

## 11 Many gospels, one Jesus?

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One of the most striking features of the history of the early church is the decision to include four gospels in the canon of Christian Scripture. The aim of this chapter is to explore the significance of the fourfold gospel for our knowledge of Jesus. The main argument will be that the four gospel texts bear witness in distinctive ways to the one gospel message at the heart of which is the one person, Jesus of Nazareth. That there are four gospels standing side by side in the canon, none of which has been subordinated to another, is an invitation to recognise that the truth about Jesus to which the gospels bear witness is *irreducibly plural* without being either incoherent or completely elastic. The fourfold gospel points to the profundity of Jesus' impact on his followers, the inexhaustibility of the truth about him, and the way in which knowledge of Jesus is necessarily self-involving.

### WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

The fact of four gospels in the canon – themselves a selection from a larger number mostly now lost – obviously raises questions about our knowledge of Jesus. These questions push in opposite directions. On the one hand, there are questions arising from the fact of having *more than one* account of Jesus in the canon. Are the four gospel testimonies so diverse that we can have no confidence that they bring us into contact with the one Jesus? On the other hand, there are questions relating to the *restriction to four*. Given that, at a very early stage in the church's history, a decision was made to accept only four gospels as canonical, and that other (i.e. the apocryphal and gnostic) gospels were not included, are we left arbitrarily with the traditions which happened to be prized by people who knew no better or who happened to be the party in power at the time?

Both sets of questions are legitimate and important. Why? Because they have to do with the *grounds for our knowledge of Jesus*. Since, according to Christian teaching, human identity and salvation are bound up inextricably

with our knowledge of Jesus, the authority of the fourfold gospel or of some alternative (one gospel only? an unlimited multiplicity?) deserves considered attention.<sup>1</sup>

THE SHAPES THIS PROBLEM TAKES IN THE  
(POST-)MODERN WORLD

Perhaps surprisingly, this issue is alive and well in current scholarly and popular debate. Take feminist criticism, with its central concern to critique and reinterpret the tradition in ways that overthrow patriarchal domination in church and society in order to bring about the liberation of women. Given that questions about the New Testament canon are *normative* questions relating directly to issues of authority, identity and church polity, and given also that the canon is a product of decisions by a patriarchal hierarchy in the early church, may it not be the case that the fourfold gospel canon is too restrictive, denying to women the 'lost coins' of inspiration and authority available in the (so-called) apocryphal gospels? In brief, is the fourfold gospel canon an instrument of male domination? The assumption that this may well be the case has led in one of two directions: some *expand* the canon to include apocryphal works (including apocryphal gospels), while others *go behind* the canonical gospels to see if the Jesus who can be found there is amenable to interpretation in feminist terms as (implicitly or explicitly) an advocate and practitioner of women's liberation. (See further Schüssler Fiorenza 1995b; Kwok and Schüssler Fiorenza 1998, esp. 29–36.)

The status of the fourfold gospel canon is also at issue in another area of scholarly and popular debate: the 'Quest of the historical Jesus'. Arising in part out of a suspicion that, in the interests of early church orthodoxy, the fourfold gospel *conceals* the truth about the 'real' Jesus as much as it reveals it, the attempt is made to reconstruct the 'historical' Jesus independently of the canonical shape of the gospels. Again, as in the case of feminism – another form of ideological criticism whose historical and philosophical genealogy it shares to some extent – this leads in one of two directions with respect to the fourfold gospel: either the expansion of the canon (sometimes to the point of doing away with the idea of a canon altogether) in order to draw upon whatever sources allow an historical reconstruction of Jesus, or going behind it by means of source, form and redaction criticism.<sup>2</sup> In passing, it is worth noting that, if a more certain knowledge of the 'real' Jesus is the goal of those engaged in this Quest, the results are not all that promising. What we are given is Jesus the Jewish Prophet, the Cynic Jesus, the Zealot Jesus, Jesus the Mediterranean Peasant, Jesus the Sage, and so on (cf. Witherington 1995;

Moxnes 1998). In other words, dispensing with the fourfold gospel does not necessarily solve the problem of a plurality of portraits of Jesus. Instead it gives us a different plurality.

