

What Ezekiel Saw

Why are there four gospels in the New Testament? That question has confronted Christians since the second century as it has scholars and historians. Why is there not a single narrative of Jesus' life comparable with, say, the story of Moses in the Pentateuch? Christians tend to view the differences among the gospels as reconcilable. They argue that a single, longer biography would somehow lack the richness provided by our four-sided portrait of Jesus.

From a non-Christian perspective, touting the superiority of four gospels amounts to forging virtue from necessity. Even the earliest Christian apologists were challenged to account for the variances if not outright contradictions between the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Tatian, a Christian writing in the second century, attempted to solve the problem by blending the four gospels into one narrative, the *Diatesseron* (meaning, "through the four").

Not only is the number of gospels an oddity, the process that gave us four official stories of Jesus looks haphazard. The Synoptic (meaning "seen together") gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke contain passages that are so nearly identical that borrowing seems the only reasonable explanation.

In spite of their duplications, each gospel has its own narrative style. Each contains its own particular assortment of events and its own chronology. The gospel of John stands so far apart from the Synoptics that some critics claim it presents a different Jesus.

None of the gospels straightforwardly identifies its writer or records the time and place of writing. Nor does any gospel offer more than vague comments about how or from whom its information was gathered; all we know in that regard comes from later, historically fuzzy church tradition. The author of Luke mentions other written accounts, which he nevertheless fails to identify and which he implicitly finds inadequate.

Few people have heard of the gospels of Thomas, of Peter, of Philip, of the Hebrews, or of the Egyptians, but those works and two dozen or so others from the first two centuries prove that the urge to produce a report of Jesus' life or teachings struck more than four ancient writers. If the canonical gospels are the oldest surviving examples of the genre, as most (though not all) New Testament scholars believe, they may owe that distinction to the reading preferences of early Christians. Any older gospels that might have been written never achieved wide enough circulation to leave behind recognizable traces let alone win formal acceptance by the bishops of subsequent centuries.

To put it bluntly, even if the gospels are correctly attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, they seem to have been cobbled together from memories, anecdotes, oral tradition and in some cases earlier writings, then chosen through a kind of popularity contest. No serious historian, whether secular or Christian, believes that a person or persons in the early church planned the creation of the four as a coordinated project. For one thing, it is hard to imagine that collaborators would have failed to harmonize their narratives more closely so that, to cite just one example among dozens, the order of Jesus' three wilderness temptations would be the same in Luke as in Matthew.¹

Then there is the question of how anyone could have engineered popular acceptance of four different gospels to such an extent that none of them could later be rejected by church authorities. Critics seize on the chance nature of gospel selection as if it undercuts any claim of divine inspiration for these books, when in reality it affords an

1 Matt. 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13.

opportunity to verify that claim. If a central plan or blueprint is found to underlie the gospels, it could have been executed only by someone capable of controlling the inscrutable twists and turns of history.

The Four Gospels in Ezekiel?

A Christian bishop of the second century, Irenaeus of Lyons, implies that such a blueprint is contained in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel.² Ezekiel was an Israelite exile in Babylon who was called to be a prophet early in the sixth century BC. In the opening scene of his book, Ezekiel falls into a vision and sees Yahweh clothed in supernatural light and riding a heavenly chariot with an escort of angels or cherubim. Each of the angels has four wings and four faces, the first face being “the face of a man, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle.”³ Ezekiel’s depiction of the cherubim is closely paralleled in the New Testament book of Revelation, although in that book the man, lion, ox, and eagle appear as a group of separate beings.⁴

In his work *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus symbolically relates each of the four faces of Ezekiel’s cherubim to one of the gospels.⁵ He sees Matthew’s gospel as corresponding to the man’s face because it opens with a human genealogy of Jesus and because, in the opinion of Irenaeus, Jesus’ humanity is emphasized throughout the book. Luke begins with a narrative involving priestly duties, therefore Irenaeus associates it with the only sacrificial animal in the foursome, the ox. He links the early mention of the Holy Spirit in Mark with the winged creature, the eagle, while proposing that John’s prologue concerning Jesus’ divinely “royal” parentage associates that book with the regal animal, the lion.

