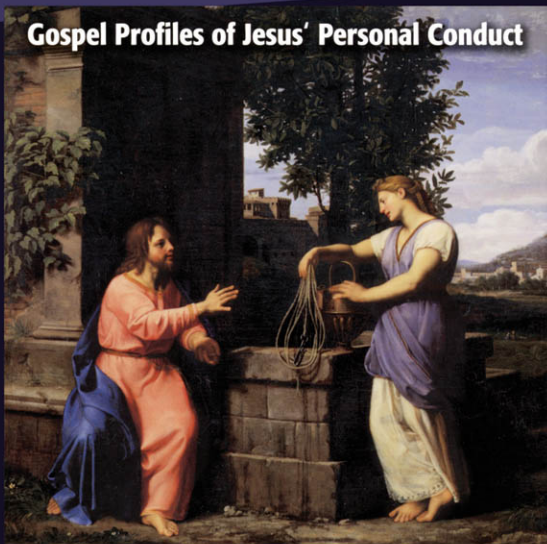


What *Did* Jesus Do?

Gospel Profiles of Jesus' Personal Conduct



F. Scott Spencer



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To Janet Marie, Lauren Michael, and Meredith Leigh
(again)

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Preface

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard it.

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. . . .

In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. Then Peter remembered and said to him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.” (Mark 11:12–21)

Presuming that what Jesus would do today has some correlation with what he actually did then—in first-century Roman Palestine as reported in the New Testament—how in the world might a contemporary Christian go about replicating and applying these bizarre incidents of tree-cursing and temple-disrupting? If our favorite grocery store happens not to stock a particular fruit we are craving—because it’s out of season!—do we proceed, with Jesus’ blessing, to curse the fruit bin, the produce manager, and everything else in sight? And if the preacher goes on too much about money one Sunday or if we are just generally miffed at various church personnel and programs, do we bust in during a worship service and start upending pews, pulpits, altars—anything not nailed down—and bouncing ushers from the premises?

No Christians I know, however literalistic they might claim to be, would endorse such an aberrant application of Jesus' activity in the modern world, any more than they would advocate physical amputation as the proper response to Jesus' challenge, "If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off" (Matt 5:30). As we recognize elements of metaphor and hyperbole in Jesus' teaching, we acknowledge that some of his actions may be overly dramatic or deliberately extreme for effect (though we may hotly disagree about which actions fit this bill). Not everything Jesus did provides a clear model for human behavior.

But, on the other hand, most Christians I know assume that much or most of what Jesus did has exemplary value for contemporary behavior and that if Jesus walked the streets of modern America today, he would do pretty much the same things the gospels claim he originally did (perhaps in jeans and T-shirt rather than cloak and tunic—in any case, the sandals stay). But here's the rub: I am doubtful that even a majority of American Christians (I cannot speak for the rest of the Christian world) know enough about the *content* of Jesus' actions in the gospels to justify this assumption of relevance. By all accounts, biblical literacy is in sharp decline, even among the devout and fervent. Accordingly, our view of what Jesus would do today is only tenuously tied to what Jesus *did* do in the gospel narratives.

How then can we properly use the life of Jesus as an ethical model? How can we prudently sort out the strange and unique actions of Jesus from his more acceptable and imitable behavior? Are gestures like his "tree-witching" and "temple tantrum"¹ truly eccentric or in fact symptomatic of other arcane rituals, and do they have any redeeming ethical value that sensitive environmentalists (who protect trees) and liturgists (who respect holy sites)—or for that matter, most ordinary, decent folk—wouldn't object to?

Alas, despite all these "how" questions, this book is not a comprehensive "how to" manual on using the gospels to address contemporary moral problems.² My aim is much more basic and modest—something more like a preliminary "what" resource. In brief, this text attempts to collate and discuss gospel information about Jesus' personal conduct in a lively and accessible format conducive to subsequent ethical reflection. It springs from the bedrock assumption that we cannot begin to grapple with "What *would* Jesus do?" until we have more than a vague inkling of "What *did* Jesus do?"

Commentaries and monographs on individual gospels provide a wealth of data about particular features of Jesus' professional career but often fail both to correlate this material with other gospel presentations and to concentrate on more personal dimensions of Jesus' life—his family, friends, health, occupation, finances, and reputation—in other words, the stuff of which much of our ethical lives consist. This book focuses on precisely these topics, drawing on pertinent incidents from all four canonical gospels. I try to walk a tightrope between synthesis and description, unity and diversity, endeavoring to bring some coherence to the accounts of Jesus' conduct but all the while respecting the integrity of each gospel's narrative and resisting tendencies to impose a superficial harmony on the four presentations.