A third example is less mainstream but no less interesting. It arises occasionally in journalistic and media-inspired debates, and has as its focus an interest in what we might call the 'esoteric Jesus'. In this context, *conspiracy theories* tend to thrive: there is a truth to be known about Jesus which church authorities (such as the Vatican) are only too keen to suppress. The fourfold gospel does not give us Jesus-as-he-really-was: but new finds are making possible the discovery of the 'real' truth about him. The Dead Sea Scrolls are sometimes enlisted in the debate here (e.g. typically in Thiering 1992). So also are the gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi. The underlying assumption is that, interpreted with enough ingenuity and with a willingness to question the vested interests of the Establishment (whether academic or ecclesiastical), these texts offer the possibility, not only of filling in historical gaps in our background knowledge, but of revealing a different and more authentic Jesus altogether. In the context of these debates, the fourfold gospel is as irrelevant as the canon as a whole. New gospels and a new canon take their place. The Jesus who surfaces is the Jesus previously hidden but now brought to light by the wit of the investigative journalist.<sup>3</sup>

Curiously, these basically liberal or radical attempts to establish our knowledge of Jesus by looking beyond or behind the fourfold gospel canon are mirrored to some degree by strategies that come from the other end of the religious and theological spectrum altogether. That is to say, in religiously conservative circles, there is a tendency to accept the fourfold gospel (on scriptural or traditional grounds) while at the same time playing down the inherent plurality of four gospels in one canon. There is a tension here, at the heart of which is a set of beliefs about revelation and salvation. If revelation comes through Scripture (and tradition), and if assurance of salvation comes through receiving that scriptural revelation as true, then it is vital that the testimony of the gospels to Jesus as Saviour and Lord is uniform and stable. One way to ensure this is to ignore the differences between the gospels and concentrate on the important 'purple passages'. Alternatively, rather than ignore the differences, the attempt is made to *harmonise* them in order to allow the plurality of gospels to speak with a single voice. Sometimes, that voice is provided by giving precedence to just one of the four gospels, for example, the Gospel of John, as if Matthew, Mark and Luke 'really say' the same as John but John says it better. Whichever of these alternatives is followed, this approach adopts (implicitly or otherwise) a canon 'within' the canon, and, in that sense, it is like those approaches

already described which go behind or beyond the canon to something accepted as more important.

What these brief case-studies show is that the question, 'many gospels, one Jesus?', is not only alive and well, but also of central importance in a wide variety of areas of study and of religious and secular life.<sup>4</sup> Before proceeding further, however, it needs to be demonstrated that, at the level of the actual gospel narratives, there is a significant issue: *the plurality is there* and has to be reckoned with. Any unifying moves have to take this plurality into account.

#### A DEFINITE PLURALITY

The first point to make is that, not only are there four gospels in the canon, but each differs from the other. It is not just the case, for example, that the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke – called 'synoptic' because they share traditions in common and therefore can be 'seen together' – are like each other and different from the Gospel of John, even if their literary interdependence gives the Synoptics greater homogeneity. Indeed, the gospels themselves provide strong evidence that, at least to some extent, one of the motives for their creation was the desire to improve upon (i.e. to give a more compelling account of Jesus than) their predecessors. In other words, there was an impetus towards a multiplicity of gospels from the beginning. Thus (assuming both the chronological priority of Mark and that Matthew used Mark), Matthew 'improves' Mark by incorporating and massively expanding his narrative of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and by making minor modifications of many kinds. Luke states, as one of his specific reasons for writing, his desire to give his addressee Theophilus a life of Jesus that goes further than the '*many*' previous accounts, '... so that you [Theophilus] may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed' (Luke 1.1–4). And the Gospel of John shows a clear awareness of having been selective in the use of the Jesus tradition and of using the tradition in a creative way: 'Now Jesus did *many other signs* in the presence of his disciples *which are not written in this book*. But these are written so that you may come to believe...' (John 20.30–31; cf. also 21.24–25).

