



Topic: Person of Jesus

Option:

Essential Richer Reading – you must read this for your lessons ☐

Recommended Richer Reading – advised as it would enhance your understanding further ☒

Further Richer Reading – widening your knowledge beyond A-levels ☐

Richer Reading title: Jesus in the 4 Gospels – David Wenham

Type: Article by David Wenham

Reading intention: (*importance of the text, what students will gain from it*)

- Understand the purpose of each Gospel and their uniqueness in the portrait of Jesus.
- Gain and understanding of the motives and intentions behind each Gospel account and its content
- Starting to explore the Bible beyond face value, exploring *behind the text* issues.

Core content to take away:

- Understanding of the Gospels and the perspectives they were written from and their purpose.
- How different stories explored have significant meaning and motives.
- A comparison between the synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John.
- Key examples and sources that suggest Jesus was divine, a person with an acute awareness of God, or a liberator of the marginalised.

Exam help...

- This will help gain an in-depth understanding of the individual stories in the Gospels. By understanding different motives for writing them, clearer and more academic analysis can take place for AO2 paragraphs.
- References to passages can be used that are beyond the specification requirements to show intricate topical subtleties.

Task for this reading:

to get full context, I would advise you use a small bible to look up any references you're unfamiliar with.

1. Under the heading "**Mark's Gospel**" make notes on:
 - i. The opening: What significant events are discussed in Mark's Gospel and why might this be
 - ii. 2 part Gospel: What is the content and significance of the 2 distinct parts of Mark's Gospel?
 - iii. The Ending of Mark: What are the interpretations of the abrupt ending of mark's Gospel?
2. Under the heading "**Matthew's Gospel**" make notes on:
 - i. The beginning: what is the purpose of the aspect of "fulfilment" in Matthew's Gospel? Who was Matthew's Gospel aimed at and why/how do you know?
 - ii. The ending, Jesus authority: What does Matthew's Gospel suggest about the authority of Jesus? Give examples to support.
3. Under the heading "**Luke's Gospel**" make notes on:
 - i. Jesus, Judaism and OT: What is the purpose of the symbolic links to the OT for Luke?
 - ii. Jesus the spirit and poor: why are the poor and marginalised important in Luke's Gospel? Give examples.
4. Under the heading "**John's Gospel**" make notes on:
 - i. What is the difference between John's Gospel and the synoptic Gospels?
 - ii. The Messiah: explain how John's Gospel is seen to be "Jewish"
 - iii. Son of God: What does this mean for John? How does John express Jesus' divinity – give examples? What are the differences between John's Passion account and Mark's Passion account – why?

Jesus in the Four Gospels

David Wenham

Many people have a very hazy idea of what is distinctive about the picture of Jesus in each of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The purpose of this article is to offer a brief introduction to some of the gospels' major emphases. Mark is usually seen as the earliest of our gospels, and we will start there.

MARK



The Opening of the Gospel

Mark does not leave his readers in suspense over the question of who Jesus is. He kicks straight off in chapter 1, verse 1: 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God'.

The word 'gospel' means 'good news', and reminds us of Old Testament verses like Isaiah 52:7, which speaks of Israel's God coming to rescue his people from trouble and disaster. Mark sees Jesus in just those terms: he is 'the Christ', in other words the Messiah whom the Jews expected to come and save them from their enemies. Jesus is also 'the Son of God'. What exactly 'Son of God' means for Mark is not made clear but he goes on in verses two and three to quote Old Testament verses that speak of 'preparing the way of the Lord', i.e. of God. In some sense at least Mark sees God, the Lord, as intervening and coming in Jesus.

God's intervention is clear in the first story of the gospel (1:2-11). It describes John the Baptist, that wild prophet of a man, baptizing people in the river Jordan. John speaks of someone coming who 'will baptize you with the Holy Spirit', and then Jesus comes for baptism. Immediately God's Holy Spirit is seen to descend on him, and God's voice is heard announcing that Jesus is 'my Son'. God is clearly intervening: Jesus has come as the powerful Spirit-filled leader looked forward to in the Old Testament (e.g.