My appreciation and interpretation of the gospels' portraits of Jesus is indebted to more scholars than I could possibly mention and, in fact, given the more popular nature of this project, I have not cluttered the body of the text with scholars' names, lengthy citations, or the spectrum of academic arguments currently in vogue. But I have tried to compensate for this less technical style with ample use of endnotes, supplying more detailed explication of gospel passages and pointing the interested reader to supporting primary and secondary literature.

Given the suggestive rather than definitive nature of this book, I will be happy if it simply encourages readers to probe the gospels for themselves, to ground their Christian moral reasoning and decision making more firmly in the gospels' testimony, and to "examine the scriptures every day to see whether these things are so," as the Berean audience responded to Paul's message (Acts 17:10–11). I further hope that this study will spur a spate of fresh investigations of other practical dimensions of Jesus' ethics (e.g., *What Did Jesus Teach His Followers to Do?*; *How Did Jesus Treat Others?* [social ethics], *Women* in particular [feminist ethics], *Nature* [environmental ethics], and *the State?* [political ethics]), as well as the ethics of other scriptural figures (e.g., *What Did the Hebrew Prophets Do?*; *What Did the Apostle Paul Do?*) under the broad rubric of "Biblical Resources for Ethical Reflection."

Special thanks go to Henry Carrigan—visionary, polymath, and editor extraordinaire (not to mention an incredibly nice guy)—for soliciting and shepherding this project every step of the way. After I wandered with the idea in the publishing wilderness (not quite forty years), Henry

graciously brought it to fruition, if not in the promised land, at least in the TPI catalog—and that's good enough for me.

Finally, I dedicate this volume to my wife and daughters, who continually astonish me with their intelligence, imagination, and consummate abilities. Apart from putting up with my silliness and sloppiness (I really don't know why I can't keep food off my shirt), their enthusiastic support of my scholarly pursuits and my recent transition to the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (which brought many changes for them) means more to me than they will ever know. Janet, Lauren, and Meredith: "What Would I Do" without you?

NOTES

1. I picked up this tongue-in-cheek description of Jesus' temple cleansing from public lectures and panel discussions offered by Prof. Paula Fredriksen. She meant no disrespect by such a witticism, and neither do I. But "temple tantrum" does provocatively capture the strangeness and volatility of Jesus' action, which cannot be denied. It should also be noted that Fredriksen treats this incident quite seriously and provides numerous insights into its meaning in her published works: *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Christ* (2nd ed; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 111–14; *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 207–14, 225–34.

2. In fact, the whole notion of a "how to" manual applying biblical passages and principles to contemporary ethical problems is itself highly problematic (not to mention naïve), as Fowl and Jones have perceived:

[T]here are some significant problems with the methods and presumptions upon which much current work on the use of Scripture in ethics rests. In fact, casting the issue in terms of "use" (as in the use of Scripture in Christian ethics) suggests that Scripture is something out there waiting to be "used." All that is needed is the proper method which will (1) excavate the meaning of the Bible, (2) apply that meaning to this or that situation, and (3) identify how the meaning found in the Bible ought to be understood in relation to other possible sources of guidance.

We think this approach is problematic. (Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture & Ethics in Christian Life* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991], 4)

Eschewing a formulaic approach, their book sketches a dynamic process of integrating biblical study and ethical reflection rooted in communities of faith. See also the promising recent studies by Daniel J. Harrington and James Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges Between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology* (Lanham, Md.: Sheed & Ward, 2002); and Charles H. Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate: Five Hermeneutical Rules* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002).

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First Questions First

As a little girl she'd made a rule for herself: if she petted or fed one animal in the presence of others, she must pet and feed them all. It was what Jesus would have done if he had lived intimately with animals.

What *would* Jesus do?—that's what I ask myself. I try, and I try, but my good intentions break down when I'm with other people.¹



Oh, dear me, it *is* complicated. No surprise that people are always trying to simplify life. What's that question our evangelical brethren are always asking? "What Would Jesus Do?" What, indeed?²

These citations, not from religious or devotional literature, but from critically acclaimed novels by two of America's leading writers, illustrate two curious features of contemporary American society. First, the question: "What Would Jesus Do?"—often represented by the acronym "WWJD" brandished on T-shirts, key chains, lanyards, bracelets, bumpers, and license plates—constitutes a key motto, an organizing principle, for Christian faith and practice, chiefly but not exclusively among the influential bloc of "evangelical brethren" in this country. The question has become part of our popular culture and thus fair game for the nation's novelists, politicians, journalists, and comedians, as well as for the faithful.

