

Everything According to the Pattern

Someone suggested to me that even though it is impossible to believe that the four gospels were deliberately written with the four-faced cherubim in mind, second-century Christians could have edited early versions of the gospels after deciphering the symbolism of Ezekiel. The first problem with this theory is the convenient way the faces align with the divisions of mankind, gospels aside.

We have already seen that the combination of lion, bull, eagle, and man as “cherub” dates back nearly four thousand years, to before Israel existed as a monarchy, let alone as northern and southern kingdoms. For reasons already discussed, the ancestors of the Samaritan Israelites may have come to see the bull as their emblem even before they constituted a nation, and the Judahites of the south could have distinguished themselves later by adopting the Davidic lion. It would be a mild coincidence that these animals already were components of the cherub figure.

What the chance occurrence of the lion and bull as Israelite symbols fails to explain is why the eagle is so prominent in the iconography of so many ancient Gentile empires.

In theory, Deuteronomy's description of the destroyer of Israelite cities as an "eagle" could have been written after the Assyrian conquest under the influence of Mesopotamian usage. It would still be astonishingly lucky, on a par with being dealt an ace-high straight off the top of a poker deck, that such an imperial symbol would happen to be the one animal left on the cherub composite after subtracting the two that stand for Israel. The straight proved to be a royal flush when Greece, under Alexander the Great, made the eagle its emblem of royal majesty and Rome, the final desolater of Judea, adopted it as well.

Gospel Identities and the Four-Way Pattern

Imposing as the odds are against the accidental coding of Ezekiel's animal faces with the three-fold division of mankind, any gambler would gladly take them over the odds against the gospels' having been reworked or "redacted" to conform to Ezekiel. The distinguishing factors of the gospels are not like flavors of jam spread on generic slices of toast. Rather, they are like the baked-in characteristics that make a loaf of whole wheat bread different from a loaf of rye or sourdough.

Qualities of Mark and Luke that integrate style and content serve to illustrate this last point. The Roman Gentiles whose perspective Mark reflects were builders and soldiers who valued deeds above words. Mark therefore presents Jesus' teaching in pithy parables, proverbs, and admonitions. Mark's narrative has Jesus moving from one dramatic event to the next with the adverb *eutheos*, "immediately," frequently serving as a connector. Jesus, according to Mark, is not just "the carpenter's son," as in Matthew, but "the carpenter"—a builder who reveals himself also to be a tireless healer, teacher, commander of men and nature, and finally, at the cross, the very Son of God.¹

If Mark is a tale of action, Luke is a work of literature, specifically of Greek literature. Luke's rich vocabulary and articulate phrasing set him apart, not only from Matthew, Mark, and John, but from every other New Testament writer except the author of Hebrews. The *Anti-Marcionite Gospel Prologues*, one of the ancient sources that tell us about

1 Mark 6:3; cf. Matt. 13:55.

the Judean origin of Matthew's gospel and the Italian origin of Mark's, claims that Luke wrote his gospel in the district of Achaia, the Greek heartland where the ancient cities of Athens and Corinth were located.²

Luke's command of Greek letters and Greek culture is related to the Samaritan sympathies evident in both his gospel and the sequel to it, Acts of the Apostles. More than three hundred years before Jesus, the Samaritans had resisted the Greek forces of Alexander the Great and in return had been brutally suppressed. A Greek colony was established in the town of Samaria, capital of the district of the same name, and in time, the Samaritans accommodated themselves not only to Greek rule but, to a considerable extent, to Greek culture. Recurrent bouts of warfare sent Samaria's capital into decline, but King Herod rebuilt it as a Hellenistic (Greek-style) city and renamed it Sebaste in honor of Caesar Augustus, whose name in Greek is "Sebastos." Prominent in the city was a temple to the Greek goddess Kore (the ideal maiden, also known as Persephone).

