

PORTRAITS OF JESUS

A FIVE-SESSION CHRISTIAN EDUCATION SERIES ON THE CHRISTOLOGY OF THE
GOSPELS AND ACTS

BY

LIS VALLE

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

FEBRUARY 2010

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Matthew: Jesus the fulfillment	3
Luke: Jesus the savior	5
Mark: Jesus the sufferer	7
John: Jesus the Incarnation	9
Acts: Jesus exalted	11
Bibliography	13

INTRODUCTION

The four gospels included in the Bible as we know it are four different accounts of the life of Jesus of Nazareth and his ministry. Each one of them contributes a particular perspective of the events that surrounded Jesus' life and provides a glimpse into a particular context and life of the early Christian church. Each one of them portrays Jesus in a different way. Each one of them interprets Jesus' messiahship, role, and his relation to God in a different way.

Acts is a second volume to one of the gospels: Luke. As the author narrates the story of the church in the first century the book provides yet another perception of Jesus. This perspective is clearly from a new generation of Christians who did not get to interact with Jesus while he was alive.

The purpose of these series of Bible studies is to continue getting to know better Jesus through the eyes of the writers of the gospels and Acts. Each session focus on a book providing the participant a window into the particular characterization of Jesus as found in it.

MATTHEW: Jesus the fulfillment

Matthew 2:13-15

The gospel of Matthew was written in Greek probably by a Jewish-Christian between 80 and 90 C.E. in Antioch, Syria. Matthew's sources include the gospel of Mark, the sayings collection Q and his own original materials identified by scholars as M. Its implied audience consists of a mixed population of Jews and Gentiles. Matthew deals repeatedly with conflicts between Jesus and the leaders of Judaism, trait that may suggest that Matthew's own Christian community was in conflict with the leaders of Judaism.¹ One particular characteristic of this gospel is the arrangement of the content within a framework of 5 sermons. This might be a way to resemble the Pentateuch.

Matthew refers to Jesus more frequently as Christ, Lord, Son of God, Son of Man, Son of David², Messiah, King, and sometimes as Son of Abraham, The Coming One, Shepherd, Prophet, Rabbi/Teacher, Servant, Emmanuel.³ In Matthew Jesus is portrayed as teacher and healer, sometimes rejected, messiah, king, new Moses, but especial emphasis is placed on Jesus being the fulfillment of the Scripture prophecies. Matthew quotes Jewish Scripture often in what have become known as formula quotations. Maybe this is why Matthew is known as the "Jewish Gospel." However, for the author of Matthew a Christian community of Jews **and** Gentiles is the continuation of the people of God.⁴

Matthew often uses chiasmic structures in his gospel, arranging units around a central focus. In this instance the chiasmic structure would be Joseph/Herod/Joseph where an obedient Joseph surrounds and contrasts an evil Herod.⁵ While Joseph obeys the angel of the Lord to protect the life of the child, Herod infuriated acts to destroy the lives of many children.

The story of the exile in Egypt shows both Matthew's perspective of Jesus as a new Moses and the fulfillment of Scripture ending with the third formula quotation citing Hosea 11:1b. Jesus moving to and out of Egypt echoes the stories of Joseph in Gen. 37, Moses and Israel. The massacre of the infants echoes Pharaoh's and just as Moses survived the Pharaoh Jesus survived Herod. Here the author clearly states that is quoting Jeremiah [31:15]. The Return to Nazareth ends with the fifth formula quotation, which doesn't correspond to any Old Testament passage. Notwithstanding, "Nazorean" might be referring to a messianic branch of David's line (Isa. 11:1; Zech. 3:8, 6:12) or to a Nazirite, a holy one with particular vows (Num. 6; Judg. 13:5-7; Acts 18:18, 21:17-26). The whole chiasm follows Matthew's Moses typology and reinforces 3 times

¹ *Theological Bible Commentary*, O'Day & Peterson, Eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 293-294.

² Charles B. Cousar, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Witnesses to God's New Work* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 123.

³ Richard N. Longenecker, ed. *Contours of Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 100-101.

⁴ *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, New Testament Articles, Matthew, Mark (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press., 1994), 92-122.

⁵ *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, 146.

in only 11 verses the fulfillment of Scripture. While not all of the quotes are messianic prophecies Matthew seems to be portraying Jesus as fulfilling in his own experience the story of Israel.⁶

This story resembling the typical folkloristic legend in which a royal child escapes an attempt against his life only to come back and rule in power sustain Matthew's regard of Jesus as King.⁷ While Matthew's depiction of Jesus as King and new Moses fulfilling Scripture is present in this passage the Jesus we encounter in this text is passive and silent, just as Mary. But the whole family appears as refugees, fleeing and resettling. This story unique to the gospel of Matthew may be reflecting the persecution, displacement and exile that some in the Matthean community had experienced on account of being Jesus followers.⁸

This passage portrays Jesus as King, future leader of Israel just as Moses; fulfillment of Scripture and displaced person. Appreciating this Matthean Jesus, being his disciple means keeping his teachings and making other disciples.⁹

⁶ *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, 146.