Second, the task of applying this simple formula to current moral dilemmas is not that simple; indeed, “it *is* complicated,” extremely so, not least because of the innumerable contemporary issues Jesus never faced. The little girl portrayed above sorts out easily enough how Jesus would have treated a barnyard of animals if he had grown up on a farm like hers, which the girl knows full well he didn’t. But current environmental, ecological, and biomedical quandaries are a good bit more complex than equal opportunity petting and feeding of God’s furry creatures. What would Jesus do about global warming, stem-cell research, and cloning? What, indeed? Such issues were not just ignored in first-century Galilee: they were inconceivable. But surely not to God or to God’s Son, the Alpha and Omega. Time is no barrier to the Eternal Mind—or is it? Fundamentally, there is a tension between Jesus’ uniqueness and universality from both ends of the liberal-historical (left) and conservative-theological (right) spectrum. Both conservatives and liberals stress Jesus’ singularity: the former, as the uniquely incarnate Son of the Eternal God; the latter, as the peculiarly individual Jesus of ancient Nazareth. If Jesus is either so far above us spiritually and metaphysically or so far behind us culturally and historically, how can he effectively serve as a model for everyday, twenty-first century conduct? Traditionally, however, this gap (chasm?) between Jesus and us, while appreciable, has not been insurmountable. Conservatives insist that the pre-existent divine Son of God took on real humanity in the person of Jesus—“the Word became flesh” (John 1:14)—and thus demonstrated what it means to be authentically human in the image of God. Thus, when Jesus said, “follow me,” he intended more than just “tag along and worship me”; he meant: “Do what I say, do what I do, act like me.” Or, as the apostle Paul develops the point: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). It must be assumed that we can never fully match Jesus’ perfect standard in this life, but that should not keep us from trying.

On the liberal side, while punctuating the strange, conditioned identity of the historical Jesus within the milieu of eastern Mediterranean antiquity—millennia of years and miles from modern America—most scholars who care to bother with this figure do so from some pressing conviction that if Jesus is not exactly a man for all seasons, he still has much to offer our time. And so, as many critics have pointed out, the portraits of the historical Jesus that continue to flood the market often

bear an uncanny resemblance to Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, or some other major twentieth-century social reformer, political activist, or spiritual guru, who themselves, to some degree or another, drew strength and motivation from Jesus' example. Despite repeated warnings against "the peril of modernizing Jesus,"³ contemporary scholars persist in translating this ancient Galilean's life and teaching into a very modern image and idiom. In their own way, liberals as well as conservatives are dying to know what Jesus would do with the mess we find ourselves in today. How would he tackle the thicket of daunting ethical challenges we face at this moment in our history?

In grappling with the whole "What Would Jesus Do?" enterprise, I acknowledge its popularity, complexity, and importance. I write as an interested, hybrid "believer," with both conservative religious roots and liberal academic values. But I have a nagging concern. In a rush to reach the worthy goal of living as Jesus' disciples in the modern world, we believers often fail to anchor our moral reflection sufficiently in the gospel reports of what Jesus himself actually did. We seize on a convenient capsule or popular sketch of Jesus' activities that we can easily (cheaply) apply to our own behavior. Relevance trumps evidence. We ask the wrong question first: "What *would* Jesus do?" is meaningless without prior understanding of "What *did* Jesus do?" in the gospel narratives.

Of course, it might be objected that ancient literary evidence has little to do with the issue because of the prospect of immediate communication with the living Jesus. If we have "ears to hear" what Jesus says through his Spirit, we simply ask him what he would do about a current problem or decision, and he tells us. Here prayer trumps study. However, while I do not presume to limit the scope of genuine spiritual experience, I confess to only modest personal success in this area (I am not aware that Jesus has ever "spoken" to me as such, except in some vague, impressionistic sense) and to a certain skepticism that much of what is attributed to Jesus these days is more wishful thinking (we hear what we want to hear) than reliable testimony. But I may be wrong about that and simply too spiritually tone deaf to know it. Be that as it may, even the most mystically minded believers have traditionally advocated biblical study as a necessary spur and aid to contemplative prayer, and logic dictates that if the risen Jesus is the same person (albeit in a transformed body) that traversed Galilee two thousand years ago, what he might do and say

today would be consistent with what he showed and told then. And so, any way we come at the matter, we are back to the foundational question: What *did* Jesus do?

This book makes no attempt to answer the question fully. It is not a comprehensive treatment of either gospel literature, the figure of Jesus, or Christian ethics—which would represent a near-Herculean task these days, given the avalanche of available information and bibliography, not to mention the even deeper mound of ancient artifacts (textual and material) awaiting excavation. But this study does aim to offer a fresh perspective on the gospels, Jesus, and ethics in order to elucidate further the complicated mystery of “What did Jesus do?” I begin with a brief sketch of three distinctive emphases governing this investigation, followed by a fuller discussion of each point.