But having said just now that the Synoptics themselves represent a genuine multiplicity, it is nevertheless also the case that John is distinctive in comparison with the Synoptics taken together (cf. usefully Smith 1980). First, they differ in their accounts of Jesus' origins. Mark begins with the appearance of John the Baptist at the River Jordan and Jesus' baptism by him. Matthew and Luke take us a stage further back and provide us with

genealogies, birth and (at least in the case of Luke) infancy narratives. John shows no interest in the birth and boyhood of Jesus, and instead focuses all our attention on his identification of Jesus as the incarnation of the pre-existent *Logos* (Word) of God (John 1.1–18).

There are also major differences in the accounts of Jesus' miracles. Whereas in the Synoptics the demon exorcisms bulk large, in John there are none at all. Nor is there any account of the Transfiguration, an event which is so pivotal in the Synoptics and which would have lent itself so readily to John's interest in demonstrating the divine 'glory' (*doxa*) of Jesus as the Son of God. Of the healing miracles, John has no precise parallel to any of the Marcan healings, and he reduces the number to just four, a fraction of the number in the Synoptics. When it comes to the interpretation of the miracles, there is another contrast. In the Synoptics, they are pointers to the in-breaking of the kingdom of God in Jesus (cf. Matt 12.28 par. Luke 11.20). In John, they are 'signs' (*sēmeia*) whose purpose is much more explicitly christological: to reveal the identity of Jesus as the divine Son (e.g. John 2.11). Jesus, the proclaimer of the kingdom in the Synoptics, becomes Jesus the king in John; and the miracles are signs of his kingship (cf. John 6.15; 18.33–38a).

But it is perhaps in the teaching of the Johannine Jesus that John's distinctiveness comes most strongly to the fore. For example, although he speaks in figures and allegories, he does not teach in 'kingdom' parables in the way that is so characteristic of the Jesus of the Synoptics (e.g. Mark 4; Matt 13; Luke 15). Instead, and in contrast with the pithy aphorisms of the Synoptics, there are long convoluted discourses in which a theme is taken and developed at length in a rather homiletic style. And in relation to the content of Jesus' teaching, it is generally true to say that most of the synoptic teaching is not in John, and most of the Johannine teaching is not in the Synoptics. Again, the synoptic proclaimer of the coming of the kingdom of God becomes the Johannine revealer of himself as God's 'I am' (e.g. John 4.26; 6.35; 8.12, 58; 10.11; 11.25; etc.).

There can be no question, therefore, of denying either the differences between each of the four gospels or the difference between John and the Synoptics. The undoubted evidence of literary interrelationship between the Synoptics demonstrated by source criticism – for example, the overwhelming likelihood that Matthew and Luke used Mark – make these differences all the more remarkable. That is to say, the respective gospel writers had an evident sense of freedom – of *obligation* even – to retell the story of Jesus in ways significantly different from (and, from their respective points of view, implicitly better than) their predecessors. Likewise, the evidence of a

likely interrelationship between the Synoptics and John, as demonstrated by traditio-historical analysis, shows the extent to which John, claiming the inspiration of the Spirit-Paraclete (cf. John 14.25–26; 16.12–15), felt obliged, nevertheless, to take the Jesus tradition in new directions.

#### FOUR PORTRAITS OF JESUS, NOT ONE

To reinforce the point that the plurality of canonical accounts of Jesus is real, it is worth attempting a thumbnail characterisation of each of the four portraits of Jesus, following the canonical order (see further Kingsbury 1981; Stanton 1989; Barton 1992). For Matthew, Jesus is Immanuel, ‘God with us’ (cf. Matt 1.23; 28.20): the one who as God’s Son authoritatively reveals the life of the kingdom of heaven and invites into discipleship all who accept his invitation, follow his example and obey his teaching. With the coming of Jesus as the Messiah of the end-time, God has drawn near to bring salvation and judgement to Israel and the nations through the revelation of his will, above all in the death of his Son ‘for the forgiveness of sins’ (Matt 26.28). This brings into being a ‘new covenant’ community, the *ekklesia* (‘church’) of disciples of Jesus drawn from people of every nation, Gentiles as well as Jews. The ending of Matthew ties all the main threads together: the pre-eminent and universal authority of Jesus as the crucified and risen Son who comes to his people; the command to the disciples to go on mission to all nations, baptising as Jesus himself was baptised and teaching as Jesus had taught them; and the reassuring promise of his sovereign presence ‘to the end of the age’ (Matt 28.16–20).

