

*light on the gospels*

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# *light on the gospels*

*a reader's guide by*  
*John L. McKenzie*

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## Series Foreword

MARK TWAIN ONCE RUMINATED, “It ain’t the parts of the Bible I can’t understand that bother me; it’s the parts I do.” John L. McKenzie, commenting on the same subject from another perspective, wrote, “The simple see at once that the way of Jesus is very hard to do, but easy to understand. It takes real cleverness and sophisticated intelligence to find ways to evade and distort the clear meaning of what Jesus said.”

But McKenzie, like Twain, was himself a person of exceedingly high intelligence, distinctively witty, with a double-edged sword’s incisiveness. As the first Catholic elected President of the Society of Biblical Literature, President of the Catholic Biblical Association, fluent in ten languages, sole author of a 900,000-word Bible dictionary, of over a dozen books and hundreds of essays, John McKenzie attained worldwide recognition as the dean of Catholic biblical scholars.

But again like Twain, McKenzie possessed a cultivated reservoir of abiding empathy—cognitive and emotional—for ordinary people and what they endure, millennia-in and millennia-out. He insisted: “I am a human being before I am a theologian.” Unlike many who become entrenched in a hermetic, scholarly world of ever-multiplying abstractions, McKenzie never permitted his God-given faculty of empathy to atrophy. To the contrary, he refused to leave his fellow human beings out in the cold on the doorstep of some empathically-defective theological house of cards. This refusal made all the difference. It also often cost him the support, or engendered the hostility, of his ecclesiastical and academic associates and institutional superiors—as so often happens in scholarly, commercial and governmental endeavors, when unwanted truth that is the fruit of unauthorized empathy is factored into the equation.

## *Series Foreword*

John McKenzie produced works of biblically “prophetic scholarship” unlike anything created in the twentieth century by any scholar of his stature. They validate, with fastidious erudition, what the “simple see at once” as the truth of Jesus—e.g., “No reader of the New Testament, simple or sophisticated, can retain any doubt of Jesus’ position toward violence directed to persons, individual or collective; he rejected it totally”—but which pastors and professors entrenched in ecclesiastical nationalism and/or organizational survivalism have chronically obscured or disparaged.

In literate societies, power-elites know that to preemptively or remedially justify the evil and cruelty they execute, their think-tanks must include theologians as part of their mercenary army of academics. These well-endowed, but empathically underdeveloped, theological hired guns then proselytize bishops, clergy, and Christians in general by gilding the illogical with coats of scholarly circumlocutions so thick that the opposite of what Jesus said appears to be Gospel truth. The intent of this learned legerdemain is the manufacturing of a faux consensus fidei to justify, in Jesus’ sacred name, everything necessary to protect and augment an odious—local, planetary and/or ecclesial—status quo.

John McKenzie is the antidote to such secular and ecclesial think-tank pseudo-evangelization. Truths Jesus taught—that the simple see at once and that Christian Churches and their leaders have long since abandoned, but must again come to see if they are to honestly proclaim and live the Gospel—are given superior scholarly exposition via McKenzie. This is what moved Dorothy Day to write in her diary on April 14, 1968, “Up at 5:00 and reading *The Power and the Wisdom*. I thank God for sending me men with such insights as Fr. McKenzie.”

For those familiar with McKenzie this re-publication of his writings offers an opportunity to encounter again a consistent scholarly-empathic frame of consciousness about Genesis through Revelation, whose major crux interpretum is the Servant of Yahweh (Isaiah 42). Ultimately embodied in the person of Jesus, the Servant is the revealer of Abba almighty—who is “on our side,” if our means each person and all humanity. For all Christians, John L. McKenzie’s prophetic scholarship offers a wellspring of Jesus-sourced truth about the life they have been

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chosen to live, the world in which they live, and the Christ in whom they  
“live and move and have their being.”

(Rev.) Emmanuel Charles McCarthy

September 2008

Brockton, Massachusetts





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Note: All references are to *The New Testament of the Jerusalem Bible* which the author abbreviates as JB and which is published by Doubleday & Company, New York, New York. The abbreviation "Q" indicates the Qumran documents discovered near the Dead Sea in 1947.



## INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPELS

### What are the Gospels?

The Greek word *euangelion*, which we translate "gospel," is never used in the documents of the New Testament which we call the Gospels. It signifies in the first place the good news which Jesus himself proclaimed, the good news of the coming of the reign of God. In the second place it is the good news proclaimed by the apostles of Jesus; but this good news is that the reign of God has arrived in Jesus Messiah. The earliest version of this announcement appears in some New Testament summaries in forms as brief as our own Apostles' Creed: ". . . who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he arose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty; thence he shall come again to judge the living and the dead." The gospel of Jesus is the proclamation of a person and an event, and the event is the climactic saving act of God; it is not the exposition of a doctrine.