1. **GOSPELS.** Unlike most recent scholarly examinations of Jesus’ life, which favor the first three (synoptic) gospels and bracket out the fourth gospel as a later, independent development, this study, while sensitive to historical trajectories and diverse perspectives among the gospels, includes John as a full dialogue partner. The goal is to catch a wide-angled vision of Jesus’ behavior in the gospels, without privileging earlier images as more “authentic” or later portraits as more “spiritual.”
2. **JESUS.** Distinct from many studies of Jesus’ ethics that concentrate on his sayings or pronouncements as an authoritative code of conduct, this one focuses chiefly on Jesus’ deeds or actions as an integral component of his identity and vocation. While not ignoring Jesus’ teaching, this work is more interested in discovering how Jesus personally lived out and lived up to his own moral instruction.
3. **ETHICS.** The social and political implications of Jesus’ message and mission as a boundary-breaking prophet have been heavily explored in a number of recent studies. While appreciating Jesus’ staunch commitment to social justice, the present project concentrates on the neglected area of Jesus’ personal conduct—how he treats himself and those closest to him. A chapter each is devoted to Jesus’ actions with respect to his family, his friends, his body, his possessions, his work, and his reputation.

Evidence: Gospel Quartet

Virtually all the information we have about the ancient figure of Jesus comes from “gospel” literature: that is, from the religious-biographical narratives that proclaim the “good news” (*euangelion*) of Jesus as Israel’s—and indeed, as the world’s—Lord and Messiah. As much as the gospel writers or evangelists regarded Jesus as the chief protagonist of human history, Rome took little notice at the time. A few Roman historians confirm in passing that someone called Christ was crucified in Judea under the auspices of Pontius Pilate, but that’s all they have to say on the subject.⁴ Studies of Greek, Roman, Jewish, and other eastern Mediterranean literary and material remains uncover a wealth of data about Jesus’ cultural environment but not about Jesus’ specific, personal behavior. Archaeology, for example, has in recent years recovered remnants of a first-century fishing boat from the Sea of Galilee commonly called the “Jesus Boat.” However, while this craft may be typical of the one Jesus and his disciples might have used, there is no way of proving that Jesus ever sat or sailed on these planks (no JESUS WAS HERE etched in the wood). Similarly, archaeology may offer a sketch of typical synagogue architecture and worship in ancient Galilee, but it has not unearthed—and likely never will—a bench in the Nazareth synagogue where a boy named Jesus sat and inscribed his name during a boring Sabbath address or a “bulletin” from a worship service citing “Jesus, son of Joseph” as the Scripture reader for the day.⁵ If we want to know anything about Jesus’ particular Sabbath or synagogue habits—or any other activities—we must investigate the gospels.⁶

But while this conclusion may seem to settle matters, it in fact raises two critical questions: “Which gospels do we focus on?” and “How do we interpret the gospels we’ve selected?”

In the first few centuries following Jesus’ death, the early Christians produced various—more than four—written accounts of Jesus’ career, some concentrating on his childhood (infancy gospels), others on his teaching (sayings gospels), as well as broader accounts of his adult ministry, passion, and resurrection. Currently we have evidence of about thirty such “gospels.”⁷ There may have been many more that didn’t survive. Whatever the complete tally, by the end of the fourth century the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—had securely won the

day among the majority of church officials as the divinely inspired and duly authorized accounts of Jesus' life and death. In short, they became part of the Christian canon.

But why these four and not others? The argument of a leading church father, Irenaeus of Lyon, that the number four is self-evident because "there are four directions of the world in which we live, and there are four principal winds . . . four living creatures [in Revelation] . . . and there were four principal covenants made with humanity, through Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Christ,"⁸ seems forced and flimsy. Why not five gospels because God gave us five fingers on each hand, five points to a star, five books of the Law—and while we're playing the game—five principal covenants, if we add the important Davidic pact to Irenaeus's list? Less fanciful reasons for the ascendancy of the four gospels include their comparatively early dating (in the last third of the first century), their traditional claims to apostolic authorship, and their wide circulation and affirmation among the "established" churches.

But however committed Irenaeus and company were to the fourfold gospel, should Christians today be so limited, given our awareness of other ancient gospels? Shouldn't we want to consider all the early testimony of Jesus' conduct before formulating judgments concerning "What Would Jesus Do?" in modern society? But is all this testimony equally reliable or relevant? These huge theological and historical issues cannot be fully tackled here, but some discussion is required to justify the focus of this study.

