covenant”:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares Yahweh, “when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and with the seed of beast. As I have watched over them to pluck up, to break down, to overthrow, to destroy and to bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant,” declares Yahweh. “In those days they will not say again, the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge. But everyone will die for his own iniquity; each man who eats the sour grapes, his teeth will be set on edge. Behold, days are coming,” declares Yahweh, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares Yahweh. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares Yahweh, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know Yahweh,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares Yahweh, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” (vv. 27–34)

Hebrews 8 makes it clear that Jeremiah is ultimately referring to the covenant established in the death and resurrection of Jesus. But Jeremiah's original prophecy is about Israel's return from Babylon (vv. 6, 8, 10, 12, 17, 21, 23). Yahweh promises to "sow" the land with people and animals (v. 27). He has been destroying Israel but promises to build her again, and especially to rebuild the temple and city of Jerusalem (v. 28; cf. vv. 38–40). Centuries before Jesus comes, Israel is already living in Jeremiah's "new covenant."

Years after Nebuchadnezzar's disturbing dream, after the Persians conquer Babylon, Daniel is reading Jeremiah's prophecy and he is reminded that the Babylonian exile was to last "seventy years" (9:1–2; Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10). Seventy years has gone by, so Daniel asks Yahweh to keep His promise and liberate Israel from exile (Dan. 9:3–19). Gabriel appears to tell Daniel that the seventy years of exile will end. But Gabriel also says that there will be a continuing exile, another "seventy" period, a period of "seventy weeks":

Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy place. So you are to know and discern that from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince there will be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress. Then after the sixty-two weeks the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing, and the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary and its end will come with a flood; even to the end there will be war; desolations are determined. And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even

THE STORY OF
JESUS¹

“Seek the peace of the city where I have sent you into exile,” Jeremiah says to the people of Judah as they are carried to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. Some of the Jews, like Daniel and his friends, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and Mordecai, follow Jeremiah’s instructions. Many Jews do not. By the early first century A.D., the tensions between Jews and Romans are very high.

During the decade between A.D. 26 and 36, when Pilate serves as the Roman procurator in Jerusalem, Pharisees clash with Romans on a regular basis.²

- Pilate moves the Roman army from Caesarea to Jerusalem for the winter, and brings along images of Caesar. He knows it will upset the Jews, so he moves them into the city at night. When Jews learn about it, they plead with Pilate to remove the images, but he refuses and threatens to kill them all. The Jews “threw themselves

1. My understanding of the gospels and life of Jesus has been so thoroughly shaped by the work of N. T. Wright, especially *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), that I could footnote virtually every sentence of this chapter with a citation from that book. That would be tedious; so here I acknowledge that this chapter would have been very different, and probably could not be written at all, without Wright.

2. I have drawn this list of incidents from Wright, *People of God*, 174.

upon the ground, and laid their necks bare, and said they would take their death very willingly, rather than the wisdom of their laws should be transgressed.”³ Pilate is so impressed that he tells his troops to move the standards back to Caesarea.

- To raise money to pipe water into Jerusalem, Pilate takes money from the temple. Tens of thousands of Jews mob together and call for Pilate to return the money to the temple, and some of the Jews insult the Roman governor. When the Jews refuse to leave at Pilate’s request, Pilate sends in the troops and massacres them.⁴
- Pilate massacres Galileans in the temple, so that the blood of sacrifices mingles with the blood of the animals (Lk. 13:1).
- Pilate places Roman shields in his palace at Jerusalem, and Jews become annoyed.
- In Samaria, a prophet calls all the people to gather to Mount Gerazim. Many Jews come with weapons, and Pilate stops them with a “great band of horsemen and foot-men.” He kills some, others get away, and he captures many. Later, he slaughters all the prisoners.⁵

Rebels rise up in Galilee and Judea on a regular basis. These are often called “robbers” in our Bible translations, but that gives the wrong impression. They are not simply robbers stealing money. They are revolutionaries trying to make life very difficult for the Roman government, so that the Romans will leave the holy land. They are Robin Hoods or Jesse Jameses, folk heroes to many Jews. They are like

3. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.3.1.

4. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.3.2.

5. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.4.1.

the Iraqis and Afghans who set car bombs outside American military bases trying to get the Americans to run home. In the cities, there are *sicarii*, “dagger-men” known for their clever assassinations. They sneak up behind their target in a crowd, kill him, drop the knife, and immediately join in the loud laments over the dead body. No one knows who has done the deed.

There is a storm on the horizon, and almost all the Jews are expecting something to happen, something very big. They know that the Lord promised to destroy all Israel’s enemies, to make Israel the “chief of the mountains” (Is. 2:1–4), and to raise up a new David to make war and then sit on the throne (Is. 9:7; Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Ezek. 34:23). Daniel even gives them a calendar (Dan. 9:24–27). He says that the Messiah will come to finish everything up within seventy weeks, four hundred and ninety years. That time has past, but the Jews are sure that the Lord has not forgotten His promise. He is going to come to help Israel as He did when she was in Egypt, when she was oppressed by Philistines, when Assyria threatened Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah. Israel’s best days are still ahead of her. This hope is what made the Jews of the first century do what they do.

Not all the Jews are hoping for something new to happen. Sadducees aren’t. Most of the priests are Sadducees, and they have many privileges and much wealth. As long as the Romans protect the temple, and protect the Sadducees’ privileges, they are content to have Romans in their land. They seem to be following Jeremiah’s instructions, but they are not really. They have compromised and are not very faithful to the covenant with Israel anymore. The Sadducees think everything is just fine the way it is, and they hope it will last forever.

The Pharisees are people of hope. The Pharisees are strict about keeping the law, and strict about avoiding compromise

with the Romans and other unbelievers. To that extent, they follow Jeremiah's instructions. But they also believe that the Romans are unclean and pollute the holy land. They want the Romans to go, and they are more than willing to use whatever means they can find to get rid of the Romans. Some are even willing to take up weapons and start a war. They resist the Romans, but the way they resist shows that they are more Roman than they think. Romans think the world is ruled by the sword, and many Pharisees agree. They forget that it is not by power nor by might but by the Spirit. Pharisees have compromised as much as the Sadducees have.

At the same time, the Pharisees do not think the Romans are the main problem. They believe the problem is that Jews are unfaithful. The Romans have power because Yahweh is punishing the Jews for their unfaithfulness. The Pharisees believe that the way to save Israel is to make sure that Israel is very, very pure. They want every Jew to follow the same strict holiness code that the priests followed. Once Israel is very, very clean, then the Messiah will come to deliver the faithful Jews from the Romans, destroy the unfaithful Jews and Romans, and raise up the true, faithful Israel as the greatest nation on the planet.

Even the Essenes are people of hope. They move out of the land of Israel sometime after the Maccabees replace the Zadokite priests. They don't believe that priests are legitimate, and so they refuse to participate in the temple worship. But they do not leave the land to live near the Dead Sea because they have given up hope. They leave the land because they are sure that the land is corrupted by the Romans, the temple corrupted by false sacrifices, and the priests polluted. But they do not expect to stay in the wilderness forever. Someday, they believe, Yahweh will come to destroy all the false Jews, scatter the Romans, and lead the true Israel—the Essenes, of course—into the land, just as He led Israel into

the land under Joshua. The Essenes do not go to the wilderness because they like the wilderness. They go because they believe that is where the true Israel gathers, before they begin a conquest.

The ingredients are all there for a great explosion. The Romans mainly want to keep the peace and use the resources of the Middle East, but they are often brutal. Even though they give the Jews a great deal of freedom, they think the Jews are strange and do not understand them. They cannot understand, for instance, why the Jews get so upset about images and pictures, which are the main part of every Roman temple. So the Romans blunder on, sometime slaughtering Jews, sometimes ignoring them. Meanwhile many Jews hate the Romans for being in their land, and they believe God is on their side and will come to help them throw off the Roman yoke.