Isaiah 11:1-2), and we anticipate that in due course he will 'baptize' others with the Spirit, fulfilling God's promise to pour out his spirit on all flesh (e.g. Joel 2:28-32).

From Jesus' baptism we move straight to his temptation, where he begins battle with 'Satan' (1:12-13). The coming of Jesus in Mark's gospel is a confrontation with the powerful forces of evil, and indeed only a few verses later in Mark 1 we have the first of many vivid stories about Jesus casting out demons from people (vv.21-28). God is clearly intervening in Jesus, rescuing the world from the evil one.

After the temptation 'Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news' (1:14-15). Here is Mark's summary of Jesus' mission: Jesus has come to bring the kingdom (or rule) of God into the world. In other words, he is re-establishing God's government in place of the illegitimate, damaging rule of Satan. So, as Mark will go on to illustrate again and again, he casts out demons and puts all sorts of other evil right, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, etc. He calls people to 'repent and believe', in other words to 'turn round and commit themselves' to what he is doing.

What does that mean in practice? Mark goes on to the call of the first disciples, to whom he says: 'Come, follow me and I will make you fish for people' (1:16-20). Jesus' mission is to gather God's people together (like a Galilean fisherman gathering fish) under God's rule, and he calls people to join him in this mission. For Mark discipleship is summed up in the words 'Follow me'.

A Two-part Gospel

The whole of Mark's gospel is a fast-moving narrative with lively description and a staccato style (lots of 'ands' and 'immediatelys'). But his narrative falls into two quite distinct parts. The first part from 1:1-8:30 portrays Jesus as magnificently powerful with authority over evil spirits, over disease, over sin and in his teaching. The question on

people's lips is: 'What is this?' 'Who is this?' (1:27, 4:21).

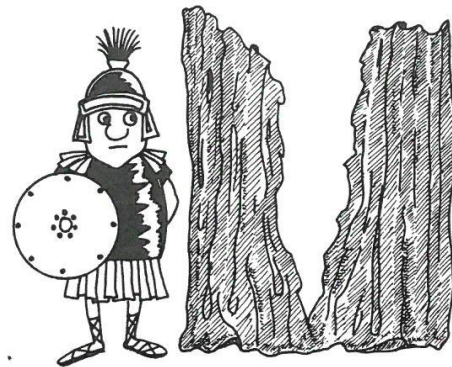
People are perplexed: Jesus' opponents say that he gets it from the devil (3:22). His family and even his disciples are slow to learn, so that Jesus says: 'Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see and ears but fail to hear...?' (8:17-21, cf. 3:31-35).

But then in 8:22-26 Mark describes a blind man being healed by Jesus: first he sees indistinctly, then 'everything clearly'. For Mark this is probably a sort of parable about Jesus' disciples, because, having been previously 'blind', in the next story Peter confesses Jesus as the Messiah (8:29). This is the climax to the first part of the gospel.

At this point the gospel changes direction: 'He then began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things' (8:31). The spotlight shifts now from Jesus' power to his coming crucifixion. There are three so-called 'passion predictions' (8:31-33, 9:30-32, 10:32-34). In each case the disciples show themselves mystified, not now about who Jesus is, but about the idea of his suffering. They see the Messiah as a victorious leader, and want to share in his kingdom (8:32-33, 9:33-34, 10:35-37). But Jesus explains that he and they must follow the way of suffering and service (8:34-38, (9:35, 10:41-45, cf. 10:52).

The climax of this second part of the gospel is the crucifixion (ch.15). Jesus dies at Passover, the Jewish celebration of God's rescue of his people from Egypt. Mark sees Jesus' death as bringing liberation from the rule of Satan ('a ransom', 10:45) and opening up the way to God. When Jesus dies, two things happen: first, 'the curtain of the temple was torn from top to bottom' – an extraordinary sign of God himself bringing to an end the old temple system which kept people at arm's length from God (15:38). Secondly, a Gentile centurion comments: 'Surely this man was the Son of God' (15:39).