Samaria's history would lead us to expect that in the first century, as in the three centuries prior to it, a larger proportion of Greek-speakers was to be found among the inhabitants of Samaria than among those of Judea. From Greek-educated Luke, we learn that the good news about Jesus was first preached to the Samaritans by one of the ministers of the *hellenistes*, Christian Jews in Jerusalem who were fluent in Greek.³

More evidence is available than I can review here, but already we can see that excising from any of the gospels the features that link it to its corresponding face on the cherubim would render it not just unrecognizable but incoherent. Assuming that we could somehow extract everything from Matthew that makes that book distinctively Jewish, for example, would the denatured residue still have the appeal that gained Matthew its readership? Or, to put the question another way, can the hypothetical process of adding to a source document the "Jewishness" that transformed it into the gospel of Matthew be described as anything less than composition?

We might as well propose that the gospels were custom made to fit

2 See Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1990), 335.

3 Acts 6:1-5; 8:5; cf. 6:9, where Stephen is portrayed as debating with Greek-speaking Jews.

the four-sided pattern as claim they were edited to conform to it. Either way, the parties to this alleged hoax were not only brilliant enough to produce four narratives each with a unique style and perspective, but influential enough to get the four resulting documents into circulation among Christians in widely scattered regions of the Roman Empire. And imagine their good fortune that all four of the cooperatively produced gospels established themselves as fixtures in Christian tradition.

We should take a moment here to distinguish between manipulation and ordinary accumulation of textual variations. The latter refers to variant spellings, differences in word order, and the presence or absence of details that the average reader would consider minor, along with a comparatively small number of differences affecting whole verses and blocks of text. It has nothing to do with the planned introduction of scores of targeted alterations into circulating documents.

Wholesale alteration of religious literature such as the gospels might occur if the community that preserved it came to see it as deficient, but neither the early history of Christianity nor the distinguishing characteristics of the gospels point in that direction. Potentially, a religious authority such as a metropolitan bishop could have introduced changes into texts that fell under his control. But ecclesiastical power has its limits, and church leaders run a risk by flagrantly tampering with writings already viewed as sacred.

Even if there was a time when Christian bishops could have promoted sweeping revisions of the gospels, manuscript copies dating to previous periods still would preserve earlier, undoctored versions. We are able to rule out a church-mandated rewrite of the gospels because manuscript fragments are available dating back as far as the second century, prior to when any bishop or body of bishops enjoyed such power.

Long before we reach a dead end trying to imagine how the gospels could have been stretched, enriched, and molded to conform to the four-way pattern found in Ezekiel, we have left behind anything that passes for scholarship. Credible professionals in the field of biblical studies offer no support for the idea of cooperative authorship of the "Holy Four." Conspiracy theories are accorded little attention by the scholarly community and even less respect.

The opinions of experts can be wrong, of course, and one of the conclusions to be drawn from typological study is that to adopt those

opinions uncritically would be a mistake. But when scholars across the religious spectrum from conservative evangelicals to hardened skeptics find it more than apparent that the gospels were written at different times and places by writers with different perspectives and somewhat different purposes, it speaks for the quality of the evidence.

Critic R. J. Hoffman argued that each of the gospels is “tendentious” relative to the others; that is, each gospel implies that its story is uniquely true or complete in contrast to other accounts.⁴ We need not adopt Hoffman’s skepticism to acknowledge that teamwork would be bound to produce a degree of harmony that the gospels lack. The inconsistency does not prevent a unified portrait of Jesus from emerging, but it does prove to be part of a phenomenon for which no naturalistic explanation is adequate.

The New Testament book of Hebrews quotes an instruction God gave to Moses to make the holy tabernacle “according to the pattern” he was shown on Mt. Sinai.⁵ The interrelationships among the gospels, along with the other examples we have studied, demonstrate that spiritual realities realized in Christ were represented by prophetic patterns of God’s making. The command to Moses proves to be an example of the very foreshadowing it suggests.