Few scholars would place the so-called infancy gospels on a par with the four canonical gospels. They are entertaining, to be sure, but obviously represent later attempts to fill in the gaps of Jesus' "hidden" childhood years with fanciful tales of "superboy" exploits. In *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, for example, the five-year-old Jesus magically transforms twelve clay sparrows he has sculpted on the Sabbath into live, "chirping" birds in order to cover up his improper Sabbath "work." He also puts a death hex on a boisterous child who happens to bump his shoulder while running through the village and resuscitates another little tyke who had fallen off the roof while playing with Jesus.⁹ In the last case, Jesus demonstrates that he wasn't responsible for his playmate's tragic accident, but overall he appears as a strange and volatile lad to hang around

with. Although Matthew and company also present a wonder-working Jesus, they do so in a much more reserved manner: his miracles comprise but one part of a multifaceted mission of ushering in God's kingdom, with special emphasis on helping those in dire need, not on serving Jesus' own interests or zapping meddlesome opponents.

On the whole, Jesus' miraculous activity does not fit well with a modern "What Would Jesus Do?" agenda. We might like to perform (or receive) a miracle to solve every personal problem or ethical dilemma, but normally our options are more mundane. While certain Christians today (often labeled "charismatics") stress that the faithful are destined to do "even greater things" in Jesus' name than Jesus himself did,¹⁰ most believers regard Jesus' supernatural power as something that sets him apart from most, if not all, human beings. We may depend on Jesus' gracious exercise of power for our ultimate salvation but not as a pattern for personal emulation in everyday matters. In any case, however awkward Jesus' traditional miracles may be for modern ethical reflection, the impetuous feats of Wunderkind Jesus in the infancy gospels are off the charts. If Jesus cursed a kid to death for bumping his shoulder, what would he do today if a careless motorist banged his fender? This is hardly a promising model for dealing with road rage.

Setting aside the infancy gospels, we confront a more formidable canonical challenge in two sayings collections: 1) the Q gospel, as it is typically dubbed, and 2) the *Gospel of Thomas*, distinct from the "infancy" gospel of the same name.

To the uninitiated, mention of a Q gospel sounds like some covert code or the work of some secret agent in a James Bond or Star Trek adventure.¹¹ Actually, the label is of German derivation and has nothing to do with the Gestapo or any other intelligence operation; in fact, it comes from the quite ordinary word *Quelle*, meaning "source." Source for what? Q designates a putative source for the material—mostly sayings of Jesus—uniquely shared by Matthew and Luke. The proposal is at once logical and therefore possible, but also hypothetical and therefore not provable. The logic comes from the multiple overlapping samples of Jesus' teaching (e.g., the beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer) found only in Matthew and Luke, without parallel in Mark or John. It is thus a reasonable presumption that the first and third evangelists had access to some

common sayings tradition. But we cannot be certain that this material ever existed in written form as an independent “gospel,” still less that it reflects the history of some discrete early Christian community. There is no manuscript copy, early or late, complete or fragmentary, of the Q gospel under glass at the British Museum or anywhere else. It is a hypothetical document, pure and simple, which doesn’t automatically discredit it but does limit its value for our purposes. We are concerned chiefly with sketching a composite gospel profile of Jesus’ activities as a foundation for contemporary ethical practice, not plotting a chronological history of gospel traditions. By focusing on the canonical Matthew and Luke in their final forms, we will be taking into account the Q material irrespective of speculative theories concerning its development. As a first order of business, grappling with the Jesus evidence we have takes precedence over reconstructing what might have been. Moreover, this study targets the actions of Jesus (see below) more than his sayings, whatever form they might have taken inside or outside the gospels.

Likewise, the *Gospel of Thomas* (*Gos. Thom.*) comprises an early collection of 114 “secret sayings” of Jesus, purportedly revealed to Didymos Judas Thomas (“doubting Thomas” the apostle? Jesus’ twin brother?), with no narrative structure or accounts of Jesus’ deeds. Unlike Q, however, much of *Gos. Thom.* reflects distinctive pronouncements of Jesus, overlapping only sporadically with the four New Testament gospels (about a third of *Gos. Thom.* sayings parallel Q). What is the relationship, then, between this “fifth” gospel and the traditional quartet? Some scholars contend that the *Gos. Thom.* sayings reflect an early, independent strand of Jesus’ teaching, potentially as “authentic” or “authoritative” for Christian origins as the New Testament material. Others, however, stress that while a first-century Greek original is possible, the earliest hard evidence we have is a second-century Coptic (ancient Egyptian) translation found at Nag Hammadi in 1945. This datum, together with the esoteric, “gnostic” cast of many *Gos. Thom.* sayings, suggest a later development, a century or so removed from the first layers of Jesus tradition disclosed in the canonical gospels.¹²