Neither is the gospel a biography or a history. The fact that the external form of the Gospels resembles a biography confuses readers. It is not immediately evident that there is no parallel to this literary form elsewhere in the world. And we should add that there is no parallel in literature to the relations between the Gospels of Mat-

thew, Mark and Luke, which are called the Synoptic Gospels. Yet even in Mark, the shortest Gospel, the statement of the Christ event goes much beyond the summary form illustrated above from the Apostles' Creed. The written Gospels are more than the proclamation of the good news. What is the additional material?

It is obvious that the expansion consists of stories about Jesus and sayings of Jesus. The earliest proclamation of the gospel is reflected not only in the summaries mentioned but also in the epistles of Paul. From the letters of Paul, however, one learns no stories about Jesus and only one saying of Jesus (1 Cor 9:14). His gospel was, as we have said, the proclamation of the Christ event: the redeeming death and the saving resurrection. The written Gospels, however, show an early interest in the life and person of Jesus beyond the simple saving event. This interest, it seems, arose from the developing life of the Christian communities, both Jewish and Gentile, in Palestine and the cities of the Roman Empire. Questions arose concerning the Christian moral response to the situations of life in Jewish or pagan communities. In all probability such questions were first answered by appeals to the oral traditions, the memories of the teaching and example of Jesus as they were related by those who had heard, seen with their eyes, looked upon and touched with their hands (1 Jn 1:1).

This development can be clearly seen if the Gospel of Mark is compared with Matthew and Luke. Mark frequently says that Jesus taught, but he gives very little of the content of his teaching. One wonders whether he did not know the content or whether he thought it was not important; more probably he believed that the content of the teaching of Jesus was totally found in the teaching of the apostles and disciples. As we noticed above, the gospel in the apostolic church became the proclamation of Jesus himself as an event; and in this proclamation, apparently, the teaching of Jesus was contained. But when Matthew and Luke came to be written this simple identification was

no longer enough; thus both of these gospels were enriched with the sayings of Jesus.

Yet the development of the teaching about Jesus does not obscure the original character of the gospel as an oral proclamation. The proclamation had to be oral because the hearing of the gospel was an interpersonal encounter. The gospel, which was at first the recital of the Christ event, was believed to be a word of power. Its impact did not depend on the eloquence or the personal charm of the speaker; it was a charismatic word whose power was neither enlarged nor limited by the personal power of the speaker. The apostolic church believed that the proclamation of the gospel made Jesus a present reality to the hearer just as he had been a present reality to the disciples who knew him personally. Their own experience of Jesus gave them no advantage over those who knew him only by hearing the gospel. The disciples too had to respond to Jesus by faith; what they affirmed of him was not the result of experience and observation, but of belief in his word. A person who heard the gospel proclaimed was in the same position as one who saw Jesus effect a cure or heard him utter a sermon or a parable. He was challenged to believe.

One who heard the gospel, like one who had seen and heard Jesus, could not plead ignorance or innocence; and the conviction that the gospel left no one indifferent relied on the belief that the gospel was a word of power which could not be evaded. One was challenged to believe; if one did not believe, one was not indifferent but an unbeliever. One had encountered reality and denied it. One had been offered the fullness of life and had preferred death. One had met God and chosen the world. It is not easy to share or even to understand the apostolic church's belief that Jesus lived in the gospel, but certainly this was their belief. The power of the word was the power of him who was proclaimed by the word; and the response commanded by the word was a response of matching power, the faith

that could move mountains, the faith which enabled the disciples to do works greater than the works of Jesus (Jn 14:12).

The power of the proclamation is not seen in the written Gospels; they are not interpersonal encounters. Nor are they addressed to the world, as the proclamation was; they were written in faith for faith. This does not mean that their purpose was to confirm faith or to furnish apologetic material for those who might have to defend their faith; it was a part of the proclamation that it needed no defense. The written Gospels reflect the desire of the early Christians to flesh out, so to speak, the personal encounter with Jesus which the proclamation was. They wished to hear his words and to see him in action; hopefully the power of the gospel would be enlarged if one saw the source of the power more clearly.

### **Why is there more than one Gospel?**

Since there is only one Jesus, one may ask why there is more than one Gospel. The answer to this question is not entirely clear, and it will be treated to some extent in the introductions to each of the four Gospels, where it will be necessary to point out the peculiar characteristics of each. From early times it has been recognized that Matthew, Mark and Luke have a resemblance to each other not only in structure, but even in details and often in the very words of the texts. This gives rise to the "Synoptic Question," by which is meant the problem of the relationship of these three Gospels with each other. We noted above that this interrelationship has no parallel elsewhere in literature. Ancient writers spoke of *concordia discors*, a discordant concord. Were it merely a problem of agreement, the question could be answered by establishing dependence; were it merely disagreement, it would be a historical rather than a literary problem. The historical problem could be resolved only by determining which of the sources could be established as the most reliable and measuring the others

by this standard. If this could not be done, the historical problem would be insoluble.