Proof and Doubt

Skeptics may sidestep the question of the gospel pattern and typological coding by asking why we should have to go to such trouble to verify the Bible. “If God is so important to our everlasting welfare,” they ask, “why are we not granted to see irrefutable miracles?” The question assumes that God’s primary interest ought to be proving to humans the bald fact of his existence, rather than coaxing them out of moral corruption and leading them on a journey that has him as its goal and end. The challenge also ignores the barrier of sin that, according to the Bible, prevents direct communion between God and man.

Christians discern God working in their lives, sometimes even in ways that can be called miraculous, but today we do not see miracles

4 R. Joseph Hoffmann, *Jesus in History and Myth*, eds. R. Joseph Hoffmann and Gerald A. Larue (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1986), 143.

5 Heb. 8:5; cf. Exod. 25:40.

that are universally acknowledged and proclaimed by believers, as were those performed by Jesus and the apostles, nor could such events function now exactly as they did in the first century. God does continue to offer as evidence the lives of faithful Christians and a book to be examined and debated.

Often enough, those who examine the book conclude that it is no more than the work of men. However, in judging the Bible, as in judging anything else, the manner in which we look affects what we see. The genius behind the Mona Lisa is apparent not from peering at the canvas through a microscope but from viewing the complete image with an appreciation born of insight. It is when we are willing to stand back and look at the Bible in faith, even if faith only in the possibility of its special character, that we can hope to glimpse the organic whole enlivened by God's Spirit.

The Deep Patterns of the Universe

The means by which we assemble a rational unity from the fragments of experience is referred to in New Testament Greek as *sumesis*, “understanding” or “comprehension.” This capacity, which recommends the Scriptures’ internal claim of divine authorship as the best explanation of typological coding, is also responsible for the breathtaking expansion of human knowledge through the sciences.

Science, like typological analysis, is a system of inferences from patterns. For example, observations of the way objects fall to earth and the way planets move in their orbits form a pattern that underwrites our concept of gravity and allows us to predict, among other things, that a satellite launched at a certain speed on a certain trajectory will begin orbiting the earth.

Patterns may be generated either by chance or by design. If the same number—say the number four—were to come up on three successive rolls of a die, we might assume that pure chance was responsible. But if chance generated the pattern of repeating fours, it would offer us no insight as to what we might expect on yet another roll of the same die. On the other hand, if the die had been intentionally “loaded” to bias the result, then we could assume a high probability of getting a four when we rolled the die again.

What is true of die rolls is true of everything that we observe in the physical world. If the universe just happens to be the way it is without further explanation, then every event in the universe just happens to occur the way it does, and it is by pure chance that events seem to have an intelligible quality. Every event that occurs in an accidental universe is itself accidental, and the apparently predictable quality of physical events is a mirage. It hardly needs saying that such an idea is irreconcilable with science.

Science assumes a universe governed by rules in the form of physical laws.⁶ Rules, however, owe their power to minds. For example, the rules of chess generate a predictable pattern in the movements of chess pieces because of the power those rules acquire from the minds of players. Similarly, the rules that generate order in nature must exist in a mind or minds capable of promulgating those rules across all of space-time.⁷ And that, of course, is just what the Bible tells us.

God leads forth the constellations, says the book of Job, by means of the “ordinances of the heavens,” that is, through the laws governing astrophysics.⁸ He makes the sun shine and the rain fall and gives “seed to the sower and bread to the eater,” not (in most cases, at least) by miraculously setting aside physical laws, but by maintaining them.⁹

In the book of Job, God rhetorically asks the title character if he knows who causes the sun to rise each morning. He further inquires as to who sends forth the lightning, makes channels for the rain, generates snow and ice, and sets the courses of the stars. He finishes by asking who gives various kinds of animals their unique characteristics.¹⁰ God

6 Physical laws are universe-governing principles for which scientific laws are the closest approximations available. Scientific laws include the field equations of Einsteinian astrophysics, the probabilistic wave functions of quantum mechanics, and, perhaps, the arcane formulations of String Theory that relate large- and small-scale phenomena to one another.