The Jesus of Mark’s Gospel is a figure of mystery and paradox who evokes incomprehension and awe-struck ‘fear and trembling’. He is the Spirit-empowered Son of God and heavenly Son of Man (cf. Dan 7.13–14) who teaches and heals ‘with authority’, but who nevertheless ‘*must* suffer many things’ (Mark 8.31; 9.31; 10.33) and whose life ends with a cry of forsakenness on a Roman cross. In this fundamental paradox is the ‘messianic secret’ for which Mark is famous. It is the ‘secret’ of the hiddenness of the saving power of God in the weakness of the Son of God who, in obedience to the divine will, gives his life as ‘a ransom for many’ (Mark 10.45). To this secret, only those with faith are given access: they are portrayed in the narrative as a woman with a chronic illness, a Gentile woman with a demonised daughter, children brought to Jesus, a blind beggar by the roadside, and the like. It is a mystery of cosmic significance sustained right through to the end, an ending whose difference from that of Matthew could hardly be greater: ‘So they [the women] went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had

seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid' (Mark 16.8).

In Luke's writing, there is a profound innovation. Luke tells the story of Jesus in, not one part, but two: what we call the Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. The two-part narrative represents a deliberate authorial decision. What was at stake for Luke was a way of seeing history. (It is there in Matthew and Mark also, but not so emphatically.) In brief, God's saving purposes for humankind are being fulfilled (1) in the mission of Jesus the Messiah to Israel in the power of the Spirit (the Gospel), and (2) in the mission of Jesus' apostles 'to the ends of the earth' in the power of the same Spirit (Acts). 'Today' is the day of salvation (cf. Luke 2.11; 4.21; 19.9; 23.43), a message which Jesus takes all the way to Jerusalem, and which Paul takes all the way to Rome. The coming of Jesus inaugurates the new age of eschatological (end-time) fulfilment of God's promises to Israel. This is an age of unbounded grace in which salvation is offered to all who repent and come with joy to Jesus' eschatological banqueting table. For the self-righteous this is a scandal; for the 'poor, maimed, blind and lame' it is joy and peace and issues in praise to God. Once again, the Gospel's ending is paradigmatic of the evangelist's distinctive picture as a whole. There is the exaltation of Jesus, the empowerment of the apostles, the central role in salvation history of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the joyful doxology of eschatological fulfilment: 'While he [the risen Jesus] was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the Temple blessing God' (Luke 24.51–53).

What, finally, of John's portrait of Jesus (of which something has been said already)? Perhaps most striking is the cosmic scale of the drama of salvation in which the Jesus of John plays the main part. Somehow, to call Jesus 'Messiah', if by that is meant Israel's saviour, while it is true, is not enough (cf. 6.15). Rather, Jesus is recast as the incarnate Son of the heavenly Father who shows God's love to the whole world. Above all, he is identified with the divine *Logos* (Word) of God, pre-existent with God. Like the Wisdom figure of biblical and Jewish tradition, he is the agent through whom God created the world. He is the bearer of the divine glory. And he is the One who descended from heaven and took flesh as Jesus of Nazareth (cf. John 1.1–18 and *passim*). His incomparability as the giver of 'eternal life' is revealed in the gigantic sign-miracles he performs before the people in the first main part of John's Gospel (chs. 1–12), culminating in the raising of Lazarus his friend, 'dead *four days*' (John 11.39). In the second part of the Gospel (chs. 13–21), his incomparability is also revealed in his ascent back to the Father via the cross

and resurrection to prepare a place in heaven for 'his own', an ascent which shows that he (and no other) is, indeed, 'the way, the truth and the life' (John 14.6). Indeed, so incomparable is Jesus that traditional Christian belief in the coming of salvation and judgement in time *future* reflected in the Synoptics is transposed in John into an assurance that salvation and judgement have come *already* with the coming, in Jesus, of the heavenly Son of Man.