Irenaeus writes about the alignment of the faces with the gospels as if he is expressing a belief common among Christians of his time. It may

2 Irenaeus does not name the biblical books he is referencing, but his descriptions correspond to those contained in Ezekiel and Revelation. See T. C. Skeat, “Irenaeus and the Four-Gospel Canon,” *Novum Testamentum* 34 (1992): 194–199.

3 Ezek. 1:10.

4 Rev. 4:7.

5 Irenaeus, *Adv. Her.* 3.11.8.

have seemed natural that God would incorporate a symbolic prophecy about the gospel message into the visible form of the angels, since angels frequently function as messengers.⁶ Wherever the idea originated, it continued to fascinate Christian scholars even as their tendency to reshuffle the face-to-gospel assignments cast doubt on it. Augustine (lived 354–430) like Irenaeus assigned the ox to Luke but gave the lion to Matthew, the man to Mark and the eagle to John.⁷ In agreement with Augustine, Jerome (347–419) linked the fourth gospel with the eagle, because when he read its prologue he felt as if he were winging his way to heaven. For Matthew and Luke, Jerome stuck with Irenaeus’ assignments of man and ox, respectively, while giving the lion to Mark.⁸

Jerome’s scheme has proven to be the most popular, but commentators have periodically revisited the subject and suggested yet other combinations.⁹ What all these theories have in common is a reliance on subjective judgments such as Jerome’s impression that the opening verses of Mark have the boldness of a lion’s roar. Interpretations of that kind can be produced to match any of the faces with any of the gospels, making the enterprise appear futile if not comical. Moreover, there are other, less sensational reasons for the occurrence of these four-faced angels in the book of Ezekiel.

Anyone who has seen representations of gods from Egypt and Mesopotamia knows that they frequently combine parts of different animals as well as parts of animals and humans. Likewise, attending spirits or genii are portrayed as griffins, sphinxes, and winged bulls.

The cherub was a composite figure placed as a spirit guardian on the side panels of thrones and in other locations of sacred or strategic significance. A 3,200-year-old bronze cult stand from Cyprus portrays a creature with the head of a man, the wings of an eagle, the forelegs of a

6 The Hebrew and Greek words for angel literally mean “messenger.” Although the creatures of Ezekiel are simply called cherubs, several texts classify all spirit attendants of God as angels (Ps. 103:20; 148:2; Heb. 12:22; 1 Peter 3:22).

7 Augustine, *The Harmony of the Gospels* 4.10.

8 Jerome, *Commentary on Ezekiel* 1.1.

9 E.g., Matthew/lion, Mark/ox, Luke/man, and John/eagle; see Chuck Missler, *Cosmic Codes: Hidden Messages from the Edge of Eternity* (Coeur d’Alene, ID: Koinonia, 1999), 208.

lion, and the hindquarters of a bull.¹⁰ Perhaps the oldest known example is a depiction on a stone from Syria from the 19th-century BC.¹¹ The combination is not as odd as it sounds in that each of these creatures was seen as dominating some sphere of the natural world: the lion over wild animals, the bull or ox over domestic animals, the eagle over birds, and man over creation in general.¹²

The cherubim of Ezekiel, therefore, are easier to understand in an ancient context than in a modern one. What better way to depict the otherworldly power of the angelic beings attending God's throne than by attributing to them ferocity, strength, and swiftness using stock symbols of the time?

It is tempting to stop with a cultural explanation of Ezekiel's vision and conclude that relating the cherubim to the gospels is a misguided though understandable attempt to rationalize the presence of four biographies of Jesus in Scripture. But a systematic approach to typological coding has served us well until now. When we suppress our skepticism long enough to examine objective differences among the gospels and then relate those differences to symbol identifiers, we find to our surprise that the church fathers were partly right. A relationship between the cherubim and the gospels does exist, although it is more complex than those who first wrote about it imagined.

