

The Gospel of John

Part 1

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September 11, 2024

Source

- My source material for this series is John Shelby Spong's The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic (2013)
- As some of you know, Spong is my favorite author
 - A bishop in the Episcopal Church
 - Born June 16, 1931; died Sept 12, 2021
- As I will explain later, the Gospel of John contrasts sharply with the Synoptics, and this first lesson will discuss them to set the stage for understanding how and how much the Gospel of John differs
- I taught a series before on the “Liturgical-Midrash Model” of the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) that was discovered by Michael Goulder
 - Goulder was a brilliant Biblical scholar but wrote mostly for other scholars, and not for lay people

Source

- In addition to writing his own books, Spong wrote three wonderful books explaining Goulder's work
 - Born of a Woman discusses the “virgin” birth
 - Liberating the Gospels discusses the life and teachings of Jesus
 - Resurrection: Myth or Reality? discusses the resurrection
- Each of these three books covers material from Mark, Matthew, and Luke
 - People are accustomed to hearing “Matthew, Mark, and Luke” because that is their order in the New Testament, but I deliberately put Mark first to list them in the chronological order in which they were written; this is very important as I will explain later

The Synoptic Gospels

- The earliest writings in the New Testament are Paul's epistles, which were written before the gospels
- The disciples of Jesus were almost all illiterate and none of them wrote anything that survives (and probably wrote nothing at all)
- The Synoptic Gospels are accounts written decades after the crucifixion of Jesus, and were thus written by people who did not know Jesus personally
- Goulder makes a good argument that Mark, author of the first gospel written, as a young boy heard Peter (and/or perhaps another disciple of Jesus) talk about Jesus; he argues that Mark's mother was an early Jewish Christian who hosted worship services at her home where a few disciples preached and shared the Good News of Jesus
- Decades later, Mark wrote his gospel according to "what must have happened" when he merged what he heard from the disciples with Jewish scriptures (OT)

The Gospel of Mark

- The Synoptic Gospels as explained by Michael Goulder are accounts written to explain “what must have happened” according to Jewish scriptures (OT)
- What does this mean? It means this:
 - Jesus lived, taught, and was crucified; his story was passed along to Mark via Peter (or another disciple) when he preached in Mark’s home
 - Mark, being both a Christian (“a follower of the Way”) *and* a Jew, interpreted what he learned in the context of Judaism, which had a strong belief in the idea that **God foretold clues about the future in the scriptures**
 - “Follower” phrase indicates that one imitates Jesus, as opposed to relying on Jesus to save you
 - Mark later searched the scriptures (our “Old Testament”), as others did, for clues about the coming Messiah

The Gospel of Mark

- Mark wrote the first gospel (a *new* genre of literature) to explain the life of Jesus on the basis of *scriptural clues about the coming Messiah because Mark believed Jesus was the Messiah*
- Why did Mark need to explain that Jesus was the Messiah?
 - The Jews expected the Messiah to be powerful, such as a king, a prophet, or a cosmic figure; he was supposed to overthrow the Romans!
 - But Jesus was just the opposite! He had already come and gone without overthrowing the Romans!
 - None of the Jewish expectations of a Messiah included death by crucifixion, or being humble, or preaching to the poor, or saying to carry the cloak of a Roman soldier
 - Jesus as Messiah was preposterous to many Jews
 - To claim Jesus was the Messiah required a lot of explaining!

The Gospel of Mark

- Mark firmly believed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah and took on the task of explaining how Jesus was the Messiah despite the obvious contrast to common Jewish expectations
- On what basis can one explain to Jews that Jesus was the Messiah?
- The Jewish Scriptures!
 - Use the Jewish belief in scriptures *foretelling* God's plan
 - So Mark searched the scriptures for clues that he could use to explain that God really intended for the Messiah to be like Jesus, though this was contrary to all prior expectations of the Messiah
 - These clues were *not* a part of what he heard from the disciples, though Christian preachers may have contributed their ideas
- (1) God foretells his plans in scriptures + (2) Jesus was the Messiah => Jesus *must have been foretold* in the scriptures, and so certain events *must have occurred* in Jesus' life
- So Mark wrote a gospel (the first) to tell “what must have happened” to show how the Jesus was the Messiah