However we assess these thorny chronological and theological issues (and they are complicated), we must acknowledge that for the vast majority of Christians, early and modern, the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*, if

known at all, constitutes a maverick and in some cases aberrant assortment of Jesus' teachings, adding nothing of value to the New Testament evidence. The majority can be wrong, of course. Religious reform is typically sparked by a reassessment of established traditions and openness to new perspectives. But at the present I do not see *Gos. Thom.* (or Q) igniting a fresh Reformation. I do not see most believers poring over modern *Gos. Thom.* translations for spiritual or ethical guidance, nor do I envision *Gos. Thom.* texts inspiring rousing sermons in most Christian pulpits. But, then again, I am no prophet and could be mistaken. Nevertheless, whatever happens in the future, we seem to have enough on our plates right now dealing with the four gospels most Christians agree on. The problem, I'm convinced, is not so much that we need new material as it is that we haven't sufficiently studied or taken seriously the gospels we've had and affirmed for two millennia.

So, for better or worse, we will keep the spotlight trained on the four New Testament narratives of Jesus' life. But selection is just the beginning: How should we interpret these accounts? While some scholars have rushed to open the canon and add new gospels, other interpreters have effectively reduced the canon and privileged one or more of the four gospels over the others. One trend, launched by Tatian's *Diatessaron* in the second century, merged the four distinct gospels into one continuous, blended account.¹³ This harmonizing phenomenon has persisted in popular Bible studies among the faithful. There remains a powerful pull in Sunday schools and study groups to collapse the multiple versions of Jesus' life into one. The traditional Christmas nativity scene is a banner example, with shepherds, wise men, angels, animals, and the lot all packed into the stable around the manger, irrespective of the unique portraits that Matthew and Luke provide.¹⁴

Apart from flattening the four gospels into one, a second tendency in the history of interpretation has been the practice of favoritism. Originally, the communities in which and for which the individual gospels were composed likely regarded their gospel as superior, if not exclusive. Later, as knowledge of multiple gospels spread and the "final four" became more popular, one or more gospels might still carry greater weight among certain groups for various reasons. Or, conversely, one or more might be slighted, even denigrated, in some way. The controversial

second-century bishop Marcion didn't really want any of the four gospels in his canon (they were all too Jewish and "earthy" for his tastes). He found all the "gospel" he needed in Paul's writings (that is, in ten of the thirteen letters attributed to the apostle; the three Pastoral missives—1 and 2 Timothy and Titus—didn't cut the mustard). Marcion conceded some value, however, in Luke's gospel, but only in a truncated form (minus the birth stories), consistent with his esoteric brand of Paulinism.¹⁵ While on the whole the Christian church has repudiated Marcion's minimalist, anti-Judaic agenda, the propensity to elevate one gospel over the others persists. Part of this stems from a natural desire to differentiate and exalt individual components within a group. Among the myriads of Beatles fans who idolize the entire band, most would still admit to a particular favorite among the famous foursome.

And so it is with the gospels. My mother, for example, will tell you flat out that her favorite gospel is John. And she is not alone. Many believers prefer Jesus' extraordinary, straightforward "I am" statements in the fourth gospel—along with the unmistakable presentation of Jesus' divine authority and promise of eternal salvation (encapsulated in that most celebrated of all Bible verses, John 3:16)¹⁶—over the more subtle, "human" sketches of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. For years, the multitude of respondents who "came forward" at Billy Graham's evangelistic crusades were given individual copies of the Gospel of John to help them grow in their faith. Now neither Graham nor any of his associates (nor my mother) would suggest for a second that John was the "best" or the "only" gospel worth reading; they wouldn't dream of altering the canon. But it is interesting that they were willing to publish and distribute a single gospel under separate cover, which at least implicitly gave this work a special status.¹⁷

On the more liberal, critical end of the spectrum, different priorities among the gospels often come into play. Here, John has typically been rated last and least of the four—the last to be written and the least historically reliable, reflecting a more "spiritualized" or "mythologized" portrait of Jesus.¹⁸ The three Synoptic Gospels—so-called because they share a more common "vision" of Jesus' life with each other than with John—fare much better in this scheme, but even here, distinctions are made. The prevailing theory, building on the premise of "Markan priority," posits that Mark was written first and served as the foundation for

Matthew and Luke's expanded accounts. Overall, a certain bias favors the most primitive layers of the Jesus tradition, which can supposedly be uncovered through a variety of "scientific" means. The "real" Jesus becomes the earliest Jesus we can find, unadorned (uncorrupted) by later theological imagination.