Faces, Gospels, and New Testament Categories

To appreciate what it is that links the gospels to the vision of Ezekiel, we must review some information from previous chapters. Beginning in chapter 7 we learned that the New Testament divides mankind into ethnic categories based on Israel's historical status under the Mosaic covenant. The broadest division is into Israelite and non-Israelite—Jew and Gentile. The gospel “is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes,” says Paul, “first for the Jew, then for the

10 Elie Borowski, “Cherubim: God's Throne?,” *Biblical Archeology Review* 21, No. 4 (1995): 39.

11 See John H. Rogers, *Journal of the British Astronomical Association* 108, No. 1 (Feb, 1998): 24.

12 These associations occur in Jewish tradition. See *Midrash R. Shemoth* 23 on Exod. 15:1.

Gentile.”¹³ Paul also refers to these two groups as the “circumcised” and the “uncircumcised.”¹⁴ To these we can add a nation of circumcised law-keepers that nevertheless fell outside of Judaism, the Samaritans.

Technically, therefore, mankind can be divided into Jew, Samaritan, and Gentile in keeping with Jesus’ early mission instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.”¹⁵ With the emergence of the Christian church, members of all these classes were admitted into a covenant relationship with God as witnesses of his purpose in Christ. The ability to view the Christian congregation as either a two-fold body of Jews and Gentiles or as a three-fold union of Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles happens to fulfill the Mosaic principle that “a matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.”¹⁶

Recognizing the ethnic-spiritual classes of Jew, Samaritan, and Gentile turns out to be indispensable to understanding the plan of the gospels. Each of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) has an ethnic subtext, or coloration, that corresponds to one of these groups. Each group in turn is associated in the Scriptures with one of the animals whose faces appear on the cherubim. Finally, the gospel of John with its emphasis on the person of Jesus belongs with the remaining face, that of the man. This interpretation is supported by evidence rather than subjective feelings.

Matthew and the Lion of Judah

The first gospel in canonical order, Matthew, has long been recognized as characteristically Jewish in its point of view. At the outset it documents Jesus’ Hebrew ancestry from Abraham through David and his successors in the dynasty of Judah. Matthew contains twenty-six occurrences of the names “Judah,” “David,” and “Solomon,” nearly as many as the total of twenty-eight in the other three gospels combined. Only in Matthew does Jesus presuppose ongoing worship at the Jerusalem temple, the center of Jewish religious life, by saying that it is

13 Rom. 1:16; Paul here uses the word “Greek” to connote Gentile.

14 Rom. 3:30.

15 Matt. 10:5–6; cf. Acts 1:8.

16 Deut. 19:15; cf. 2 Cor. 13:1.

imperative to reconcile with an estranged brother before offering a sacrifice at the altar.¹⁷

In keeping with Jewish reverence for the Hebrew Scriptures and for the law of Moses in particular, Matthew speaks more highly of the law than do the writers of Mark, Luke, and John.¹⁸ Matthew also refers repeatedly to Jesus' fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy.

A standard reference work supplies totals for quotations of Old Testament Scripture in the four gospels.¹⁹ This allows us to compare the figures for each:

Matthew	66
Mark	34
Luke	43
John	21

In addition to quoting prolifically from the Hebrew Bible, Matthew lays greater stress than the other gospels on the priority of the Jewish people. Matthew alone contains Jesus' command, cited above, that the disciples are to preach to Israel, meaning Jews, rather than to Samaritans or Gentiles.²⁰ Unlike Mark's account of the Syro-Phoenician woman, Matthew's version has Jesus pointedly say to her, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."²¹

When, in Matthew, Jesus advises that any Christian who lapses into unrepentant sin should be shunned, he tells the disciples to treat the wrongdoer "as a Gentile and a tax collector" in keeping with peculiarly Jewish social attitudes.²² These verses are a small part of the evidence of Matthew's Jewish orientation, as can be verified by anyone willing to consult annotated study Bibles, commentaries, and scholarly literature.

Although scholars generally agree that Matthew lacks the earmarks of a translated work, the statements of church fathers that Matthew was originally written in Hebrew confirm its close association with Jewish

17 Matt. 5:23–24.

18 Matt. 5:17–19; 23:2–3.

19 Robert Bratcher, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament (Helps for Translators)* (NY: United Bible Societies, 1987), 1–27.