Judea and Galilee are powder-kegs whose fuses are burning short. They are ready to blow. In the first century, Palestine is nearly as volatile as that area of the world is today. It does not take a prophet to realize that the Romans and the Jews are headed for a catastrophe. But a prophet comes. In fact, two prophets.

Prepare Ye the Way

When Herod the Great rules in Judea, the angel Gabriel who appeared to Daniel appears again, this time to a priest named Zecharias while he is offering incense in the temple. He has good news for Zecharias and his wife Elizabeth. Though the two are very old and served the Lord faithfully, they had no children. Now, the angel says, in their old age, the Lord is going to give them their life-long wish. They are going to have a son. But Gabriel's announcement is bigger. He is the angel who delivered visions to Daniel; now, he

FOUR GOSPELS¹

The so-called “synoptic problem” is one of the most complicated issues that Bible scholars deal with. The word “synoptic” refers here to the first three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The questions posed by the “synoptic problem” are, Where do the gospels come from? Which gospel comes first? Do any of the evangelists use the writings of other evangelists? These questions arise from a fairly simple observation: The synoptic gospels are very similar in their basic structure and in many of their incidents, but they are not identical. They differ in their wording even when they are telling about the same event; they differ in the arrangement of the events of the life of Jesus; and they sometimes include different events. The synoptic problem is to explain the similarities, and the differences.

For example, Matthew tells the story of Jesus’ healing of a leper this way:

When Jesus came down from the mountain, large crowds followed Him. And a leper came to Him and bowed down before Him, and said, “Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.” Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, “I am willing; be cleansed.” And immediately

1. This is the most technical chapter in this book, and teachers may want to instruct students to skip it. The material, though, is important, and should be at least summarized to students studying the gospels.

his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, “See that you tell no one; but go, show yourself to the priest and present the offering that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” (Mt. 8:1–4)

Mark tells the same story this way:

And a leper came to Jesus, beseeching Him and falling on his knees before Him, and saying, “If You are willing, You can make me clean.” Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, “I am willing; be cleansed.” Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed. And He sternly warned him and immediately sent him away, and He said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” (Mk. 1:40–44)

Luke also tells this incident:

While He was in one of the cities, behold, there was a man covered with leprosy; and when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and implored Him, saying, “Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.” And He stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, “I am willing; be cleansed.” And immediately the leprosy left him. And He ordered him to tell no one, “But go and show yourself to the priest and make an offering for your cleansing, just as Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” (Lk. 5:12–14)

There are some minor differences. Mark mentions Jesus’ compassion, and in both Matthew and Luke (but not in Mark) the leper addresses Jesus as “Lord.” Overall, though, these are very close, both in the facts of the story and the words used to tell it.

Scholars want to understand how three books from different authors, writing at different times and in different places, can be so similar. But they also want to know why

MATTHEW

righteousness that
surpasses the scribes

The first gospel has traditionally been attributed to Matthew or Levi, the tax collector who becomes the disciple of Jesus (Mt. 9:9; 10:3; Mk. 2:14). As a tax collector, he is able to read and write. He is ideally suited to write a gospel.

Matthew knows the Old Testament well. Matthew writes for a Jewish or Jewish-Christian audience. He assumes that his readers know a good bit of the Bible and something about Jewish customs. When He records Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees and scribes for "broadening phylacteries" and "lengthening the tassels of their garments" (23:5), he does not stop to explain what he's talking about. He assumes that his readers know what phylacteries and tassels are. Numbers 15 requires Israelites to have tassels on the corners of their garments, and many first-century Jews wear Torah-boxes or phylacteries on their foreheads or wrists to fulfill the command of Deuteronomy 6. As recorded by Matthew, Jesus' words make sense only to an audience that knows Jewish customs.