⁷ *Id.*, 146

⁸ *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, 147.

⁹ *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 3-4.

The gospel according to Luke is usually dated around 85-90 C.E. Its implied author is a Gentile Christian and skilled writer well educated in Hellenistic literature and rhetoric, and very familiar with Jewish biblical writings. He wrote the gospel in two volumes, Acts being the second volume. Luke contributes a unique perspective of history dividing it into three periods: Israel, Jesus, and the Church. The sources that the author used include the gospel of Mark, the sayings collection Q, and materials unique to Luke known as L. Luke provides a challenging message about wealth and poverty both to oppressed and oppressors.¹⁰

Luke refers to Jesus as Son of God, Prophet Greater than the Prophets, Lord, Messiah or Christ, Son of Man, Savior. In fact Luke is the only gospel that calls Jesus Savior. While this title is used only twice, once in reference to God and the second in reference to Baby Jesus, Luke clearly portrays Jesus as savior by identifying him repeatedly as God's salvation or as the one who saves. In Luke, Jesus speaks of himself as **Son of Man** more frequently than with any other form of self-reference.¹¹

Jesus in the Temple is the last episode of the infancy narrative section in the book of Luke. It tells about Jesus rite of passage and interprets it to suggest that Jesus is getting ready for his ministry.¹² Scholars have found that the story has striking parallels with other stories of exceptional children that had outstanding wisdom and were also famous figures of history or mythology. Based on this the story can be regarded as a legend or just a story of Jesus that could have been included by Luke to make the point of Jesus' precocious wisdom or of his religious future. Nevertheless, the episode includes the first words to be spoken by Jesus in this gospel in the format of two questions. The second question implies Jesus awareness of a special relationship with God. In this story, that is unique to Luke, as well as the rest of the infancy narrative the author is leaving the Church a legacy of a Christological affirmation that is pushed back to Jesus infancy and adolescence.¹³ With his first words Jesus clarifies his identity and mission joining the declarations of Gabriel, Simeon and Anna: he was sent by his Father, God.¹⁴

Luke is also stating that Jesus was raised within the tradition of Judaism and educated accordingly.¹⁵ There are some clues in the story that should direct the reader's attention to what the story says about who Jesus is as opposed to what actually happened. The setting is the Temple, Jesus has 12 years old and he was found on the third day. The Temple and the numbers

¹⁰ Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, *Women's Bible Commentary*, Expanded Edition (Louisville, KY: 1998), 363-366.

¹¹ *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 14-27.

¹² Brian K. Blount, General Editor, *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 163.

¹³ *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*. NY: Double Day, 1981, p. 434-439.

¹⁴ *True to Our Native Land*, 163.

¹⁵ *The Anchor Bible*, p. 434-439.

3 and 12 were important cues in Judaism. Jesus' connection with the Temple and the fact that his parent found him on the third day may be foreshadowing Jesus resurrection and his centrality for the early Church.

For a gospel that often portrays Jesus as friend of outcasts the adolescent Jesus portrayed in this story seems exceptionally wise and well educated in his religious tradition. At the same time the episode reveals a Jesus that conforms to earthly rules – like being obedient to his parents – as much as it does not conflict with obedience to the Heavenly Father. In this context it could be argued that befriending outcasts while outside of the established societal rules was Jesus way of obeying God and being in the Father's house.

The gospel according to Mark was probably the first of the four gospels to be written and served of framework to Luke and Matthew. It seems to have been written shortly after the Roman-Jewish war and the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. Probably addressed to an audience of peasants living at a subsistence level the book is short, with a simple style, and conveys a sense of urgency.¹⁶

Mark shows concern with false messianic prophecies and with the fate of the Temple. Other issues often addressed by the author are, war, denial and betrayal. These may provide a sense of the context of the Markan community struggling to learn how to live within a war setting and without a temple. One solution for this new situation was the development of house church communities. Such practice may account for Mark's common portrayals of Jesus explaining his public teaching to the disciples inside a house.¹⁷

Mark's preference to locate Jesus' ministry at homes is shown in the opening verse of the story of Jesus family coming to restrain him because people thought he was out of his mind. The episode of Jesus insanity is divided in two halves because of Mark's common technique of composition of embedding one story within another one.¹⁸ The upcoming reference to Beelzebul may respond to the belief in ancient world that insanity was caused by demonic possession.¹⁹ The scribes used this argument to undermine Jesus authority to cast out demons. This authorities' conflict characterizes the book of Mark. The sense of conflict permeates these few verses with the atmosphere created between the crowd, the impossibility to eat, the family that came to seize, and the antagonist scribes.