20 Matt. 10:5–6.

21 Matt. 15:24; cf. Mark 7:27.

22 Matt. 18:17 NASB.

Christians, as do Hebrew language versions of the gospel dating back at least to the Middle Ages. The “Jewishness” of Matthew is so well attested as to be a settled issue except for remarks made in recent years by a few scholars to the effect that the book of John is the most “Jewish” of the gospels. Those comments must be seen as a reaction against the once commonplace assumption that John’s gospel was heavily influenced by Greek thought.

Due especially to Dead Sea Scrolls research, scholars now acknowledge that John’s expressions are as likely derived from first century Judaism as from Greek sources. That is not to say that John actually is more Jewish in its outlook than Matthew. John’s routine description of Jesus’ audience as “the Jews,” in contrast to a single such usage in Matthew, places the reader of John at a relatively greater distance from Jewish culture. John 2:6, which notes that “nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing,” stands as one example. When all factors are considered, Matthew’s status as the “Jewish” gospel is beyond dispute.

With the ethnic identification of Matthew, we are able to make our first assignment of one of the faces from Ezekiel’s cherubim. Jews or Judeans are primarily members of the dominant tribe of the southern kingdom, Judah, from which the northern tribes eventually withdrew, as we saw in chapter 10.²³ The animal symbol for Judah is the lion, as is plain from passages in both Old and New Testaments. “You are a lion’s cub, O Judah,” says Genesis, and, “Like a lion he crouches and lies down.”²⁴ Revelation famously describes Jesus as “the Lion of the tribe of Judah.”²⁵

Mark and the Roman Gentile Eagle

We now turn to Mark’s gospel. Because Mark’s author goes out of his way to explain Jewish customs and Aramaic terms, scholars generally recognize that he has a Gentile readership in mind. Commentaries often cite verses 3 and 4 of chapter 7, describing the concern of “the Pharisees and all the Jews” with ritual purity, but the entire chapter in

23 Josh. 18:5.

24 Gen. 49:9.

25 Rev. 5:5.

which the passage occurs reinforces the same point. The comment at the end of verse 19, saying that Jesus effectively “declared all foods clean,” implies that Jesus authorized in advance the admission of Gentiles into the church.²⁶ A similar pronouncement that formerly forbidden foods are now “clean” occurs in the book of Acts as part of the story of the first Gentile convert to Christianity, the Roman centurion Cornelius.²⁷

The indirect connection between Mark’s gospel and the first Gentile Christian convert is not the only link between Mark and the Roman people. Mark contains more Latin loan words than any of the other gospels, and while these words are part of the vernacular of some other Jewish literature, their presence still leaves Mark relatively more Latinized than Matthew, Luke, or John.

The tradition dating back as early as the second century that Mark was written in Rome is revealing as well, since factual or not there must be a reason for it, just as there is for the idea that Matthew was composed in Hebrew.²⁸ As far as we know, symbolic interpretations of the book of Ezekiel had nothing to do with early Christian claims that Mark’s gospel was written in Rome; conjectures about where the book originated likely were prompted either by its documentary history or by its contents.

In the opening words of Mark, “The beginning of the gospel [*evangelion*, “good news”] about Jesus Christ,” some scholars hear an echo of tributes to the greatest of the Caesars, Augustus.²⁹ Augustus had been proclaimed “Son of God” and “Savior” for supposedly bringing peace to the world through the military might of the Roman Empire, and his birth was described as the “beginning of good news [*evangelion*].” Mark’s challenge to such Roman pretensions might be read, “Here is the genuine good news, about Jesus, the man who (unlike Augustus) truly is the world’s Savior.”