The Synoptic Gospels

- In searching the scriptures looking for possible references to Jesus, Mark found some with potential:
 - From Isaiah, the “suffering servant” passages show a hero as someone who serves, not someone powerful
 - Mark 14:50 says all the disciples forsook him and fled, meaning there was no one at the foot of the cross when Jesus was crucified; this is believed to come from Zechariah 13:7 “Strike the shepherd that the sheep may be scattered.”
 - Mark’s crucifixion account is written as the fulfillment of scripture, especially Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53
 - Mark quotes Jesus as saying “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, so well known as to be referred to as his “cry of dereliction”, but this is the opening line of Psalm 22, and other verses in the psalm are used by Mark in his crucifixion story; no one Jesus knew was at the cross when he died
- Spong says the gospels are “*liturgical interpretation, not remembered history*” (p. 25)

The Gospel of Mark

- Mark thus wrote a story of Jesus, which sounds to us rather biographical, based on stories and parables he heard from Peter combined with clues in the Jewish scriptures that could support events in the life of Jesus
- But not everything Mark wrote came from Peter
- I think Goulder's phrase "what must have happened" is perfect in describing this and I believe Mark was sincerely trying his best to record what he believed actually happened
- To support his argument (remember his audience includes Jews who reject the idea of Jesus as Messiah and Mark wants to win them over), Mark often includes phrases such as "according to the Scriptures" in his gospel; this is a reminder to Jewish readers to take seriously these scriptural passages that Mark claims point to Jesus
- I consider his gospel to be a "good faith effort" at reconstructing the life of Jesus, to describe "what must have happened" in Goulder's words
- Mark's gospel is a *combination* of authentic stories and parables of Jesus that he heard as a young boy and his "scripturally inferred" stories of Jesus (not from Peter) that he (and others) dreamed up that could be interpreted as referring to the Messiah

The Gospel of Mark

- Despite this “good faith effort” at reconstructing the life of Jesus, the simple fact is that many of the OT references Mark uses are *weak and sometimes events seem to be made up to fit a prophecy*
- Though I do believe that Jesus was the Messiah, I personally do not believe Mark’s OT references are actually foretelling Jesus (I do not agree with the Jewish belief that God foretells God’s actions)
- I believe the following:
 - The parables are the *authentic* Jesus; they are not tainted by Mark’s dubious scriptural references, but instead come directly from Peter who heard Jesus tell them
 - The “biographical” details about Jesus are suspect, as some of them are influenced by Mark’s desire to use scripture to prove that Jesus was the Messiah to skeptical Jews; some may be true
 - Furthermore, since I never believed in the Jewish understanding of a Messiah, I don’t consider the arguments Mark makes to be necessary; I can thus dismiss them without weakening my belief in the authenticity of the teaching of Jesus

Goulder's Liturgical Midrash Model

- Midrash is the *method of conveying meaning by making subtle references to another well known person*, the characteristics of whom are intended to apply to the subject of discussion
- A modern example is a politician saying he “was born in a log cabin”; what does he mean by that?
 - He means he is like Abraham Lincoln because we all know Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin and so when we hear “log cabin”, we think of Lincoln; Lincoln was a great president; the politician wants us to think he has Lincoln’s qualities, and thus we should vote for him; we know what he means because when we hear log cabin, we think of Lincoln
 - To non-Americans, or people with little knowledge of American history, the phrase “I was born in a log cabin” falls flat; it has no meaning! Without the historical background knowledge, the midrashic idea fails and the audience resorts to a literal interpretation. In a similar way, some of the references in the Gospel of Mark mean nothing to us! But they were meaningful to Jews of his time. Sadly, many people today wrongly take these stories to be literal history.
 - Knowing the cultural history is all important! It allows much to be conveyed in a few words for the target audience, but is meaningless to an audience lacking the historical knowledge of the culture
- So a midrashic phrase is *not* to be taken literally! Yet it can carry a great deal of importance for the right audience!

Goulder's Liturgical Midrash Model

- Having discussed Midrash on the previous slide, let's now turn to the term "liturgical"
- A liturgy is the practice of reading scripture according to a planned schedule; it was practiced in the Judaism of Jesus' time and is a common practice in churches today
- The Jews of the first century read the "Torah" (the first five books: Genesis through Deuteronomy) on a one year schedule
- They read the scripture *in order*, at least partly because they used a scroll, which made it very difficult to move forward or backwards to different books (plus, at that time, there were no chapters or verses, making it very difficult to find a certain passage); so they would read some text, stop for this Sabbath, and resume on the next Sabbath where they left off
- They also read other scriptures on a three year cycle (using a second scroll?)