The story appears rather early in the gospel portraying Jesus' family (or "those near him" in a literal translation of the Greek) in a negative way. The themes of betrayal and denial are present in this story as Jesus' mother and brothers come to restrain him and he implicitly rejects their relationship by explicitly naming "whoever does the will of God"²⁰ as his brother and sister and mother. This is a portrait of a suffering Jesus caught in the midst of a mixed crowd, considered insane, in conflict with those near to him, with his family and with the religious authorities.

Some scholars propose that the cause for the conflict, at least with his family, may be that they are trying to relate to him within traditional patterns of family relations without recognizing that he is the Christ and that his ministry requires new patterns of relationships.²¹ Other scholars emphasize the story's implicit teachings about the danger of attachments to family, village, and

¹⁶ *Theological Bible Commentary*, 311-312.

¹⁷ *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, 509-520.

¹⁸ *Id.*, Vol. VIII, 563.

¹⁹ The Harper Collins Study Bible NRSV

²⁰ Mark 3:35

²¹ *Women's Bible Commentary*, 358-359.

traditional ties. Prior to this story Mark has told his audience that Jesus' first disciples left family and occupation in order to follow him.²² The consensus is that Mark is stating that familial authority cannot be set above doing the will of God. Several passages in this gospel support the conclusion that following Jesus is a route of suffering.²³ Jesus' disciples may reasonably expect to experience rejection, betrayal, and abandonment just as Jesus experienced it.

²² *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, 566.

²³ *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 3.

The Fourth Gospel was probably written during the late first century. Its implied audience is a Christian community of Jewish origins and experiencing a painful separation from its roots because of its belief in Jesus.²⁴ Such a social context accounts for the harsh expressions against “the Jews” that are particularly stronger in this gospel than the synoptic ones. Other characteristics of this gospel include a description of a three-years ministry of Jesus and three trips to Jerusalem rather than one year and one trip like the other gospels; the blend of narrative and discourse; the use of figurative language; and extensive dialogues between Jesus and other characters.²⁵ John is also characterized by a literary style that interweaves narrative, dialogue, and discourse to create lengthy drama-like scenes.²⁶ Some scholars agree that the author opens up the story of Jesus to the audience’s own experience so that they can discover the presence of God in Jesus for themselves.

John highlights Jesus’ special relationship with God and reflects an understanding of his identity as a manifestation of God, the Word Incarnate. In this gospel the language Father/Son to describe Jesus’ connection with God is very important to convey John’s theology.²⁷

The story of the man born blind that received sight demonstrates the social location of the Johannine community and it also depicts Jesus as sent by God. The story conforms to the formal elements of a miracle story stating the situation of need, the miracle and the attestation of the miracle. It shares common elements with stories of Jesus’ giving sight to a blind man as they appear in the synoptic gospels: the man is a beggar, Jesus uses spittle, and touches the man’s eyes. John expands the formal elements of the miracle story to serve his dramatic and theological purposes.²⁸ For example, the need that evokes the miracle was not really the man’s blindness but the need for God’s work to be manifest.²⁹

The story is located after two chapters of establishing the lines of conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities. The man’s blindness then serves as the catalyst for a conversation between Jesus and the disciples about the relationship of illness and sin, traditional Jewish speculation. It is only after 4 verses that the story really begins and the blind man becomes a character in it. Jesus’ response to the disciples reveals John’s conceptualization of sin, not as a moral category about behavior but as a theological category about one’s response to the revelation of God in Jesus.³⁰ This is an important key to the story since the Johannine Jesus is the

²⁴ The Harper Collins Study Bible NRSV; *Theological Bible Commentary*, 339.

²⁵ *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 381.

²⁶ *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX, 493.

²⁷ *Id.*, 496.

²⁸ *Id.*, 652.

²⁹ *Id.*, 653.

³⁰ *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX, 653.

Word incarnate, the heavenly revealer who is not of this world but who was sent to reveal the Father.³¹ Throughout the story Jesus is aware of his nature, role and mission. “The one who sent me” is Jesus’ most frequent way of speaking about God in the Fourth Gospel.³² Being a disciple of the Johannine Jesus therefore means responding to the revelation with belief, being born from above, imbibing living water and eating bread of life, and fulfilling one’s place and vocation in the community of the children of God.³³

It is an interesting fact that the healing power of clay made with spittle was a popular element in healing stories in the Greco-Roman world. Mark uses it. Matthew and Luke avoid using it. Jesus making clay is important because kneading was one of the thirty-nine categories of work explicitly forbidden on the Sabbath.³⁴ The clay is also the instrument that allows the healing to occur at a distance. The man gains sight when he washes the clay off his eyes and he is able to see Jesus only several verses later.

