

For Christian readers of the New Testament Gospels, apparent contradictions between certain passages (e.g. Matt 9:18; Mark 5:23) do not diminish the agreement of the four documents at the deepest level. To believers the evangelists are like members of a string a quartet playing different parts of a single composition. If such harmony lies just beneath the surface, might there be a way to detect it other than by intuition?

The earliest known comments about the unity of the four New Testament gospels date back nearly eighteen centuries. Irenaeus, Bishop of the city of Lyons during the middle of the second century, insists in his treatise on heresies that there can be neither more nor fewer than four inspired accounts of Jesus' life.¹ The world has four quarters and four principle winds, he says. "From which fact it is evident that the Word, the Artificer of all . . . has given us the gospel under four aspects, but bound together by one Spirit." Stranger still, he goes on to claim that the gospels bear a prophetic relationship to a group of creatures seen in vision by the authors of the Bible books of Ezekiel and Revelation. The creatures consist of a man, a lion, a bull, and an eagle.

The word *tetramorph*, meaning "four-formed," is sometimes used of the strange four-faced creatures that appear near the beginning of book of Ezekiel; Revelation instead describes a group of four separate beings (Ezek 1:10; Rev 4:7). According to Irenaeus, each of the four figures of Ezekiel and Revelation corresponds to one of the Gospels: the figure of the the lion to John's Gospel, the bull to Luke's, the man to Matthew's, and the eagle to Mark's. Similar ideas are found in other Christian writings of the period. However, there was no consensus as to which creature represented which Gospel. The table below contains three key opinions:

Church Father with Dates	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

Neither Irenaeus nor the other commentators explain why these visionary creatures could be expected to symbolize the Gospels, nor are the reasons they give for their creature-to-gospel assignments persuasive. For example, Irenaeus claims that the lion, sometimes a symbol of kingly power, is appropriate to John's Gospel because John identifies Jesus' royal parentage from God the Father. Irenaeus does not meet the possible objection that the other Gospels also designate Jesus as the Son of God. Augustine, on the other hand, assigns the eagle to John's gospel because the book's prologue carries us heavenward as if on eagles' wings, but he makes no reference to the physical capabilities of the lion and bull in assigning those figures to Matthew and Luke, respectively.

What does this bit of historical trivia have to do with serious study of the Gospels, specifically with the question of whether they share a deep though subtle unity? Surprisingly, the symbolism of the tetramorph has much to do with the subject, which we will see as this series of posts continues.

¹ *Adversus Haereses* 3.11.8 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:428-29.