Goulder's Liturgical Midrash Model

- The early Jewish Christians, following the idea that Jesus was the Messiah (many believed this *before* Mark wrote his gospel) thought Jesus to be a natural outgrowth of Judaism and so they wanted to *extend* Judaism to include Jesus
 - Of course, as we know from hindsight, this idea was not adopted by most Jews, and later Christianity broke away from Judaism, or, more accurately, Judaism *expelled* the Christians (more on this later)
 - But for the time period around 70 A.D., when Mark wrote his gospel, Jewish Christians were allowed into the synagogues; they followed traditional Judaism and attended Jewish worship services
 - So how did they fit Jesus in? The answer is that they held an *additional, separate worship service after* the purely Jewish services ended, sometimes in private homes, to discuss Jesus; they attended two services!
 - Were the “Jesus” worship services related in any way to the purely Judaic services they attended earlier in the synagogue?

Goulder's Liturgical Midrash Model

- Were the “Jesus” worship services related in any way to the purely Judaic services they attended earlier in the synagogue?
- The answer is yes! How so?
- In the synagogue, the Christians (along with non-Christian Jews) would hear the normal Jewish liturgy, which was read (in order) across the span of one year
- To tie in their belief in Jesus as the Messiah, their preachers sought to *relate Jesus to what they heard in the Jewish scriptures* earlier that same day
 - Personally, this is not important to me, but to them it was
- I earlier said that Mark looked for scriptural references to Jesus, but he was not the first to do this; early Christian preachers had been doing this for years; but none of this had been written down!
- Mark’s writing his gospel was the first effort to put into writing what various preachers had been struggling to do for some time: to show that Jesus “flowed” from Judaism
- Mark was trying to make their preaching job easier by putting all the ideas together in an organized document

Goulder's Liturgical Midrash Model

- So does Mark cover the entire year like the Jewish liturgy?
- The answer is no! Why?
- Mark chose to start his Gospel at Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, which makes sense; this holiday occurs in the fall, and floats in our calendar since the Jews used a lunar calendar (Rosh Hashanah is a two day holiday, that is October 3 (evening) - October 5 this year)
- But since Jesus was crucified during Passover (scholars not sure; but Mark portrayed it this way), which is in the spring, his gospel ends after Passover
- The result is that Mark's Gospel covers only about 6.5 months of the year!
- So Mark's gospel is liturgically read by Jewish Christians to match the liturgical Jewish reading in the synagogue, but only between the Jewish New Year in the fall and Passover in late spring; over the other 5.5 months, the Christian preachers are "on their own"
- So what was the result of this 5.5 month gap in the Gospel of Mark?

Goulder and the Synoptic Gospels

- So what was the result of this 5.5 month gap in the Gospel of Mark?
- There are two answers!
 - (1) the Gospel of Matthew
 - (2) the Gospel of Luke
- Goulder convincingly explains that first Matthew and later Luke decided that Mark's gospel was great but that it needed to be extended to cover the entire year
- So Matthew extended Mark's gospel by copying over 90% of it, and adding his own new text to extend it to cover 12 months; it still of course has the crucifixion near the end, though with more resurrection material
- Likewise Luke, about a decade or so later, copied half of Mark and added his own new text to make it cover a full year
- Matthew, like Mark, was Jewish; Luke was a convert, and Matthew's Gospel is more "Jewish"; hence Matthew's gospel is first in the NT
- Both Matthew and Luke added the virgin birth stories and their resurrection stories
 - In contrast, Mark has no virgin birth story and his gospel abruptly ends with the discovery of the empty tomb (someone else later added verses 9-20 after the original ending at Mark 16:8)

Goulder and the Synoptic Gospels

- So what does all of this mean?
- First, Mark, Matthew, and Luke are called the Synoptics (“seen together”) because both Matthew and Luke copied so much of Mark
- Secondly, and this is something many Christians fail to realize, since Matthew made up new text to supplement Mark, and Luke also made up new text to supplement Mark, and even though Luke had a copy of Matthew when he wrote, it turns out that Matthew and Luke differ from each other substantially in their new texts, sometimes to the point of being entirely incompatible
- So all three gospels agree when Matthew and Luke copy from Mark (the “synoptic” characteristic), but are *different, and even sometimes contradictory when Matthew and Luke add text Mark did not have*
- So the similarities of Mark, Matthew, and Luke are not *random*, but instead are predictable: if a story is the same in Mark and Luke, it will almost certainly be the same in Matthew; but if Luke has a story *not* in Mark, then it probably differs from Matthew or Matthew may not even have it; Matthew and Luke seldom agree unless the story is in Mark