The problem is seen in the wide agreement (with disagreement in detail) of Matthew and Luke with Mark. Most of Mark is found in Matthew and Luke. But Matthew and Luke, both more extensive than Mark, often have agreement with each other in material which is not found in Mark. In addition, both Matthew and Luke have material peculiar to themselves. The literature on this problem is enormous, and any simple statement of the solution would be false. The solution most commonly accepted, with numerous variations, is that both Matthew and Luke used Mark but not each other, and for the materials common to both but not in Mark they employed another source. This source appears to have been almost entirely, if not entirely, a collection of sayings of Jesus. This explanation is known as the "Two-Document Hypothesis," the two documents being Mark and the other written source. Thus there is general agreement that Mark is the first Gospel; and, while it is difficult to argue with assurance, there is general agreement also that Matthew is second and Luke third.

The dependence of Matthew and Luke on Mark and on at least one other document leads at once to the question of the immediate witness of these two evangelists. As we shall see, this dependence makes it highly unlikely that the Gospel of Matthew could be the work of the apostle Matthew, or that the author of the Gospel is reporting his own memories. This should be in itself no problem, and it really is not. The first generation of the apostolic church was amply endowed with men who had known Jesus and who had shared the experience of discipleship. It is evident from the entire New Testament that Jesus was and remained the primary object of their attention and devotion. The Gospels were written from a store of memory and oral tradition which it is no longer possible to reconstruct or even criticize. We can be sure that the store was avail-

able, and that it was highly important to the apostolic church that the authentic Jesus and not something else would be proclaimed as the object of faith.

### **Are the Gospels faithful to history?**

This does not of itself answer the question of the historical value of the Gospels, a question which must be asked and answered. The major question does not arise from any doubts of the honesty or intelligence either of the evangelists or of their sources, but from discordances in the Gospels themselves. It is impossible within the scope of this work to deal with all such problems in detail, but it would serve the reader poorly to pretend that these problems do not exist and that they are not real. One may illustrate from the passion narratives. Modern scholars generally agree that the passion recital reached a fixed form earlier than the other Gospel material. Given this presupposition, it is remarkable that four accounts of the same event can vary so much in details. Yet the Gospels themselves assure us that this is one sequence of events which the disciples could have known only by hearsay. The hearsay is evident in our Gospels.

Moving from the passion to other Gospel narratives, one may consider first the infancy narratives. Is it safe to conclude from the absence of an infancy narrative in Mark that the original traditions had no infancy narrative? Such an assumption makes it easier to explain the striking diversity in Matthew and Luke, and to treat the infancy narratives as reconstructions of scattered pieces of tradition rather than memories. Lacking any genuine account of the infancy of Jesus (an account which is lacking for almost every person), the devotion of early Christians supplied an account based mostly on their faith in Jesus Messiah and the use of some messianic passages from the Old Testament. We encounter in these accounts a type of narrative which is not and could not be the same type of historical narrative which we have in the passion narratives, for all their divergences in detail.



Once it is granted that the infancy narratives are largely creations of faith, and that when there was no very clear memory of what did happen, the passion narratives were in some details filled out by conclusions concerning what had to happen or ought to have happened, we have moved to the question of how much the Gospels have transfigured Jesus. It should be noticed that this is not precisely a question of whether they are faithful to the realities of history. We have said that they were written from faith in Jesus Messiah for faith in Jesus Messiah. They are concerned with the life of Jesus, a period in which scarcely anyone even thought of him as Messiah. It is normal not only in popular but even in historical memory to view a person in terms of his fulfillment, even when dealing with those periods of his life prior to the fulfillment. There is scarcely any person known to history who has not been submitted to this type of transfiguration, in which the fullness of the future is foreshadowed in childhood or adolescence. That such transfiguration leads to the distortion of events is a manifest fact of human experience.

That such transfiguration leads to a distortion of history itself or of the hero of the history is by no means such a manifest fact. Or if it does, then let it be said that an undistorted view of events and persons is not within the reach of history, scientific or popular. Our point is that Jesus by transfiguration need be no more distorted from historical reality than Julius Caesar or Abraham Lincoln. All three are distorted to some extent, but not so distorted that the reality has been lost. It is true that we have no account of Jesus written by scribes and Pharisees. The account would be hostile, but not by that very fact distorted. The historian would feel enriched if such an account were discovered; the believer might feel threatened, but if his faith is solidly founded the reality in whom he believes would emerge with greater clarity. It is indeed one feature of Gospel criticism, whether literary or historical, that the reality narrated in the Gospels tends to resist dissolution under extremely rigorous and hostile

criticism. It is precisely this *concordia* in presenting a real and entirely credible person—speaking historically—which preserves the Gospels as historical records.