26 Mark 7:19.

27 Acts 10:10–22.

28 Both traditions date to the late second century; see Irenaeus, *op. cit.*, 3.1.1.

29 Craig A. Evans, “Mark’s Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel,” *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 1 (2000): 67–81. For a survey of the evidence of Mark’s Roman provenance, see Adam Winn, *The Purpose of Mark’s Gospel: An Early Christian Response to Imperial Roman Propoganda* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

All the Synoptic Gospels refer to the Roman officer who presided over Jesus' crucifixion, but Mark does so by spelling out the Latin word "centurion" in Greek letters as *kenturion* instead of translating it into the Greek word *hekatontarchos*, as do Matthew and Luke. Mark has the demons calling Jesus the "Son of God" in defiance, but no one is shown confessing Jesus' divine sonship until the centurion exclaims, "Surely this man was the Son of God."³⁰ The Roman soldier's testimony serves as the climactic declaration of Jesus' identity in Mark.³¹

The Roman Gentile affinity of Mark is the key to our second face identification. To use it we must sort through a menagerie of snakes, lions, leopards, bears, wolves, goats, and other animals to which the Gentile nations are likened in the Hebrew Bible.³² Rome is not explicitly mentioned, but empires that had a dominant status comparable to Rome's offer a clue. These are Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Media-Persia, and Greece. Two on this list, Assyria and Babylon, fulfilled a prophecy at Deuteronomy 28:49–52 that as punishment for Israel's rebellion, "The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down . . . They will lay siege to all the cities throughout your land until the high fortified walls in which you trust fall down."

In keeping with the language of Deuteronomy, Assyria and Babylon are later referred to under the figure of a hovering or swooping eagle.³³ Media-Persia is called a "bird of prey."³⁴ Ezekiel, the book in which the four-faced cherubim appear, portrays the kings of both Babylon, the dominant power of Ezekiel's time, and Egypt, its southern rival, as eagles.³⁵ Greece is not associated with the eagle in the Bible, but Alexander the Great adopted the eagle owing to its status as the sacred bird of Zeus, the head of the Greek pantheon.

It was not just the ancient Mesopotamian empires that fit the

30 Mark 15:39.

31 See Tae Hun Kim, "The Anarthrous *Hyios Theou* in Mark 15,39 and the Roman Imperial Cult," *Biblica* 79 (1998): 221–241. The Greek lacks the article "the" and might better be translated "God's Son," but still carries great force, as is clear from John 19:7–8.

32 Jer. 5:6; Dan. 7:2–6; 8:3–8.

33 Jer. 48:40; 49:22; Hos. 8:1; cf. Isa. 8:8.

34 Isa. 46:11.

35 Ezek. 17:3–15.

description of the predatory eagle of Deuteronomy 28. In AD 70 Rome responded to the First Jewish Revolt by invading Judea in force. Bearing standards crowned with Rome's animal ensign, the eagle, Roman legions besieged and overran Jerusalem, razed the temple, and killed or enslaved thousands of Jews.³⁶ The eagle, therefore, is the appropriate biblical symbol for Rome just as it is for previous Gentile empires. We are safe in concluding that Mark, the "Gentile gospel," is represented by the eagle's face.

Luke and the Samaritan Bull

Of our three categories of Jew, Samaritan and Gentile, only Samaritan is left, with the gospels of Luke and John still to be assigned. It is not apparent that either of those books was written for the limited audience represented by first-century Samaritans, but Samaritans are prominently mentioned in both.

Luke contains (1) the refusal of a Samaritan village to allow Jesus to pass through on his way to Jerusalem, (2) Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan and, (3) Jesus' healing of ten lepers, one of whom is a Samaritan.³⁷ John, on the other hand, contains (1) the story of the Samaritan woman Jesus encounters at a well and the favorable reception he receives at the nearby Samaritan town of Sychar, and (2) the accusation by Jesus' enemies, stemming perhaps from his unusual visit to Sychar, that Jesus is himself Samaritan.³⁸ On casual reading neither gospel seems to be more "Samaritan" than the other.

If we look more closely, we find that the second and third Samaritan-related passages from Luke are unlike anything else in the gospels, including the Sychar story from John, in that they portray Samaritans as being more righteous than Jews. After Jesus heals ten lepers, only a Samaritan turns back to thank him; the majority if not all of the remaining nine are Jews, as can be understood from Jesus' instructions to them to show themselves to the priests as well as from his concluding reproach.