7 For more on this argument, see John Foster, *The Divine Lawmaker: Lectures on Induction, Laws of Nature, and the Existence of God* (Oxford: OUP, 2004); Hugo Meynell, *The Intelligible Universe: A Cosmological Argument* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1982); C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (NY: Harper-Collins, 2001), 162-171. See also Hugo Meynell, “Hume, Kant and Rational Theism,” www.leaderu.com/truth/3truth08.html.

8 Job 38:31-33; Jer. 31:35.

9 Matt. 5:45; Isa. 55:10.

10 Job 38-41.

thereby refers the law-governed processes of nature directly to his own creative prerogatives.

Using the present tense, as in Job, Amos says that Yahweh “forms the mountains, creates the wind, and reveals his thoughts to man.”¹¹ The psalmist acknowledges to God that “all your works you have made in wisdom.”¹² The apostle Paul, speaking to the Lycaonians, said that God had left them with a testimony to his existence by sending rain and fruitful harvests, meaning not that rain fell by miraculous fiat on the plains of Asia Minor but that the system of laws governing the hydrologic cycle is evidence of a purposeful and dependable God.¹³

If a good God superintends the universe, why is it that throughout natural history, volcanoes, hurricanes, and other natural disasters have laid waste to living things, and animals have consumed one another to survive? The answer has to do with our inability, except through divine revelation, to see every aspect of the world’s history clearly. From inside a corrupted world, corruption is all that is visible to the natural eye in any direction of either space or time. Beauty is still present, but it is scarred beauty—the beauty of something destined to be other than what we now behold.

Here we need to remember what we discussed in chapter 9 about God’s purpose for man to have all earthly creation “in subjection.” Subjection has to do primarily not with the power to destroy but with the power to glorify that which has been subjected.¹⁴ At the time of man’s appearance, God’s creative works were “very good” and “complete,” not in that there was nothing more to be done with them, but in that they had been brought to the ideal stage for man to play his divinely appointed role in their care.

We at best can dimly conceive of how unfallen man, equipped with powers no human except Jesus has ever wielded, was supposed to have beautified the natural order. Instead, because of Adam’s sin, nature was crippled at the moment of birth and left “groaning” in misery, awaiting glorious liberation under the coming kingdom of Christ, the “last Adam.”¹⁵

11 Amos 4:13.

12 Ps. 104:24.

13 Acts 14:17.

14 Phil. 3:21; Heb. 2:8 NASB.

15 Rom. 8:19-22; 1 Cor. 15:45.

“Wail, for the world’s wrong,” wrote Shelley in his “Dirge.” Exactly how the world can be in any meaningful sense “wrong” is unclear if, as Shelley believed, God does not exist. Instead, our cosmic discomfort is evidence that a rupture has occurred between us and the Source of life. Each of us must decide whether to cooperate with God’s ongoing project to repair this breach through Christ.

God intends for men to “reach out for him and find him,” Paul tells the philosophers of Athens, “though he is not far from each one of us.”¹⁶ Besides confirming that evidence of God lies close at hand, the verse suggests that God wants to accomplish something in us that requires our straining toward him. The biblical principle that “from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded” suggests that the more intelligent we are, the more difficult the struggle for faith is likely to be.¹⁷ Inviting us to undertake that struggle is God’s way of searching for us, since he desires no one’s eternal destruction.¹⁸ Yet the Scriptures warn us against delaying to avail ourselves of God’s grace: “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.”¹⁹

Admittedly, questions remain. Until now we have touched only lightly on the historical accuracy of the Bible. And, speaking of history, what are we to make of the less-than-savory record of nominal Christianity as far as wars, inquisitions, and injustices of all kinds are concerned? What about the thousands of sectarian divisions that make the church resemble a poorly-sewn quilt? These are not questions that can be thoroughly entertained let alone settled in a book such as this, but in the final chapter we will look for scriptural directions in which to seek the answers.

16 Acts 17:27.

17 Luke 12:48.

18 2 Peter 3:9.

19 Isa. 55:6; cf. 2 Cor. 6:2.