The question of the historical values of the Gospels should not cause the reader to wonder whether he is encountering the real Jesus. He may wonder whether he is reading the actual words of Jesus or whether the events of which he reads occurred exactly as they are narrated. Neither of these questions has anything to do with the encounter of the real Jesus. We have observed that the Gospels themselves with their numerous variations in detail assure us that the authors could not achieve historical fidelity in all details and did not attempt to achieve it. They could present the Jesus in whom the apostolic church believed, and they could assemble enough memories to preserve the “teaching” based on the words and actions of Jesus. These memories were almost entirely anecdotal; no one, it seems, preserved a connected and sequential account of the life of Jesus. The evangelists were governed by Mark’s basic pattern (Jesus’ ministry in Galilee, his journey to Jerusalem, and the week of the Passion) which is preserved in Matthew and Luke, but disappears in John. Each of the synoptic writers shows liberty in the distribution of the material within this scheme.

Modern interpreters have done considerable work in attempting to understand how the church modified or even created sayings of Jesus to answer questions which he had never answered. The life of the Christian in a large Hellenistic city presented problems which the Palestinian Christian did not experience. The apostolic church examined its memories of the words and deeds of Jesus and presented sayings which answered these questions by deducing the answers from its memories. They did not believe they were being unfaithful to Jesus or to history when they handled problems in this way. Jesus had revealed a way of life, and when the explicit answer to a question

was not found in his quoted words, it was found there in principle. They realized that Jesus had not taught the world to adopt the manner of life of a Galilean peasant. But since most of his remembered words had been addressed to Galilean peasants, it would be false to his teaching mission not to adapt them to a wider world. One does not wish to say that the modern interest in history is unimportant; but the reader of the Gospels must with their authors accept the belief that the authentic Jesus could be presented with less than perfect fidelity to history. Unless one takes some of the liberties which they took, Jesus as a person and an event may be confined to Palestine of the first century of this era.



## INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

### **Did the Apostle Matthew author the first Gospel?**

The first and the fourth of the four Gospels are attributed to members of the Twelve. The name Matthew appears in the four lists of the Twelve given in the New Testament (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). The tax collector who was chosen to be a disciple is called Levi in Mark (2:14) and Luke (5:27) but there is no doubt that the hero of the story is the same man who is called Matthew and not Levi in the first Gospel (9:9). The identification of the tax collector with the Matthew of the lists is not explicit, but there can be hardly any doubt that this slender connection was the basis for attributing the first Gospel to Matthew; that is, it was assumed that the identification came from the one man who surely knew who Matthew was. Very probably the Gospel stands first in the canon because the earliest collectors of the New Testament thought it was the first Gospel written. Yet neither the priority of the Gospel nor its attribution to Matthew is accepted by modern scholars.

The authorship and the priority, however, were attested as early as 130 A.D. by a certain Papias, bishop of Hierapolis; but his evidence is not preserved directly. Eusebius, the church historian of the fourth century, quotes the writings of Papias, which he has seen. The sentence of Papias, much discussed since Eusebius, reads in translation: "Matthew collected the sayings (*logia*) in the Hebrew language and each one translated (or interpreted) them as best he could."

Irenaeus in the late second century and Origen in the third century also attributed the Gospel to Matthew; but they may have depended on the testimony of Papias. Irenaeus dated the writing of the Gospel as contemporary with the preaching of Peter and Paul in Rome, therefore before the year 68.

Eusebius, not the most critical of historians, did not think that Papias was very well informed nor of very acute intelligence; and, as we have noticed, modern historians have been no more generous to him. Nothing of what he says is true of the Gospel we have. It is not a collection of sayings, although it has far more of the sayings of Jesus than Mark. It is not a translation from Aramaic (which Papias meant by "Hebrew"). It shows no more traces of translation than Mark or Luke, and critics are sure that ancient translators were not skillful enough to disguise the Aramaic oral tradition which lies behind the written Gospels. Very few modern scholars defend the thesis of an original Aramaic Matthew; and if it existed, it was so substantially modified in translation that it has left no traces of its identity in the Gospel we know by the name of Matthew.

Matthew cannot be the earliest of the Gospels, and the same factors which argue against its priority argue against its authorship by Matthew. If Matthew does not depend on Mark as a source, then it is impossible to establish literary dependence anywhere. In the story of the call of the taxpayer, just the passage in which, in the hypothesis that Matthew was the author, a personal memory would be contained, there is seen the same dependence on Mark that appears in the other narratives. The one independent feature is the name Matthew. The author of Matthew is normally dependent on Mark and another source which he has in common with Luke; nowhere does he betray personal memory and personal experience.

Modern critics have not, however, answered an obvious question which arises from their criticisms: Why should