These thumb-nail sketches lead to only one conclusion. The accounts of the life of Jesus in the four canonical gospels are irreducibly diverse. Each has an integrity of its own. As redaction criticism and (more recently) narrative criticism have helped us to see, we *have* to speak of 'the Jesus of Matthew', 'the Jesus of Mark', and so on. Harmonisation (i.e. trying to make all four gospels say the same thing), at least at the level of what the gospels actually say, is not possible. Nor, given the evident sense on the part of the gospel writers that no single account could do full justice to its sublime subject matter, is harmonisation even desirable. This does not mean that nothing coherent can be said about Jesus, nor that it is a matter of 'anything goes'. What it does mean is that our knowledge of Jesus will always be partial, always open to correction, always a matter of listening to the diverse testimonies of those who claim to know or to have known him. That will include the testimonies of the gospel writers themselves.

PRECEDENTS AND ANALOGIES: PLURALITY IN THE BIBLE  
AND EARLY JUDAISM

In passing, it is worth observing that this clear plurality in the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus is not unprecedented from the viewpoint of the canon as a whole and developments in early Judaism. In the Old Testament, there is a very significant amount of narrative repetition at both micro- and macro-levels (cf. Alter 1981:88–113), the most striking examples of the latter being the parallel accounts of the Davidic dynasty in the books of Kings and Chronicles. If we cast our net wider to include the literature of early Judaism (cf. Nickelsburg 1981), we note there that stories from the Bible are retold and multiple traditions about the patriarchs and prophets take shape. For example, the *Book of Jubilees* elaborates the narrative running from Gen 1 to Exod 12; the story of Joseph is retold and elaborated in *Joseph and Asenath*; patriarchal death-bed scenes provide the occasion for the account of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*; and the *Testament of Moses* retells the events described in Deut 31–34.

This implies something important about the nature of biblical and related literature: that its main concern was not to give a single, fixed account

of the past, but to provide authoritative, scriptural resources to enable Israel (and subsequently the Jews) to live *from the past in the present and with a view to the future*. For this to be possible, multiple retellings and ongoing elaborations of the oral and literary inheritance were essential.

Given that the transmission and inscribing of the gospel traditions about Jesus took place in a primarily Jewish milieu and was shaped heavily by scriptural precedents, it is very likely that similar dynamics were at work. The story of Jesus, told and retold, provided authoritative, scriptural resources enabling believers in Christ to ‘follow’ him, as the first disciples had done, in subsequent generations. The remembrance (*anamnēsis*) of Jesus was not a way of ‘fixing’ him in the past, but of encountering now, in the present, the one who had been with the disciples then (cf. 1 Cor 11.23–34a; see further Dahl 1976).

#### WHAT IS A GOSPEL?

As well as observing scriptural precedents that make the plurality of gospels in the canon understandable, we also need to ask *what a gospel is*. For it may be the case that the phenomenon of ‘many gospels’ is only a problem if the nature and purpose of the gospels are misunderstood.

The first point to be made here has to do with the word ‘gospel’ itself (see further Talbert 1981). In earliest Christian usage, ‘the gospel’ (*to euaggelion*) referred to the message of salvation and judgement proclaimed by Jesus (cf. Mark 1.14–15) and, subsequently, by the apostles (cf. 1 Cor 1.17–25; Rom 1.1–5). The gospel, in other words, was *an announcement of hope and warning* in view of the drawing near of God. Because God’s presence was believed to have been displayed pre-eminently in Jesus himself – in his life, death and resurrection – the message of the gospel came to focus on Jesus.