Over against these tendencies either to amalgamate the four gospels into one or to accentuate certain gospels or strata of gospel tradition above others on either historical or devotional grounds, the present study aims to grapple with both the common and the distinctive literary portraits of Jesus in all four gospels. While appreciating the parallel or overlapping episodes among the gospels, we can also find variations within these similar accounts. Rarely does one gospel's report perfectly match another's; they are not carbon copies, but rather distinctive presentations of similar events. To ignore these differences or to roll them into one conglomerated mosaic dilutes the singular contribution of each evangelist. Superficial harmonization impoverishes rather than enriches our understanding of Jesus' life. Furthermore, we must consider not merely the fact, but also the extent, of common material. Does a story appear in one, two, three, or all of the gospels? Does it represent a single (unique), double (as with the Q sayings in Matthew and Luke), triple (synoptic), or quadruple (unanimous) tradition?

But why bother with such questions if, as my students regularly remind me, one report of a particular saying or action of Jesus in the New Testament is sufficient to take seriously. If it's there, we have to deal with it. I agree—I don't want to exclude any pertinent data—but I further contend that frequency matters; repetition reflects emphasis. If multiple evangelists regarded an incident important enough to include in their gospels, that may give that incident stronger weight in influencing contemporary ethical conduct among those who want to pattern their lives after Jesus. Put another way, if all four gospels highlight a certain activity of Jesus, it should be much harder to dismiss that activity as an idiosyncratic, one-off experience of limited relevance to Christian faith and practice. Yes, all the gospel evidence is important, but some of it is earmarked for special attention by virtue of its multiple attestation.¹⁹

As a further check against imposing an artificial unity upon the gospels, we must also acknowledge that differences among the four narratives may reflect not simply alternative or more elaborate accounts, but

perhaps points of tension, debate, even disagreement over Jesus' conduct. Concerning Jesus' treatment of his immediate family, for example, we will discover (in chapter 2) a range of responses from dismissive to supportive, running along a rough trajectory from Mark (harshest responses), to Matthew and Luke (somewhat softer), to John (most tender). This pattern may also betray an editorial process from the earliest (Mark) to the latest (John) gospel, according to the dominant scheme pointed out above.

But while appreciating the phenomenon of conflicting reports about Jesus and the possibility of tracking these developments chronologically, we must be cautious about privileging one of these stages—usually the earliest—as more “authentic,” more representative of the “real” Jesus. My reservations are twofold: one theoretical, the other practical. First, the process of detecting the earliest layers of the Jesus tradition is far from an exact science. For the most part, scholars in search of the historical Jesus depend upon analytical and imaginative reconstructions of literary data, not precise electronic and microscopic measurements (except, to some extent, in archaeology), and they hotly contest which methods or criteria to use. Moreover, while most Jesus “questers” continue to give priority to Mark's gospel, a growing number of scholars are giving greater consideration to Matthew²⁰ and even to John²¹ as repositories of primitive testimony.

Secondly, as we have already stressed, the practical reality for most Christians through the ages is that the “real” Jesus is the Jesus revealed in the four New Testament gospels. Jesus “lives” through these authoritative books that are accepted, venerated, and interpreted in communities of faith.²² While I have been radically challenged and richly illuminated by the spate of historical Jesus studies in the past two decades, I seriously doubt whether any speculative reconfiguration of Jesus' life is capable of winning the day over two thousand years of New Testament tradition. Among those who care most today about Christian discipleship, following Jesus somehow entails emulating Jesus' actions as found—uniquely or repeatedly—in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and/or John. Of course, this is easier said than done; in fact, I think that “doing what Jesus did” proves to be a good bit more difficult than most believers recognize because of the complexity of the gospels' portraits of Jesus, rife with narrative gaps and tensions, and the cultural distance between Jesus' world and ours.

The main purpose of this book is to uncover the gospel evidence of Jesus' ethical conduct, tensions and all, in the context of first-century, eastern Mediterranean society. But my guess (and my own bias) is that most Christians are willing to live and struggle with whatever the four gospels offer—in all of their multiplicity and strangeness—rather than jettison them for some bowdlerized abridgement or modernized alternative.