In the good Samaritan parable, preserved only by Luke, the title

36 Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 3.6.2, op. cit., 645.

37 Luke 9:51–56; 10:30–35; 17:11–19.

38 John 4:4–42; 8:48.

character offers lifesaving aid to an injured man by the side of the road after a Jewish priest and a Levite pass him by. New Testament scholar Ben Witherington observes that the exemplary place accorded in Luke to a Samaritan over and against those who were seen by the Jews as the official custodians of Mosaic law is “striking.”³⁹ The extent of the honor Luke’s gospel accords upright Samaritans is further evident from the typology of the story. As discussed in chapter 14, a parallel is implied between the charitable Samaritan and Jesus himself inasmuch as Jesus furnished salvation for dying humanity when the Mosaic law, represented by the priest and Levite, could not.

Less obvious than the heroic status that the good Samaritan story confers upon a member of a nation despised by Jews is its relationship to the history of that nation. Samaria began its national existence as the northern kingdom of Israel following the split with Judah in the tenth century BC. The Old Testament narrative running from 1 Kings chapter 12 through 2 Kings chapter 17 consists primarily of early Samaritan history and allusions to this portion of the Hebrew Bible abound in Luke’s gospel.

Chapter 14 showed how Jesus created the good Samaritan parable by reworking the tale of the Judean and Samaritan prophets, along with that of kindly Samaritans from the book of 2 Chronicles.⁴⁰ The mission instruction Jesus borrows from Elisha, also cited in chapter 14, is one of the many narrative details unique to Luke that correspond to events from Samaritan history.⁴¹ References to Samaritan history that are absent from Luke but present in the other gospels are far less extensive.⁴²

Among the gospels, only Luke contains the names of both great prophets of Samaria, Elijah and Elisha, and only Luke reports the Elijah- and Elisha-like resurrection of the son of a widow in the village

39 Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 195.

40 1 Kings 13:1–32; 2 Kings 23:17–18; 2 Chron. 28:5–15.

41 Cf. Luke 9:51 with 4 Kgdms. 2:1, 9, LXX (2 Kings MT); cf. Luke 9:54; 12:49 with 2 Kings 1:9–16; cf. Luke 9:61–62 with 1 Kings 19:19–20; cf. Luke 10:4b with 2 Kings 4:29b; cf. Luke 12:54 with 1 Kings 18:43–44; cf. Luke 17:7–8 with 1 Kings 17:10–13; cf. Luke 24:15–16, 31 with 2 Kings 6:17–20; cf. Luke 19:41–44 with 2 Kings 8:11–12.

42 Cf. Matt. 3:4; Mark 1:6 with 1 Kings 1:8; cf. John 16:32 with 1 Kings 22:17, 36.

of Nain just a few miles from where Elisha performed a similar miracle.⁴³ In Luke's genealogy, "Joseph" is the most frequently occurring name, evoking the tribal forefather of the northern Israelites.⁴⁴

Recognizing the Samaritan sympathies of Luke's gospel allows us to solve a long-standing puzzle having to do with the most popular of all of Jesus' parables, that of the Prodigal Son. The story of a son who sinfully squanders his father's money, repents, and is accepted back by the father but scorned by his older brother is an illustration of God's patient love for humanity. But the plot is unusually detailed for a parable. Is it based on the experience of an actual family or instead representative of some aspect of Israel's history?

None of the many theories about the origin of the prodigal son tale has won general acceptance, but the suggestion of some scholars that it is based on the northern kingdom of Israel fits well with other evidence of Luke's interest in Samaria.⁴⁵ The Jews were descendants of Judah, an older brother of the principal forebear of the Samaritans, Joseph.⁴⁶ It was the northern kingdom, the "younger brother," that withdrew from the national family and squandered its spiritual inheritance, becoming ethnically and ritually impure in the process.⁴⁷ The various details of the story correspond closely to the experiences and attitudes of the northern Israelite and Judean peoples (see Appendix).