This message was communicated primarily in oral form by those who could claim to be witnesses (cf. Acts 1.15–26, esp. vv. 21–22; 1 Cor 9.1; 15.1–11). But from very early days, the ongoing oral proclamation was accompanied and supplemented by written forms of communication (cf. Luke 1.1–4; John 20.30–31). Some of these took the form of letters, as in the case of Paul; and here, the extent to which the letters represent personal testimony to the living Lord is noteworthy. Other written communication took a form most like what the ancients would have called *bioi* (‘lives’) of Jesus (see Burridge 1992). They are called ‘gospels’ because their content is *the* gospel of the drawing near of God in Christ. Hence, in the opening of Mark (‘The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God’), ‘gospel’ designates *both* a literary work for which this first sentence is the opening *and*

a proclamation whose source and content is 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (Mark 1.1; cf. 1.14–15; 8.35; 10.29; 14.9).

Understanding the nuances of the term 'gospel' in this way is important because it allows us to see that *multiple and diverse* testimonies to Christ, in forms both oral and written, were an inevitable expression of the revelatory impact he made on those who came to know him before and after the resurrection. This impact was *personal*. That is implicit in the gospel superscriptions, which take the form 'the gospel according to so-and-so' (see now Hengel 2000:48–52): in other words, the *one* gospel from and about Jesus Christ *in the version of* Matthew or Mark or Luke or John. It was also *deep and ongoing*: no single narrative could convey it adequately. More than one gospel was not only inevitable but also necessary.

#### WHY FOUR?

This question invites answers at the historical level and at the theological level – though, as we shall see, the two are closely intertwined. We begin with the historical, noting what was said earlier, that developments generally took two directions: towards multiplication (*why only four* and not more?) and, alternatively, towards reduction (*why not just one* gospel in the canon?). (See further Cullmann 1956, Stanton 1990 and Hengel 2000.)

Initially, the trend was towards multiplication, not only with the writing of the four gospels, each seeking to improve upon or supplement its predecessor, but also with the writing of other 'gospels', some of which were no more than collections of the sayings (*logia*) of Jesus, like the *Gospel of Thomas*, others of which were elaborations, using legendary material to fill in the silences about Jesus left by the earlier gospels. Examples of the latter are birth and infancy 'gospels', like the *Protoevangelium of James* and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. There are also 'gospels' that elaborate the other end of Jesus' life. *The Gospel of Peter* is an apocryphal reworking and expansion of the passion and resurrection, while other works contain apocryphal post-resurrection revelations, like *The Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Epistle of the Apostles* and the *Gospel of Mary*.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, and perhaps in part as a reaction against this multiplicity, there was a trend towards reducing the number of gospels, even to the point of accepting just one. We know from Irenaeus that there were docetic circles that preferred the Gospel of Mark, and that the Ebionites recognised only the Gospel of Matthew. As is also well known, Marcion (died c. 160) accepted as valid (by virtue of its link with Paul) only an edited version of the Gospel of Luke, and dispensed with the rest. In the Syrian church, Tatian

took a different line. Rather than accepting as valid only one of the four, he synthesised or ‘harmonised’ the four into one, in a work (c. 170) that became known as the *Diatessaron* (i.e. ‘the [one] from the four’).

How, then, did a fourfold gospel gain acceptance over these alternatives? At the mundane level, one reason probably has to do with an important innovation in the early church: the use of the codex rather than the scroll. The codex allowed more than one gospel to be bound together side by side; and there is early evidence of Christian codices containing all four gospels. Indeed, it may be the case that the fourfold gospel presupposes the four-gospel codex and vice versa: the fourfold gospel was made a practical possibility by the codex, and, conversely, the development of the multiple gospel codex was an expression of the acceptance of the fourfold gospel (see Stanton 1990:326–29, 336–40).

