

# PORTRAITS OF JESUS

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**W**HEN WE read the gospels it is not difficult to find ourselves at times suffering from a certain bewilderment. We are faced with writings that are ancient and they can appear complex.

The gospels were written in Greek, the language of communication throughout the Roman Empire of the day. It is not always easy to translate from one language into another, especially when that language was spoken by people living in a culture so different from our own. Furthermore we can find learned scholars disagreeing in their interpretation of the meaning of certain passages, and we might wonder what chance we have of reading the material properly when the experts fail to agree.

It is important not to give in to this feeling of helplessness for it is not a matter of grasping all or grasping nothing. No one has a perfect understanding of parenthood, but we can learn and we can enjoy our children as we learn. No one has the last word on any work of art, yet we can enjoy art and we can grow in our appreciation of it.

Likewise, no one can claim to have a perfect understanding of this rich gospel material. We are all learning. Let us open our hearts to Jesus' Spirit whom he promised would guide us to all truth (John 16:13). Paul assures us: 'If you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you' (Philippians 3:15)...

We cannot afford to be mistaken about the kind of writing that we are dealing with when we read a gospel. If we wanted to know something about Saint Francis of Assisi, for example, and we were given something to read about him, we would need to know whether we were reading something which he himself had written or something written by someone who lived with him and knew him well, or

whether, on the other hand, we were reading something written centuries later by someone who was interested in him.

Furthermore, the author may have been interested in biographical details, or he may have reflected on Saint Francis and written a play about him, or a novel, or a poem. All of these kinds of literature can give us true insights into the real Saint Francis, but we cannot afford to confuse historical biography with drama or poetry.

If someone were to show us a portrait of Saint Francis, we would be interested to know how lifelike it was, or whether the artist was interested in Francis' character rather than in how he appeared to the eye. If the colour of the eyes was a shade of purple, we would know that the portrait was giving us, not the colour of his irises, but a mood judged by the artist to be characteristic of Francis.

It will become obvious that the authors of the gospels were not interested in offering a careful, chronological record of the events of Jesus' public life. They were interested, very interested, in the real Jesus of Nazareth, but they wanted to convey what they had come to know about his character, especially about what he revealed to them of God.

Their knowledge was based on what the real Jesus really did and really said, and sometimes they give us an accurate description of both. Their main interest, however, was in what Jesus meant to them.

While this was the result of what Jesus' contemporaries had seen and heard, it grew also out of what people had come to perceive and understand as a result of many years of reflection, and in the light of their own and other people's experiences, both before and after Jesus' death.

Initially this may come as a

disappointment. We might be tempted to want to know Jesus *just as he was* rather than see him through the eyes of others. But then, how do we get to know anyone? Would I know your mother better if I saw her momentarily in the street or if I were to come across a portrait by a skilled artist who knew and loved her? In the latter case I might have to live with many unanswered factual questions, but I would surely be in touch with your real mother and would be receiving from the artist the gift of privileged insights into who she really was.

As regards Jesus, unfortunately we do not have anything he wrote. We have his words and actions as remembered and shared by those who knew and loved him. We must immediately add that the records we have are those which the community chose to preserve. This gives us an extra guarantee that they do represent the real Jesus and that they were judged to do so accurately and beautifully. Furthermore, we can be sure that they tell us what the hearts of Jesus' disciples were able to perceive through long years of contemplation, meditation and reflection.

The gospels can take us straight to the heart of the real Jesus as he was known and loved by those closest to him...

The author of the gospel according to Matthew was a second generation Christian. The same is true of the authors of the other three gospels.

Drawing on the experience of those who knew Jesus personally, the evangelists were inspired to communicate to their contemporaries the wonder of Jesus, with all the power of their faith-filled imaginations, as well as with complete fidelity to what they themselves had learned.

The accuracy of their portraits is guaranteed for us by the fact that the gospels were accepted and treasured by the communities which knew or had learned about Jesus. There were other writings about Jesus which the community refused to accept. They were judged to be inaccurate in their presentation of him.