In short, the four New Testament gospels, in their final forms, comprise our primary field of inquiry. In part they are like a “gospel quartet” (while my musical tastes have expanded over the years, I cut my teeth on four-part gospel tunes sung by popular groups like the Blackwood Brothers, the Statesmen, and the Imperials), in which four distinct voices offer complementary renditions of the good news about Jesus. This image suffers, however, from a potential over-emphasis on harmony: the New Testament gospels do not always blend as tightly as finely tuned gospel or barbershop quartets. At times, they may even sound discordant. Shifting models, fans of American collegiate basketball might appreciate comparing the gospels to “The Final Four.” Starting with a field of sixty-five teams, the championship tournament whittles down to a climactic competition among the final four survivors. This analogy reminds us that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John represent the canonical “winners” among a larger pool of gospel accounts, and that they are four full-fledged, distinct entities, each vigorously wrestling in its own way with the significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. But here we can easily overdo the competitive element. The unabashed goal of the NCAA tournament is to crown one ultimate champion from out of the final four (the battle cry is “We're #1”—not “We're in the top 4”). With respect to the gospels, however, this study resists the tendency to rank one over the others. Whatever model we employ, all four New Testament evangelists merit a fair hearing—in all their marvelous unity and diversity.

Jesus: Action Figure

Both inside and outside the community of faith, among both the devout and merely curious, perceptions of Jesus' ethics characteristically zoom in upon Jesus' classic admonitions, such as:

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

(Matt 22:39//Mark 12:31//Luke 10:27–28; Matt 5:44; 7:12;

Luke 6:31, 36)

Priority is given to the teachings of Jesus, particularly those in imperative mode, which seem to encapsulate his ethical ideals. Like the foundational Ten Commandments in the Old Testament, with their pointed focus, terse style, and absolute “thou shalt not” tone, Jesus’ pithy commandments command special attention. Accordingly, gospel segments that feature Jesus’ “laying down the law”—as in the so-called “Sermon on the Mount” in Matthew 5–7—take on extraordinary importance. People who otherwise know little about Jesus and the gospels will likely be acquainted with some of Jesus’ instruction in this famous “sermon” (it’s really more of a lecture), even if they can’t identify it as such. Aphorisms (like “The first will be last” and “The one who saves his life will lose it”) and parables (like “The Good Samaritan” and “The Prodigal Son”) are also widely known samples of Jesus’ teaching, but they offer more ambiguous ethical guidance because of their slippery paradoxical and multivalent meanings. We tend to prefer clear, simple, straightforward calls to action.

Nevertheless, while Jesus’ commands or marching orders to his followers undoubtedly constitute a vital component of his “moral vision,”²³ the picture is skewed if these mandates are given exclusive or predominant authority. In particular, I enter a special plea on behalf of Jesus’ deeds or actions as living illustrations of Jesus’ teaching. One cannot properly be considered apart from the other (separating Jesus’ words and deeds is indeed a “dreary dichotomy,” as Crossan and Reed aver).²⁴ But for the sake of redressing an imbalance in most discussions of Jesus’ ethics, this study focuses on Jesus’ enacted or embodied ethics as a potential model for our own conduct. Such an action-oriented approach is wholly consistent with (1) the process of interpretation required for applying biblical laws, (2) the principle of integrity embedded in Jesus’ message, and (3) the mystery of incarnation, foundational to Christian theology.

Laws like “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy” or “Honor your father and mother” in the middle of the Decalogue represent important ideals or mottoes that must be interpreted or unpacked in terms of specific moral actions. What precisely does it mean to sanctify the Sabbath? To rest, certainly, but to rest from what? All labor or just certain tasks? In short, what exactly may we do and not do on this hallowed day in order to keep the fourth commandment? Similarly, how does the attitude of honoring one’s parents translate into action? It certainly includes respectful speech and obedience, but to what extent and for how long? Are dutiful children expected to do everything their parents say, even what appears to be ethically questionable? When do children become morally responsible for their own actions? It’s not enough simply to affirm scriptural laws as abstract principles—they must be applied in the concrete grit of daily living.

Interestingly, Jesus frequently enters into heated discussion with the legal scholars of his day over the practical meaning of God’s commandments—including the two regarding the Sabbath and filial obligations. But he does more than just muse about the issues as an armchair philosopher. He lives them; he works them out in the crucible of experience. As a Galilean Jew, he does certain things on the seventh day of the week (see chapter 6), and as a son of Mary and Joseph, he treats his parents in certain ways (see chapter 2). In the gospel narratives, such conduct—often controversial—functions both as a spark for Jesus’ teaching (he defends his action) and as a clue to its meaning (he models his message).

The vital nexus between word and deed, teaching and action, is hammered in no uncertain terms by Jesus himself in his insistence upon integrity—or, negatively put, his crusade against hypocrisy. Both Jesus’ closest companions and his staunchest competitors²⁵ receive stern warnings against the duplicitous trap of saying one thing and doing another. At the end of his hortatory “sermon” to his disciples in both Matthew and Luke, Jesus stresses the need not merely to hear, but to heed his teaching; not only to proclaim his message, but to put it into practice.

You will know them by their fruits. . . . Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. . . . Everyone then