We find another example in Matthew 15. The Pharisees and scribes rebuke Jesus and His disciples for failing to wash their hands before eating. Washing is very important to the hyper-pure Judaism of the Pharisees (see chapter 2). Matthew does not explain why the Pharisees are worried about washing hands. Mark, by contrast, explains the Pharisees'

customs at great length (7:3–4). Matthew assumes his readers will know about washings; Mark does not. Matthew is writing to an audience that knows Judaism, while Mark writes to a Gentile audience.

This Jewish background is important to understanding the way the book is put together. Matthew writes to a Jewish audience, and he writes a very Jewish gospel. He writes the gospel of the ox, the Mosaic gospel, the gospel to the Jew first.

Beginning and End

Matthew begins with a quotation from Genesis: He writes the “book of generations” of Jesus. In Greek, the phrase is *biblos geneleos*, and the second word is a form of the word “genesis” or “beginning.” He begins his book by referring to the first book of the Bible. He is writing a “new Genesis,” the story of a new creation. The very same phrase “book of the generations” is found in Genesis 2:4 and 5:1. Matthew wants us to know that he is writing a new book of Genesis, a “book of new beginnings.”

The opening phrase is not Matthew’s only allusion to Genesis. He gives Jesus’ genealogy, which reminds us of the numerous genealogies of Genesis (Gen. 4:16–26; 5:1–32; 10:1–32; 11:10–32; 36:1–43). He tells about a miraculous birth, like the births of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Jesus’ father has dreams, and his name is Joseph. He is like the Joseph of Genesis, who was also a dreamer. As Matthew moves into chapter 2, he continues the story of Israel but moves to the book of Exodus. In Matthew’s view, Israel has become an Egypt. Instead of Pharaoh, Herod the Edomite oppresses Israel and kills small children. Jesus has to escape “by night” (cf. Exod. 12:30) to safety, an event that Matthew sees as a fulfillment of a passage from Hosea that speaks of the exodus (Mt. 2:15; Hos. 11:1). His water-crossing in baptism

(3:13–17) is like the exodus of Israel through the sea. Immediately after He goes through the water, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness for forty days, as Israel was tempted for forty years in the wilderness. During His temptations, Jesus quotes from passages referring to Israel’s forty-year sojourn (4:1–11). He ascends a mountain, where He instructs His disciples in the righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees (chs. 5–7). He lays before Israel the choice between life and prosperity, death and disaster, a choice between maintaining their “house” and seeing it dismantled by a “river” rising from Rome.

Matthew begins where Israel’s history begins, with creation and exodus. He ends his gospel where Israel’s history ends. At the conclusion of his gospel, Jesus gives the “great commission” to His disciples. Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth and commands His disciples to “Go” to the Gentiles. This is similar to the decree of Cyrus, recorded in 2 Chronicles and Ezra:

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia—in order to fulfill the word of Yahweh by the mouth of Jeremiah—Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, “Yahweh, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may Yahweh his God be with him, and let him go up!” (2 Chr. 36:22–23)

Cyrus has received “all the kingdoms of the earth” from Yahweh, God of heaven. With this authority, he commissions Israel to “go up” to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (2 Chr. 36:23). In both Matthew 28:18–20 and 2 Chronicles 36:23, we have the following sequence:

MARK

the way of the
Son of Man

Mark's is the shortest gospel, and Mark writes at a break-neck pace. In contrast to Matthew, he includes only two larger blocks of teaching material, in chapters 4 and 13, but neither of these is as long as Matthew's longer blocks, and they don't have the same structuring role in the gospel. Mark has no infancy narrative. John the Baptist simply bursts on the scene (like Elijah, 1 Kgs. 17:1), and then Jesus bursts on the scene right after him. Matthew's account of John's preaching takes up twelve verses in chapter 3, but Mark summarizes the same ministry in seven verses; Matthew takes five verses for the baptism scene, but Mark uses three; most strikingly, the temptation scene in Matthew 4 takes up eleven verses, and in Mark only two. Matthew's gospel moves in a leisurely fashion from a genealogy to the beginning of Jesus' ministry in four chapters; Mark has Jesus born, baptized, tempted, and calling disciples before he is half-way through the first chapter. It is no accident that one of Mark's favorite words is "immediately." If Matthew presents Jesus as a new Moses, as a Rabbi or Teacher, Mark presents Him as a man of action, always on the move, a new David, the Warrior.¹ Matthew is like a slow-moving, talky art film;