The majority of northern Israelites traced their descent from Joseph's sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, with the second son's tribe being so dominant that the term "Ephraim" became synonymous with the "house of Joseph."⁴⁸ Joseph's symbol is the bull or "wild ox,"⁴⁹ which is

43 Luke 4:25–27; 7:11–15; 1 Kings 17:17–24; 2 Kings 4:8–37.

44 Luke 3:23, 24, 26 (variant, Josech), 30; 1 Chron. 5:1–2.

45 See John Bowman, *The Samaritan Problem: Studies in the Relationships of Samaritanism, Judaism, and early Christianity* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1975), 83; Gottfried Quell in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Friedrich, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 973; David Ravens, *Luke and the Restoration of Israel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 102–103.

46 Gen. 29:31–30:24; Ezek. 37:16.

47 See the Hebrew of Judg. 1:3 for an example of entire tribes being referred to as individual brothers.

48 Josh. 18:5; Isa. 11:13.

49 Deut. 33:16–17.

paired with Judah's symbol, the lion, to symbolize greater Israel from the wilderness wandering through the reign of Solomon.⁵⁰

The association of Joseph/Ephraim with the figure of the bull is inseparably entwined with economic and religious history. From the northern pastures that were Israel's prime cattle-raising territory came the "bulls of Bashan," famous for their size and strength.⁵¹ God referred to the ten-tribe federation as an "unruly calf" and a "stubborn heifer" and its women as the "cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria."⁵² The miracle-working prophets of Samaria, Elijah and Elisha, made special offerings of bulls and oxen.⁵³ Idolatry in the north, too, was directed to images of bulls and calves.⁵⁴

In Luke's prodigal son story, the compassionate father slaughters a fattened young bull order to hold a feast for his repentant younger son. The symbolism of Christ as the bull that is offered to sustain those who repent in faith was not lost on Irenaeus, who saw it as confirmation of the bull as Luke's symbol. Irenaeus's sole correct guess about a face-to-gospel assignment owes in part, therefore, to a typological clue. For an even broader hint, compare one of Jesus' sayings in Matthew with the version of it from Luke:

He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep!" —Matthew 12:11–12

Then he asked them, "If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?"

—Luke 14:5 (cf. 13:15)

Jesus is teaching a lesson in mercy based on the care of domestic animals. The animal symbol for Judah, the lion, is inappropriate for this purpose, but Jesus has another metaphor to draw upon, that of the "lost

50 Num. 23:22–24; 1 Kings 7:29.

51 Ps. 22:12.

52 Jer. 31:18; Hos. 4:1, 16; 10:11; Amos 4:1.

53 1 Kings 18:33; 19:21.

54 1 Kings 12:28; Hos. 8:5–6. See Amihai Mazar, "Bronze Bull found in Israelite 'High Place' from the Time of the Judges," *Biblical Archeology Review*, Sept/Oct (1983): 34.

[Jewish] sheep of Israel” who are so carefully distinguished from Gentiles and Samaritans in Matthew’s gospel. But while Matthew records the figurative equation between a human and a sheep, Luke instead preserves a comparison of man with the ox (or bull), *bous*. Luke’s man-ox symbolism reflects what the Hebrew Bible says about the northern kingdom.

God says through Jeremiah that Ephraim “strayed” and had to be disciplined “like an unruly calf.”⁵⁵ Having handed Samaria over to Assyrian oppression, God nevertheless is anxious to recover his wayward people. “Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight?” he asks. “Though I often speak against him, I still remember him . . . I have great compassion for him.”⁵⁶ If Ephraim is a renegade calf in need of recovery, then his rehabilitation might be likened to pulling a young ox out of a well.

The bovine Ephraim (Samaria) of Jeremiah 31 is a “dear son,” hearkening forward to Luke 14:5, where son and ox alike are worthy of compassion. We now have a variety of references that combine to identify Luke as the “Samaritan gospel” under the symbol of the third animal face, that of the bull.