The last section of the story is not a traditional attestation of a miracle because while the neighbors bear witness to the man’s healing their questions anticipate and set the stage for the next section of the narrative: the interrogation of the blind man by the Pharisees. The result of this unusual attestation is that the “blind man” ends up testifying to his own healing.³⁵

In this episode John’s portrays Jesus as a teacher and a healer by virtue of him being God’s revelation.

³¹ *Id.*, Vol. IX, 3-4.

³² *Id.*, Vol. IX, 653.

³³ *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX, 3-4.

³⁴ *Id.*, Vol. IX, 653-954.

³⁵ *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX, 653-954.

The book of Acts is the second volume that continues the story started in the gospel of Luke. Scholars generally agree that the same author wrote both in a single project. Acts was probably written in the late 80's and, while it shares many theological questions with Luke, it adds some concerns of its own, which help understand better early Christianity, such as the status of the resurrected and exalted Jesus Christ and the legitimacy of the evangelization of Gentiles. These theological concerns correspond to a context of Jewish rejection of the gospel, the acceptance of Gentiles in the Christian church and vulnerable status of Christians in a Roman political climate. The title is somewhat misleading, as the book doesn't focus on the apostles but rather on the word of God as the gospel of Jesus Christ, more particularly the genesis and expansion of the church carrying this word in continuous movement, crossing borders and entering new territories.³⁶

In the book of Acts Jesus is mainly portrayed as alive and exalted. Based on the perception of the resurrection as a pivotal event, Acts regards it as an act of God that declares who Jesus is: the Christ, one more powerful than death, the source of salvation and forgiveness of sins, judge, and the pledge of humanity's future resurrection. Acts discusses the Christ from various perspectives including his identity as a prophet like Moses, as fulfillment of divine promises about a descendant of David, and as Lord, title used frequently in Acts in reference to both God and Jesus.³⁷

Chapter 9 of Acts contains the first recount of Saul's conversion in the book and it is in the narrator's voice as part of the historical account.³⁸ The other two recounts, chapters 22 and 26, are in Paul's voice as part of a speech to defend himself before the Jewish religious authorities and then before King Agrippa, current appointed form of government. The three versions coincide in a visible sign of a Christophany or revelation of the Christ to Paul in the form of a bright light from Heaven. This image confirms the exalted status of Christ as being now in the heavens at the right hand of God (7:56), as Stephen stated right before he was stoned in the presence of Saul.

The brief conversation between Jesus and Saul points toward the status of the resurrected Christ. While he was invisible, neither Saul or his companions saw him in other form than the bright light, in this particular recount they all could clearly hear Jesus. He identified himself as Jesus and he identifies himself with his church when he states that Saul is persecuting him. The epiphany is a divine audition resembling the calling of some prophets of the Old Testament that serves the purpose to charge Saul with a new ministry: evangelization of the Gentiles.³⁹

The similarities between the revelation of Christ and the revelation of God to Old Testament prophets suggest that Acts has a very high Christology. This is confirmed by the use of the title Lord for Jesus as for God. The story of Saul's conversion has Jesus as Lord revealing himself to

³⁶ *Theological Bible Commentary*, 359-362.

³⁷ *Id.*, 364-365.

³⁸ *The Anchor Bible: The Acts of the Apostles* (NY: Double Day, 1967), 82-83.

³⁹ NIB, 149-151.

Saul, then the Lord revealing Saul's calling to Ananias in a vision and concludes by identifying the two as one when Ananias affirmed that the Lord Jesus that appeared to Saul on his way to Damascus was the same one that sent him so Saul's sight was restored and he would be filled with the Holy Spirit. Such is the level of the exaltation of Christ in Acts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to Luke I-IX. NY: Double Day, 1981.

The Anchor Bible: The Acts of the Apostles. NY: Double Day, 1967.

Blount, Brian K. General Editor. *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary.* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007.

Cousar, Charles B. *An Introduction to the New Testament: Witnesses to God's New Work.* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006.

The Harper Collins Study Bible NRSV

Longenecker, Richard N. ed. *Contours of Christology in the New Testament.* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005.

The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII: New Testament Articles, Matthew, Mark. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994.

The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX: Luke – John. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994.

Newsom, Carol A. and Sharon H. Ringe, *Women's Bible Commentary*, Expanded Edition, Louisville, KY: 1998.

O'Day, Gail R. and David L. Petersen, ed., *Theological Bible Commentary*, Expanded Edition, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.