1. In several cases, Mark's account of an event is considerably longer than Matthew's. The story of the Gadarene demoniac is much longer in Mark (cf. Mt. 8:28–34 with Mk. 5:1–20).

Mark is an action movie. For Matthew, Jesus is what He teaches; for Mark, Jesus is what He *does*. This also makes a difference for their conception of discipleship. For Matthew, being a disciple means holding to all the words that Jesus speaks (Mt. 7:24–27); for Mark, discipleship involves following Jesus, doing what He *does*.

With its fast pace and its emphasis on action, Mark looks simple. It isn't. One of the things that makes Mark subtle and complicated is his use of irony. Irony depends on a difference between the meaning on the surface and the real meaning. If I say to a midget, "You are very tall," I'm using a (lame) form of irony. In literature, irony often depends on the readers or audience knowing something that characters don't know. When Oedipus sets out to find out who murdered his father, the audience already knows that the criminal is Oedipus himself, and part of our enjoyment of the play is watching Oedipus catch up with us. We know throughout *Othello* that Iago is a manipulative villain, but Othello doesn't know that, and neither does Desdemona, his accused wife.

Mark uses irony to make the Pharisees and scribes look bad. He doesn't put up flashing neon lights. He tells his stories so that the Pharisees condemn themselves without realizing it. Chapter 3 is a good example of this ironic technique. Jesus enters a synagogue on the Sabbath and heals a man with a withered hand. In Matthew's version (12:9–14), Jesus asks the assembled Jews if it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath (the Old Testament answer is, of course, yes). In Matthew, Jesus asks the kind of question a rabbi might ask. Mark includes another part of Jesus' question: "Is it lawful to heal *or to kill?*" That sets up the ending of the story. The Pharisees oppose Jesus for doing good on the Sabbath, but immediately afterward they go out to make plans to kill Him (v. 6). They don't say a word to Jesus, but they answer

His question with their actions: For them, it *is* lawful to kill on the Sabbath.

Mark also makes abundant use of intercalation, or “sandwich stories.” He begins one story, interrupts it with a completely different story, and then returns to complete the original story. All three synoptic gospels tell the story of Jairus’ daughter as a sandwich story. First we hear of the sick girl, then the story is interrupted for Jesus to heal the woman with the hemorrhage, then He returns to the task of healing the sick (now dead) girl. Matthew 9:18–26 contains a fairly brief rendition of the story, but Mark has some additional details that help us see the purpose of this structure. Mark tells us, for instance, that the woman has had a hemorrhage for twelve years. This means that the woman has been in a state of uncleanness for more than a decade, cut off from the temple worship, and having some inconveniences in daily life. Uncleanness is ceremonial death, and this woman has been effectively dead for a long time (cf. Lev. 15). When we get to the end of the story, the number twelve is repeated with reference to the girl: She is twelve years old (Mk. 5:42). The woman and the girl are linked by the number, and thus they are interlaced in Mark’s telling. Mark implies that the woman’s uncleanness parallels the girl’s death. Uncleanness is a form of death, and Jesus has come to cleanse as much as to raise the dead. The emphasis on the number twelve here is not accidental, since it associates both the woman and the girl with Israel, God’s now unclean bride, God’s dead daughter. Jesus has come to raise up dead *Israel*. The sandwich story links the two women, and shows that Jesus’ ministry is both to the outcasts, and to the dead; and Mark shows us that the outcasts are dead, and the dead, outcasts.