But the main reason is more profound: it concerns the preservation of the unity and catholicity of the church in the shared remembrance of Jesus, by bringing together in a single, fourfold collection the most authoritative testimony to him. The most famous ancient defence of this fourfold gospel is that of the second-century Bishop of Lyons, Irenaeus (c. 130–200). His argument reflects the concern of the early church to show, among other things, that the fourfold gospel was not arbitrary. The relevant passage from his work *Against Heresies*, written c. 180, is worth quoting at length<sup>6</sup> (3.11.8–9, in Richardson *et al.* 1953:1.382–3):

The gospels could not possibly be either more or less in number than they are. Since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is spread over all the earth, and the pillar and foundation of the Church is the gospel, and the Spirit of life, it fittingly has four pillars, everywhere breathing out incorruption and revivifying men. From this it is clear that the Word, the artificer of all things, he who sits upon the cherubim and sustains all things, being manifested to men gave us the gospel, fourfold in form but held together by the Spirit. As David said, when asking for his coming, ‘O sitter upon the cherubim, show yourself.’ For the cherubim have four faces, and their faces are images of the activity of the Son of God. For the first living creature, it says, was like a lion, signifying his active and princely and royal character; the second was like an ox, showing his sacrificial and priestly order; the third had the face of man, indicating very clearly his coming in human guise; and the fourth was like a flying eagle, making plain the giving of the Spirit who broods over the church. Now the Gospels, in which Christ is enthroned, are

like these . . . Again, the Word of God himself used to speak to the patriarchs before Moses, in a divine and glorious manner, but for those under the Law he established a priestly and liturgical order; after this, becoming man, he sent out the gift of the Holy Spirit into the whole earth, guarding us by his own wings. As for the activity of the Son of God, such is the form of the living creatures; and as is the form of the living creatures, such is also the character of the Gospel. For the living creatures were quadriform, and the gospel and the activity of the Lord is fourfold. Therefore four general covenants were given to mankind: one was that of Noah's deluge, by the bow; the second was Abraham's, by the sign of circumcision; the third was the giving of the Law by Moses; and the fourth is that of the Gospel, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Since this is the case, they are foolish and uninstructed, even audacious, who destroy the pattern of the gospel, and present either more or less than four forms of the gospel – the former, because they claim to have found more than the truth, the latter because they annul the dispensation of God . . .

Irenaeus' arguments clearly presuppose ways of thinking that do not fit well with modern notions of rationality. But they are instructive nonetheless. In this case, he starts from what he takes to be the *givenness* of the fourfold gospel and argues in *post hoc* fashion for a deep concurrence between their fourfold character and God's providence in creation and salvation. Thus, by theological and scriptural arguments of a partly numerological kind, reinforced by appeals to the scriptural texts on the 'four living creatures' around the heavenly throne (cf. Ezek 1; Rev 4), Irenaeus shows that, far from being arbitrary, the fourfold gospel is miraculous and providential, the very manifestation of God's will and character.

For present purposes, what is of lasting importance here is Irenaeus' implicit recognition that a defence of the fourfold gospel has to come *from outside but not independently of* the gospels themselves, that the validity of the subsequently canonised fourfold gospel has to be judged against a canon (or 'rule') *of another kind*, namely, the 'Rule of Faith' (*regula fidei*).<sup>7</sup> The Rule of Faith, the earliest references to which come from Irenaeus himself, is understood as the basis in universal (i.e. catholic) belief and practice on which the church orders its common life and distinguishes truth from error. On this basis, the fourfold gospel is not canonical because it is in the (literary) canon of Scripture; but rather, it is in the canon of Scripture because it is canonical.<sup>8</sup> That is to say, in the life and worship of the early church claiming the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the four gospels, and only these four, were

found to bear *true and sufficient* (even if partial and incomplete) witness to the coming of God in Christ for the salvation of the world. The *gospels* bore witness to the *gospel*.

This helps to explain why more strictly historical matters about the gospels, important to us, were relatively unimportant to the leaders of the church in the first two centuries. Originally, for example, the gospels may have had no authorial attribution.<sup>9</sup> The important thing was not so much who wrote the gospels, but whether or not the gospels themselves were judged to be true and sufficient witnesses to Jesus. The authors were not ‘authors’ in our modern sense of the word. Rather, they saw themselves as ‘servants of the word’ (to use Luke’s phrase in Luke 1.2), whose responsibility and calling was to pass on and interpret the oral and written tradition concerning Jesus and the gospel. In other words, of overriding importance was the desire to affirm the *apostolicity* of the gospels, the conformity of their contents with the gospel message. Attribution to an actual apostle or to the follower of an apostle was important primarily in serving that end.