From Peter's confession of Jesus as 'the Christ' we have come now to the centurion's confessing Jesus as the 'Son of God' (cf. 1:1). Two things are striking about his confession: (a) he makes it in the context of crucifixion. Mark wants his readers to see that shameful event as the climax of Jesus' mission, even more than the miracles in the first part of the



gospel. (b) It is a Gentile who makes the confession. Mark is writing his gospel for Gentiles (see Mark 7:3-4), and wants to make it clear that Jesus came for 'all nations' (11:17).

The Ending of Mark

After the climax of the cross, Mark has only a brief announcement of the resurrection in 16:1-8. One of the puzzles of Mark's gospel is why the gospel ends so abruptly with no resurrection appearances and with an anticlimactic description of the women fleeing frightened from the tomb and telling no one (16:8).

Some scholars think that the gospel's original ending has somehow been lost. (Some manuscripts do add an ending, which is probably not original.)

Others believe that Mark deliberately ended with v.8, and have connected it with the sense of mystery and even secrecy that seems to surround Jesus in Mark's gospel. Throughout the gospel people (including the disciples) fail to understand Jesus, and Jesus himself seems sometimes not to want to be understood: he speaks in parables and tells people to be quiet about him (e.g. 1:34, 9:30). Scholars have come up with a whole range of different explanations of this so-called 'Messianic secret': some have seen it as a Markan literary device with little basis in the actual life of Jesus. Did Mark want to make Jesus into a mysterious, almost other-worldly figure? In that case the women's silence at the news of the resurrection in 16:8 could fit in.

Others have claimed a historical basis to the messianic secrecy theme, arguing that the disciples' failure to understand Jesus is unlikely to have been invented by the church and that Jesus' own vision for his ministry explains his avoidance of publicity.

Whatever the explanation, Mark sees Jesus as the risen one 'going before' his disciples, and also as one who will return as Son of man on the clouds of heaven to complete his task of gathering the people of God (13:22-27). The background to this is the Old Testament book of Daniel, with its vision in chapter 7 of God's people (pictured as a human being – 'a son of man') being rescued by God from their enemies (pictured as animals). Jesus is seen by Mark as 'the Son of man' who brings deliverance to God's people: as Son of man he has authority on earth during his ministry (e.g. 2:10), he must suffer on the cross (8:31), but he will finally complete the divine rescue mission in the future.

MATTHEW



Matthew and Luke have a lot in common with Mark. In what follows we will look for their distinctive emphases, without repeating what has been said about Mark.

The Beginning: Jesus as Fulfilment of Judaism

Beginnings and endings of books are often significant. Matthew's opening is: 'The book of the genesis (or genealogy) of Jesus Christ son of David son of Abraham'; he then promptly gives us a genealogy (or family tree) starting with Abraham, going on to David, and ending with Jesus (1:1-17). Matthew does this to bring out the Old Testament background to Jesus. He wants to show Jesus as the descendant of Abraham father of the Jewish nation and as the Messianic successor to David.

'Fulfilment' is a key word for Matthew. His gospel is full of Old Testament quotations, applied to Jesus, often introduced with a phrase such as 'that what was spoken by the Lord by the prophet might be *fulfilled*'. The quotations are sometimes strange, though a little like what we find in the Dead Sea

Scrolls. For example in 2:15 Matthew quotes Hosea 11:1 'Out of Egypt have I called my son'. Hosea is referring to Israel, but Matthew applies it to the infant Jesus. What seems quite likely is that Matthew wants us to think of Jesus as the new Israel, who 'fulfils' the Old Testament.