Mark uses sandwich stories when Matthew and Luke do not. In Mark 6:14–29, we read about John the Baptist’s martyrdom. In Matthew 14:3–12, the story is told as a

LUKE

a table for
the poor

Luke and Acts function as a single book, and should be interpreted and studied as one. This is evident from the introduction to the book of Acts in 1:1–2, where Luke addresses Theophilus, the same person whom he addresses in the opening verses of the Gospel of Luke. In Acts 1, Luke refers to the “first account” about the things that “Jesus began to do and to teach.” This suggests that Acts also, just as much as Luke, is a book about the works of Jesus; Acts is the continuation of what Jesus began to do and teach. There are other indications of a single unified book, and suggestions that Luke intended the books to be read together, and, while writing his gospel, intended to complete it with a second book.

Luke delays certain themes and events until he gets to Acts. For example, the accusation that Jesus had threatened to destroy the temple is included in Mark’s account of Jesus’ trial (14:58), but in Luke’s writings this accusation doesn’t come up until the Stephen episode (Acts 6:14). Mark 7’s account of cleansing of meats is not in Luke’s gospel, but the idea is picked up in Acts 10–11, with the story of Cornelius and Peter’s dream. Luke gives a partial quotation from Isaiah 6 in Luke 8:10 (compare Mk. 4:12), but a fuller quotation in Acts 28:25–27. By this, Luke shows us that the complete hardening and obscuring of the Jews, their final blinding,

doesn't take place until they have heard the gospel not only from Jesus but from the disciples; it's only after the preaching of the disciples that we have the full hardening of the Jews. The combined book of Luke–Acts is clearly about Jesus and the church. But Luke wants to make a particular point about Jesus and the church. To see the point, we have to examine some of the structures of Luke's two-volume work.

Parallel Stories

The infancy narratives of Luke tell about the births of John and Jesus (Lk. 1–2). In both cases, the work of the Spirit is very much highlighted. John is filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb (1:15); the Spirit comes upon Mary (1:35); Elizabeth, Zecharias and Simeon all praise God in the Spirit (1:41, 67; 2:25–27); Jesus receives the Spirit at His baptism (3:22). Jesus says in His first sermon that the Spirit is on Him, and the Spirit drives Him into the wilderness, and drives Him back to Galilee (4:14). This of course fits with the opening of a two-volume work where the Spirit is going to be the power behind the early church. At the beginning of Acts, the Spirit is active, descending upon the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2). In both Luke and Acts, the Spirit produces joy and praise. Luke begins with song, and the gospel also ends with praise, as the disciples devote themselves to worship (24:52–53). Luke's gospel also begins and ends in the temple. When the Spirit comes upon the apostles at Pentecost, they too are filled with joy, as they declare God's wonderful works (Acts 2:11; cf. 13:52).

The pattern in Luke–Acts is clear: first Jesus, then the church. Jesus receives the Spirit, then the church. Jesus comes with joy; then the church. Jesus preaches in the power of the Spirit; so does the Spirit-filled Peter. In the same way, the ministry of the disciples in Acts matches as it extends

JOHN¹

seeing the
Father

John's gospel differs in many ways from synoptics. The synoptics emphasize the Galilean ministry of Jesus. All the gospels end in Jerusalem, but in the synoptics Jesus arrives in Jerusalem after a long trek from Galilee. In John, Jesus spends most of His time in and around Jerusalem. We get a whiff of a Galilean ministry in chapter 2, with the wedding at Cana; in chapter 4, with the healing of the son of a royal official in Capernaum; and in chapter 6, with the feeding of the five thousand and crossing of the sea taking place around the sea of Galilee. Otherwise, most of Jesus' activities are concentrated in and around Jerusalem.