Goulder and the Synoptic Gospels

- So what does all of this mean?
- One lesson from this is that Luke was not afraid of contradicting Matthew, even though he knew people were reading and accepting Matthew's gospel; to me this underscores the idea that even the gospel writers understood that the stories they wrote *should not be taken literally!*
 - Since Midrash is not to be taken literally, two conflicting midrashic claims can *both* be true; two different meanings can be applicable despite being contradictory if taken literally
- I cannot be certain Goulder would agree, but it seems to me that perhaps Luke might be thinking that what Matthew wrote was fine, but he would do him one better by coming up with a superior midrashic interpretation! I think that their thinking was that the more midrashic meaning they can extract, the better.
- When reading midrash, remember this: the important point the author is making is the *meaning* ("I am like Lincoln, vote for me!"), *not* the literal statement ("I was born in a log cabin")
- Don't let reverence overcome common sense!

Goulder and the Synoptic Gospels

- Another interesting point is this: for decades NT scholars had wondered why the Gospel of Mark was so much *shorter* than the others
 - This may seem like a trivial question, but it was taken seriously by Biblical scholars
 - Over decades of research, several answers were proposed, but none were compelling
 - Then Goulder nailed it! Mark is shorter because it covers 6.5 months of the liturgical year, while Matthew and Luke cover all 12
- In summary, in an effort to relate Jesus to the scripture read in the Jewish synagogue each Sabbath, the gospel writers tried as hard as they could to take phrases from those scriptures and use them to say something about Jesus in an attempt to convince skeptical Jews that Jesus was the Messiah
 - Sometimes these efforts floundered; sometimes they lead the gospel writers to contradict each other; but remember, behind the statements, the real intent of the gospel writers was to show Jesus as the Messiah, and *not* to make “real” biographical claims about where he was born, or that his birth was of a virgin, etc; their goal was to glorify Jesus by relating him to scripture and showing that he was the Messiah
 - We should not be overly concerned with these midrashic attempts but instead focus on what Jesus actually said (such as the parables)

Goulder and the Synoptic Gospels

- A good example of Matthew and Luke contradicting each other is the location of Jesus' birth: Bethlehem
- The Jews had a tradition that the Messiah, when he comes, would come from Bethlehem, and so both Matthew and Luke decided that by golly, they should claim Jesus came from Bethlehem! We are so used to assuming that Jesus was born in Bethlehem that it is quite jarring to many Christians (many even dismiss it) to hear that Jesus was not from Bethlehem (respectable scholars agree he was not; he was almost certainly born in Nazareth, where he lived almost his entire life)
- Since Mark had no virgin birth story, Matthew and Luke were each on their own, and as stated before, Luke was not afraid to differ from Matthew
- And Luke certainly differed!

Two Very Different Virgin Birth Stories

- Luke has the more well-known story: he assumes Mary and Joseph live in Nazareth and are only traveling to Bethlehem to register for a census (scholars dispute the existence of such a census at this time); they thus want to stay at an inn, but it is full, so Jesus is born in a manger
- Contrarily, Matthew assumes Mary and Joseph *are living* in Bethlehem (another shock to fundamentalists); so there is no census that makes them travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and thus no staying at the manger since the inn was full (much of Luke's story is not applicable in Matthew)
- Only Matthew has the “slaughter of the innocents”, which prompts Joseph to take his family to Egypt. Why Egypt? So Matthew can cite the Biblical prophecy “Out of Egypt I shall call my Son.”
- But Luke contradicts this by having Mary and Joseph stay in Bethlehem until Mary's purification rites (after 7 weeks I think) are performed, and then Luke has them return home to Nazareth, a place they had never lived in according to Matthew
- So how does Matthew have them end up in Nazareth? He claims that Joseph is told in a dream (remember the patriarch Joseph interpreted dreams - is this where the name of Jesus' father comes from?) that Herod is still killing babies down south, so when they return from Egypt they return to Bethlehem and then immediately move to Nazareth
- Thus the virgin birth stories of Matthew and Luke are *contradictory and completely irreconcilable* (and there are other differences I did not list)
- Despite this, Christmas pageants blend these two stories and most Christians are clueless about the vast discrepancies between them

Which of the following are in the Gospel of John?

- a) The baptism of Jesus
- b) Jesus is tempted in the wilderness
- c) Jesus tells parables
- d) In addition to performing signs and wonders, Jesus performs miracles
- e) Jesus preaches about the coming kingdom of God
- f) Jesus casts out demons
- g) Jesus is transfigured
- h) Jesus and his disciples have the Last Supper
- i) Jesus is tried before the Jewish Council