Matthew's interest in fulfilment is explicit in 5:17, where Jesus says: 'Think not that I have come to destroy the law and the prophets; I have not come to destroy but to fulfil'. Jesus goes on there to show how his ethical standards go far beyond those of the Old Testament ('the law and the prophets') and of his Jewish contemporaries. He fulfils the law not by reproducing it unchanged, but by calling for right attitudes in the heart (e.g. no hateful anger), not just for right actions (no killing) (5:21-26). Jesus has brought God's reign and the standards for children of the heavenly Father are those of perfection (5:48).

Matthew 5 is part of Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount (the first of five major teaching-blocks that we find in Matthew's gospel). Some people think that Matthew sees Jesus as a new and greater Moses: he goes up a mountain and gives the people God's law (like Moses on Mount Sinai).

Matthew's gospel has other Jewish emphases. Jesus speaks of the kingdom of 'heaven' rather than the kingdom of 'God' (following the Jewish practice of avoiding direct use of God's sacred name). He also speaks of his and his disciples' mission as exclusively to the Jews (15:24, 10:5).

But two things counterbalance Matthew's Jewishness: first he is sharply critical of the 'scribes and Pharisees' and more broadly of the Jewish leaders and people, whom he sees as under God's judgment (see especially chapter 23). And secondly Matthew is interested in the Gentiles; it is he who has the pagan magi come and worship the infant Jesus (2:1-12), and it is he who ends his gospel with Jesus sending his disciples out to make disciples of 'all nations' (22:16-20).

It is widely agreed that Matthew was written by a Christian from a Jewish background for other Jewish-Christians, but that Matthew's sharply critical remarks about the Jewish leaders reflect a situation of controversy and conflict between the young Christian movement, now reaching out to Gentiles, and people in the Jewish synagogue.

The Ending: Jesus' Authority

Like its beginning, the ending of Matthew's gospel in 28:16-20 is highly significant. The risen Jesus says: 'All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me'. Jesus has been tremendously authoritative throughout the gospel: thus in the Sermon on the Mount he quotes the law of God, given through the great Moses, but then says 'But I say to you' (5:21, etc.). His authority is seen too in his actions, like walking on the water: Matthew tells us that the disciples responded by 'worshipping' him and saying 'Truly you are the Son of God' (14:33). Worship suggests divinity, and in Matthew's gospel Jesus at his birth is given the significant name 'Immanuel', i.e. 'God with us' (1:23). So now at the end of the gospel Jesus is risen and is seen to be the one with all authority and the one who promises his disciples that 'I will be with you' – he is still, and even more now, Immanuel.

The commission of Jesus to his followers in Matthew 28:16-20 is to 'go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them..., and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you'. The reference to baptism reminds us of Matthew's special interest in the church (e.g. 16:18-20, 18:15-20). But the emphasis in Matthew 28 is not on the church, but on Jesus, on his authority and on obeying his teaching.

Obedience and high ethical standards are of central importance to Matthew, as is especially clear in the Sermon on the Mount. Some Christians may have been boasting about being 'free' from the Old Testament law and living immorally. They were, in Matthew's terms, saying 'Lord, Lord', but not obeying Jesus' teaching (7:21-23). Matthew warns strongly against this attitude, emphasising coming judgment.

But although Matthew's Jesus speaks very directly about judgment (e.g. in various parables, like the wheat and the weeds or the sheep and the goats, 13:24-43, 25:31-46) and very sternly to religious hypocrites, he welcomes the 'poor in spirit' (5:3) and invites the weary to come to him 'for my yoke is easy and my burden is light' (11:28-30). He is sent by God 'to save his people from their sins' (1:21), and he promises to be with his disciples to the end of the age (28:20).

LUKE



Luke, like Matthew, starts his gospel by describing Jesus' birth. He then opens his account of Jesus' Galilean ministry with the story of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth (4:16-30). Luke seems to have decided to use the story at the very beginning of his account – unlike Mark – in order to introduce us to Jesus as he understands him. People have called it 'the Nazareth manifesto', since here Luke's Jesus sets out his programme for his ministry.