Starting in 2:13, Jesus is in Jerusalem for a Passover at the beginning of the book. While there, He cleanses the temple. Even if this is the same incident as the one recorded in the gospels, it is out of chronological sequence. As we saw with Mark's placement of the exorcism in the synagogue, this sets

1. I have written on John more often in the past than the other gospels, and that presents a dilemma. I don't want to repeat what I've written elsewhere, but then again I think what I've written elsewhere was pretty good. I've compromised by using some material from *A House for My Name* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2000), small bits and pieces from *Deep Exegesis* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), and articles on perichoresis, mainly published in *Credenda/Agenda*. For a complete portrait of what I think John's gospel is about, a reader should consult these other works.

the theme of the whole gospel. The story is about Jesus at the temple that gets destroyed and raised up in three days. Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus apparently takes place in Jerusalem as well (ch. 3). In John 3:22, Jesus and disciples are in Judea, where the disciples are baptizing. Chapter 5 brings Jesus back in Jerusalem for "the feast" of the Jews, and in chapter 7, He's back in Jerusalem for the Feast of Booths. The events of chapters 8–10 occur in the same setting, in the temple. Chapter 11 describes the raising of Lazarus at Bethany in Judea, while chapter 12 brings Him back to Jerusalem for good.

John's chronology also differs from the synoptics'. The synoptics show Jesus going to Passover at the end of His life to die and rise again, but in none of them do we see the adult Jesus attending the Passover more than that (though cf. Lk. 2:41–52). The events of the synoptics could fit into a single year of ministry. In John, however, there are several Passovers. In John 2, Jesus is in Jerusalem for Passover when he cleanses the temple. In chapter 6, there's another Passover, but Jesus is elsewhere, in Galilee, with his disciples. In 12:1, it is now six days before yet another Passover. It's possible that John is writing about only one Passover.² But there seem to be at least two Passovers, and at least two Feasts of Booths as well (chs. 5 and 7).

The ministry of Jesus is described in quite different terms in John's gospel. There are no exorcisms, few of the neat pithy sayings of Jesus that we know from the other gospels, and many of the most notable miracles are absent. There are marked differences in theological emphasis. John begins with

2. To fit all these into a single Passover, we would have to identify the Passover of John 2 with the Passover of John 12–21, and assume that Jesus did finally go to Jerusalem during the Passover of John 6. But that plays havoc with whatever chronological order there is in John's gospel.

the eternal Word of God, who becomes incarnate among men in Jesus, and Jesus is identified with the eternal God. At the end of the gospel, Thomas identifies Jesus as “Lord and God.” John includes a series of “I am” statements that identify Jesus with Yahweh (6:35; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7, 14). John develops what scholars call a “Christology from above.”

John emphasizes Jesus’ sonship, and His relation to the Father, more than the other gospels. The other gospels do indicate that Jesus has a unique relationship with the Father (cf. Mt. 11:25–27). But this theme receives a particular accent in John, so that John becomes one of the leading sources in the New Testament for the doctrine of the Trinity. Jesus calls God “Father” four times in Mark, six in Luke, twenty-three in Matthew, and 107 in John; “the Son” is used as a designation for Jesus twice in Matthew, and once in both Mark and Luke, but eighteen times in John. Of course, it is not only the number of times that Jesus’ unique sonship is mentioned, but what Jesus tells us about His relation to the Father. In John 5:19 and the passage that follows, Jesus defends Himself against charges of Sabbath breaking. He says the Son is dependent on the Father, and only does what He sees the Father doing. The Father is the model for the Son. The Son has complete access to the Father; the Father shows Him “all things” that He is doing. The Father gives the Son the powers that He uses in His ministry. Specifically, the Son has been given the power to raise the dead and to judge. Judgment and life have been given to the Son (5:30). In verse 36, He says that the Father works and the Son works too. When Jesus heals on the Sabbath, He’s doing nothing but what He sees the Father doing.

There’s also an emphasis on the gift of the Spirit, especially in the “upper room” discourse of chapters 13–17. This theme begins in chapter 3, where Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born of the Spirit, and the one born of the Spirit