

In the last post I examined the claim of certain church fathers that a quartet of creatures seen in visions recorded in Ezekiel and Revelation—consisting of a man, lion, bull, and eagle—correspond symbolically to the four New Testament Gospels. The following chart summarizes the earliest speculations on the subject:

Church Father	Reference	Assigned to Matt	Assigned to Mark	Assigned to Luke	Assigned to John
Irenaeus (120-202)	Against Heresies 3.11.8	Man	Eagle	Bull	Lion
Augustine (354-430)	Harmony of Gospels 1.6.9	Lion	Man	Bull	Eagle
Jerome (347-420)	Comm on Matt, Preface 3	Man	Lion	Bull	Eagle

The last arrangement, that of Jerome, was in time adopted by Christian copyists and artists.¹ Commentators of later periods up to the present have proposed yet other matches between symbols and gospels. The differences in opinion have reinforced in the minds of critical readers the unscientific, purely imaginative nature of the exercise.

To review to this point, the church fathers not only fail to give a rationale for connecting the heavenly tetramorph and the New Testament Gospels, they offer flimsy reasons for linking particular figures to particular Gospels and reach different conclusions at the end of the process. To add to the grounds for skepticism, scholarly research into the gospels since the late eighteen century has undermined any theory of a human plan to create four complementary biographies of Jesus.

Even apart from the observations of scholars, an attentive reader will notice that the none of the Gospels refers to any other as an authoritative source, which is hard to explain if the writers intended these books to be read together. Moreover, the tendency of the evangelists to clash over details is difficult to reconcile with cooperative authorship on any level. For example, did the women who visited Jesus' tomb see angel(s) only, as is implied by Luke and the oldest manuscripts of Mark, or did they also see the risen Jesus himself as is claimed in Matthew and John?² With enough straining it is possible to reconcile the accounts, but would versions of the episode differ so markedly if the authors had coordinated their efforts?

To the foregoing may be added the many indications that passages from the Gospel of Mark were later borrowed, edited, and incorporated into Matthew and Luke.³ The evangelists must have written at different times in the mid-to-late first century and so could not have worked as a team.

Finally, the earliest known endorsement of the four Gospels did not occur until eighty or more years after the last of them was created, and reflected their acceptance by the Christian community at large. No one living in the year 100 C.E. could have foreseen or engineered the persistent popularity of

1 See the footnote to Augustine's treatment at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Nicene_and_Post-Nicene_Fathers:_Series_I/Volume_VI/The_Harmony_of_the_Gospels/Book_I/Chapter_6; see http://catholic-resources.org/Art/Evangelists_Symbols.htm for further information on the ancient sources.

2 Cf. Luke 24:4-10, 23; Mark 16:1-9; Matt 28:9; John 20:14-18.

3 For a survey and synopsis, see Michael F. Bird, *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2014). Copying of earlier material by later biblical writers is neither unethical nor unprecedented, as can be see from the copying of passages from the books of Samuel and Kings by the author of the books of Chronicles; borrowing in the form of paraphrasing can also be seen by comparing 2 Peter and Jude.

certain biographies during the next several decades. Nor could anyone anticipate that second-century works such as the “Gospels” attributed to Thomas and Peter would fail to win the same kind of place for themselves in the minds and hearts of believers. All the historical clues mark the emergence of the four-Gospel canon as humanly unpredictable until long after the original writing.

Understandably, then, scholars have little patience with attempts to align the New Testament Gospels with the four creatures of Ezekiel and Revelation. “Naive” would seem the most charitable word for any claim of objective, much less conclusive, evidence linking the Gospels to the symbols of the lion, bull, eagle, and man. Despite this apparently open-and-shut case I am convinced that the symbols *do* reflect the Gospels in a specific way, and that the recognition of *how* they do enriches the reading and study of these books. A relationship that ordinarily we would dismiss as implausible might be present after all if the Gospels are inspired revelation.

I invite readers, no matter how skeptical, to probe with me a bit further. I intend to build a credible edifice one brick at a time. Will the Gospel foursome prove to be, in Irenaeus’s words, “bound together by one Spirit”? As a man said when his friend asked whether anyone of note could hail from the unremarkable village of Nazareth, “Come and see!”⁴

4 John 1:46.