Jesus, Judaism and the Old Testament

What happens in the story? Jesus comes to the synagogue 'as was his custom'. Luke describes Jesus within a Jewish context: his account of Jesus' birth opened in the Jerusalem temple (1:5-25); his gospel also ends there, with the disciples gathered and 'praising God' (24:53). Luke also has a strong emphasis on Jerusalem: the second half of his gospel is dominated by the thought of Jesus going up to Jerusalem (9:51 etc.) and the risen Jesus appears there, not in Galilee. Why this emphasis on Jerusalem, the temple and the synagogue? Luke wants to show that Christianity is not a brand new religion, but that it (like Jesus) was born and grew in the context of Jewish faith and piety.

The story of Jesus in the synagogue goes on with Jesus reading out verses in Isaiah 61:1-2 about a Spirit-filled deliverer, and then saying to the congregation 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'. The scene is dramatic: Jesus in his home town claims that in him the prophetic hopes of Isaiah were being fulfilled. Fulfilment turns out to be a Lukan and not just a Matthean theme. So in the last chapter of his gospel the risen Christ 'opens the Scriptures' and explains that 'Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me...' (24:27,32,44,45).

Jesus, the Spirit and the Poor

The verses that Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61 in the Nazareth synagogue open with the words 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me'. Here again we have something of programmatic importance for Luke as a writer: in the book of Acts, Luke's sequel to the gospel, the Holy Spirit is the major actor, inspiring the young Christian church, but also in the gospel Jesus is portrayed as the one anointed by the Spirit, whose work is in the fullness and power of the Spirit (4:1,14).

But what is his work? Jesus quotes Isaiah 61:1,2: 'He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' Jesus has come to bring the day of God's favour and salvation. (Salvation is an important word for Luke, e.g. 2:11, 19:11.) But specifically Jesus' ministry is directed to the poor, the needy, the people on the margins of society, whether Samaritans, tax-collectors or women. Some of the parables and other stories only found in Luke illustrate his interests: he has parables about rich and poor (16:19-31, see also 6:20,24), about a Samaritan (10:25-37, see also 17:16), and about a tax-collector (18:9-14, see also 19:1-10). His interest in women is seen in the story of Mary and Martha (10:38-42). The 'lost' are very important to Luke, with 19:10 being a key verse: 'The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost'. Jesus came to find the lost (people like the prodigal son and the repentant thief, 15:11-32, 23:42,43), to reverse injustice and to bring back into God's kingdom all sorts of people who are now 'on the outside'.

The story of Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue continues with Jesus talking about how the prophets Elijah and Elisha went and ministered to Gentiles (4:24-27). The group of outsiders in whom Luke is most interested is the Gentiles. Acts will tell the story of how the followers of Jesus went from Jerusalem out into the Gentile world. But here in the beginning of his gospel Luke hints at Jesus' interest in the Gentiles, and describes how the synagogue rejected him for this, as they would later reject the church in its mission to Gentiles.

JOHN



The way Matthew, Mark and Luke see Jesus is quite similar, hence the expression 'syn-optic' (common view). John's gospel stands apart.

He sums up his purpose in 20:31 'These (things) are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing you may have life in his name'.

The Messiah

He wants people to see Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. Sometimes John has been seen as a very Greek gospel, using Greek ideas like 'the word' in 1 v.1, and as less Jewish and Palestinian than the synoptic gospels. But in recent years scholars have come to see that John is thoroughly Jewish. His detailed references to places, such as the pool of Bethesda in 5:2, and to Jewish practices and festivals, suggest probable knowledge of Palestine. And even the opening of John's gospel is thoroughly Jewish: 'In the beginning' is how it starts, before going on to speak of light and darkness and creation in a way that inevitably reminds us of Genesis chapter 1.