#### FOUR GOSPELS, ONE JESUS AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

In the light of the preceding, we may conclude that Christian theology and spirituality would be seriously impoverished if, instead of having four gospels for our knowledge of Jesus, we had only one. For instead of receiving an invitation to encounter, through patient attention to multiple apostolic testimonies, the mystery of salvation revealed in Jesus, we might be tempted to think that whatever ‘mystery’ there was could be grasped in a single account, which left no questions unanswered and asked for none. With four gospels, we are challenged by the possibility that the reality to which they bear witness is too sublime to be encapsulated in any one account.

Thus, we do not need to see a plurality of gospels in a negative way at all – as if all it does is throw up damaging ‘contradictions’ that it is our duty to explain away, in case a single crack in the static edifice of Christian revelation were to bring the whole edifice down. On the contrary, what a plurality of gospels offers is a complex repetition and multiple elaboration that *intensifies and complicates*. The Jesus of whom the gospels tell is not fully known in the first encounter. We have to return again and again, not just to one gospel but to all four, and not just to the gospels but to the whole scriptural witness. And theological wisdom suggests that we will gain most out of successive encounters if we come to the gospels, not just on our own, but in good company: the good company of the communion of saints past and present, who embody in their lives and in their worship what

true knowledge of Jesus, mediated by the gospels, is all about (cf. Matzko 1996).

### Notes

1. This is the thrust of Childs 1984:143–56, esp. 153.
2. A recent example of ‘historical Jesus’ research that works with an expanded canon is represented in the Jesus Seminar. See Funk and Hoover 1993. The work of the Seminar is described by Borg 1994:160–81, who is one of its members. The ‘fifth gospel’ incorporated with the four canonical gospels is the *Gospel of Thomas*, a gnostic work discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945. For a lively critique of the Jesus Seminar and related works, see Johnson 1996, esp. 1–56.
3. See for this Loughlin 1995, on Baigent and Leigh 1982 as well as Baigent and Leigh 1991.
4. There is also a significant inter-religious dimension to this subject, which cannot be pursued here. I refer to the difficulty that the fourfold gospel canon poses for Muslims. In a personal correspondence of 7 December 2000, Dr Hugh Goddard, an expert in Muslim–Christian relations at Nottingham University, writes: ‘Compared with the (relatively) simple and homogeneous Qur’an, therefore, the fact that there are four accounts of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is pretty perplexing to Muslims, since the Qur’an itself refers to the Gospel (singular) and Muslims’ expectation is that that Gospel will be pretty like the Qur’an – i.e. a record of Jesus’ message, the words which God told him to recite. In fact, of course, it isn’t . . . Later Muslims thinking on this question therefore came up with the idea that the four Gospel accounts as they exist today are not a faithful record of the original Gospel given to Jesus, but versions made up by later generations of Christians which are therefore corrupt by virtue of not being original. Jesus’ original message, therefore, according to most Muslims, has been lost, and that is one reason for the later coming of Islam – to restore the true message of Jesus.’ For more on this see Goddard 1995.
5. Such sources are readily available in translation in Schneemelcher 1991, vol. 1. For an introductory survey, see Bauckham 1992.
6. Not least because of the influence of the symbolism of the ‘four living creatures’ on subsequent Christian art, including illuminated manuscripts of the fourfold gospel like the Book of Kells, in which Matthew is symbolised by the man-like creature, Mark by the lion, Luke by the ox and John by the eagle. For a lively exploration of the gospels that draws upon these characterisations, see Burrige 1994.
7. See further Hanson 1962:75–129. The contents of the Rule of Faith, beginning with passages from Irenaeus’ *Against heresies*, are set out on pp. 86–91.
8. For a discussion of ‘the relation of the Rule of Faith to Scripture’ in the teaching of the Fathers, see Hanson 1962:102–17.
9. The matter is disputed. For the argument that the gospel superscriptions were original and that the gospels did not circulate at first anonymously, see Hengel 2000:50–56.