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Rather than imagine a gospel as a kind of photo-album which accurately records momentary glimpses into Jesus' life, we would do better to think in terms of an art gallery, a repository of portraits which express the faith-delight of those who had a special inspiration to express the meaning Jesus came to have for his disciples.

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### ***Who is Matthew?***

Of all the four gospels, the gospel of Matthew was the one most used and most quoted in the early centuries of the church. While each gospel has its own beauty and its own power, there is something quite special about Matthew that may account for its early popularity. This is the way Matthew presents the teaching of Jesus. This gives us many insights into the mind and heart of Jesus, and also into what it means to be Jesus' disciple. Matthew's gospel was particularly attractive as a handbook for instruction.

The gospel we have is written in Greek. Some verses are quoted in works by Christian writers of the second and third centuries. Also from the third century we have parts of Origen's commentary on Matthew. Our earliest complete text, however, is found in two fourth century books, *Codex Sinaiticus* (so named because it was discovered in the nineteenth century in the monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai) and *Codex Vaticanus* (so named because it is preserved

in the Vatican library).

They, and all subsequent manuscripts, refer to this gospel as being 'according to Matthew', thus linking it with the name of the disciple who was called by Jesus while sitting at the tax booth (Matthew 9:9). He is mentioned in all the lists of the apostles (Matthew 10:3, Mark 3:18, Luke 6:15 and Acts 1:13). The same connection between this gospel and Matthew is made by all the early commentators.

However, the precise relationship between the apostle Matthew and the gospel associated with his name is, unfortunately, still not clear in spite of over a hundred years of intense scholarly research.

This is an important question as it has implications for determining the literary relationship between the three so-called Synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. It also affects the dating of the gospel and, consequently, our understanding of the context within which it was written.

Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor early in the second century, has this to say about Matthew: 'Matthew made an ordered arrangement of the oracles in the Hebrew language, and each translated it as he was able.' (Quoted by Eusebius in his *History of the Church* III,39,16)

Irenaeus, writing about 180AD, says: 'Matthew produced a gospel in written form among the Hebrews in their own language at the time when Peter and Paul were preaching the gospel and founding the church in Rome.' (*Against the Heresies* III,1,1, quoted by Eusebius in his *History of the Church* V,8,2)

Origen, early in the third century, adds some details: 'The first gospel to be written was that according to Matthew, once a tax collector but later an apostle of Jesus Christ; he published it for those who had come to faith from Judaism, and it was composed in Hebrew.' (Quoted by Eusebius in his *History of the Church* VI,25,4)

Finally, Jerome, the great biblical scholar of the late fourth century, writes: 'Matthew, who is also called Levi, a former tax collector,

then an apostle, first composed a gospel of Christ in Judea, for the sake of those who had come to faith from the circumcision, in Hebrew letters and words. It is not known with certainty who subsequently translated it into Greek. The Hebrew text itself is still preserved to this day in the library at Caesarea.' (*Of Illustrious Men*, 3)

Unfortunately, the Semitic text to which Jerome refers has been lost, so that a comparison with our present Greek text is not possible. Prior to the nineteenth century, because of early witnesses such as the above, it was taken for granted that Matthew the apostle was the author of this gospel, which was understood to be a translation into Greek of his Semitic (either Hebrew or Aramaic) original. It was assumed that Matthew was the earliest of the gospels and that both Mark and Luke used it as one of their sources (see Clement of Alexandria in Eusebius *HE* 6.14).

Scientific research last century, however, led most scholars to the opinion that the Greek gospel according to Matthew may well have drawn on material from the first Aramaic gospel of the apostle Matthew, but that it used the gospel of Mark as one of its sources. The weight of current scholarly opinion lies in this direction. Since there are scholars who still consider that the traditional understanding is correct, the matter remains unresolved.

It would help if we were able to locate Matthew's gospel in relation to two significant events that occurred in Palestine in the first century. The first is the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD by the Roman army. The second is the reorganisation of Judaism by leading Pharisees in the wake of this destruction. This took place around 85AD at Yavneh (Jamnia), and included the official excommunication of Jewish Christians from the synagogue. Unfortunately, here, too, we have insufficient evidence to draw definite conclusions.

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