The author's purpose is to show Jesus as 'the Messiah', who fulfils the Old Testament. He does this not only directly in passages where the people discuss whether Jesus is the Messiah (e.g. 7:25-52), but also indirectly through stories where Jesus is seen within a distinctively Jewish context. The first miracle that John describes has Jesus turn water that is being kept for Jewish purification rites into wine (2:1-11): probably John wants us to see here a picture of Jesus turning the water of Judaism into something richer. In John 6 Jesus is compared to the Old Testament manna; Jesus is spoken of as the 'true' bread from heaven. In chapter 15 he is the 'true' vine, the comparison being with the old vine of Israel (see Psalm 80).

There is a lot of quite fierce debate in John's Gospel between Jesus and 'the Jews', and it is quite likely that the writer of the gospel is in a situation where the church and synagogue are in conflict. John insists that Jesus is the Messiah.

Son of God

But Jesus is also Son of God in John 20:31. For the Fourth Evangelist 'Son of God' means something very significant indeed: this is made clear in the marvellous 'prologue' of the gospel (1:1-18), where Jesus is identified with God's divine 'word', who was with God in the very beginning. In Jewish thought a person's 'word' is seen as something powerful that goes out from a person, making that person known and doing things on behalf of the person. Jesus is seen by John as the one who comes out from God, revealing God and acting powerfully on his behalf. 1:18 says 'He has made him known'.

The relationship between God and Jesus is closer than the relationship of God and a prophet. Prophets were sent to speak God's word; Jesus was the word. A person's word is, in one sense at least, part of that person, and John speaks of Jesus as divine and as one with God (1:1,10:30). His coming is therefore 'incarnation', which literally means 'in-fleshment': God's word came down from heaven and became human flesh in Jesus (1:14). None of the synoptic gospels explicitly speak of Jesus in this way.

John's emphasis on Jesus' divinity comes out in various ways. The miracles, for example, are not just evidence of God's kingdom and salvation arriving, but they are 'signs' – signs of Jesus' divine glory (2:11).

Then there are also the famous 'I am' sayings. Only John has Jesus say things like 'I am the way, the truth and the life' (14:6). One of the key themes in John's gospel is Jesus as the way to eternal life for those who believe in him (see 20:31). But there is something more to the 'I am' phrase in John than this, since the Old Testament God himself is called the 'I am' (Exodus 3:14, Isaiah 43:10). So in John's gospel where Jesus says: 'Before

Abraham was, I am', it is evidently a controversial claim to divinity (8:58). Similarly when his opponents come looking for Jesus to arrest him, Jesus says 'I am', and the arresting party fall to the ground in awe before him (18:5,6).

Some scholars have argued that John loses sight of Jesus' humanity. Thus in Mark's account of Jesus' passion Jesus suffers intensely in Gethsemane and cries out on the cross 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (14:34, 15:34), but in John he seems to be divinely in control as he is arrested and his cry on the cross is one of victory: 'It is finished' (19:30). The cross in John's gospel is divine glorification, not human suffering (12:23).

What is true about this view is that John does emphasise Jesus as divine and as the way to eternal life (quite likely because Jews and others were putting Jesus down in various ways, e.g. 1 John 2:18,19). However, although a simple comparison with Mark could suggest that John has deleted Jesus' humanity from the picture, that is not the impression if John is viewed on its own. Jesus is emphatically the word who 'became flesh' (1:14); he experienced real human emotions (e.g. 4:6,7); and his death is suffering, as any reader of the gospel familiar with crucifixion would recognise (see 12:24-27).

The story of Thomas in John 20:24-29 is a climax: Thomas does not believe when told about the resurrection by his fellow disciples; then he sees the risen Jesus, who invites him to touch him and says 'Don't be unbelieving, but believing'. Thomas responds 'My Lord and my God'. John writes his gospel so that his readers, who do not have Thomas' advantage of sight, may make the same confession of faith in the divine Jesus.

Further Reading

Perhaps the most useful single work covering the ground of this article is G.N. Stanton's *The Gospels and Jesus* (Oxford University Press, 1989). Also useful is the series published by Paternoster Press on the individual gospels, including R.T. France, *Matthew Evangelist and Teacher* (1989) and S.S. Smalley, *John Evangelist and Interpreter* (1978).