Animal Symbols and Classes of Mankind in Ezekiel

With the three animal symbols tentatively assigned, we turn for corroboration to Ezekiel, the book in which the cherubim are described. Ezekiel is one of just two books in the Hebrew Bible that provide identifiers for more than one of the animal faces of the cherubim. Deuteronomy connects the bull to Joseph (and therefore to Samaria) and the eagle to Gentile empires, while Ezekiel confirms the symbolism of the eagle and the lion.⁵⁷

The symbol for Samaria, the bull or ox, seems to be missing from Ezekiel until we look closely at instructions the prophet is given for a mock assault upon Israel. He is told to pantomime a siege of the northern kingdom for 390 days, followed by a forty-day siege of Jerusalem and Judah.

55 Jer. 31:18–19.

56 Jer. 31:20.

57 Deut. 33:16–17; 28:49–52; Ezek. 17:3–15; 19:1–9.

During the first siege he must eat coarse bread baked over a fire made with human excrement to illustrate the consumption of unclean food by impoverished Samaritan refugees. When Ezekiel protests that the enactment is too revolting for him to bear, God allows him to cook with manure of cattle (*bous*, LXX) in place of human excrement.⁵⁸ The concession subtly equates the people of Samaria with cattle or oxen, just as Luke's gospel places "son" in parallel with "ox."

Ezekiel, besides being the only book containing identifiers for all three of the animals represented by the cherubim, is also the only book to predict God's reconciliation to himself of mankind in terms of three ethnic/spiritual classes corresponding to Jew, Samaritan, and Gentile. Ezekiel represents these categories as three cities: Jerusalem, Samaria and Sodom.⁵⁹ This theme cannot be divorced from Ezekiel's prophecy about the coming messianic king.

References to the Messiah occur in Ezekiel 34:24 and 37:25. Consequently, Ezekiel contains the ingredients of a foursome consisting of the three divisions of humanity and the Messiah. It is also significant, given the association of the Messiah with the temple, that a mysterious "man" who reveals a plan for a new temple stands beside Ezekiel in the inner temple court just as God announces this room to be the resting place for the "soles of my feet."⁶⁰

John's Divine Man

The subject of the Messiah as distinct from sinful men brings us to the gospel of John, since it alone is left to correspond to the human face of the cherubim. John is noteworthy for its sweeping observations concerning mankind in relation to the messianic Son of God. Of Jesus' coming, John says, "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world."⁶¹ "This is the verdict," John intones about humanity, "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil," while saying of Jesus, "He did

58 Ezek. 4:9–15.

59 Ezek. 16:45–56.

60 Ezek. 43:6–7; cf. Isa. 60:13.

61 John 1:9.

not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man."⁶²

John also stresses the importance of faith in the person of Jesus in addition to agreement with his teachings. Forms of the phrase "believe in Jesus" occur only three times in the Synoptics, compared with more than twenty times in John.⁶³

Each of the gospels is centered on Jesus, of course, but in terms of its emphasis on the Divine Man, John is the "Jesus gospel." To further prove the point, we need only count the number of times the word "man," Greek *anthropos*, designates Jesus in the various gospels, discounting the many places where "man" is interpolated in translation. The tally is revealing:

Matthew	3
Mark	2
Luke	5
John	15

The occurrences in John begin in 4:29 with the invitation of the woman at the well, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did," and culminate in Pilate's declaration in 19:5: "Here is the man!"

It is time to credit Irenaeus and the Christians of the second century for their spiritual intuition. The relationship between the four faces of the cherubim and the canonical gospels is so systematic that it defies coincidence. Irenaeus's failure to assign all the faces correctly is excusable when we consider that any attempt to do so without first determining the ethnic associations of the gospels is a blind draw with 23-to-1 odds against success.

To account naturalistically for the alignment of Matthew-Jew-lion, Mark-Gentile-eagle, Luke-Samaritan-bull, and John-Jesus-man is as daunting a challenge as our studies have so far posed. In the following chapter, we will probe to see how deeply the gospel pattern is embedded. We will also make some observations about the patterned structure of the universe itself.

62 John 2:25; 3:19.

63 Matt. 18:6; 27:42; Mark 9:42; cf John 2:11; 3:15; 4:39; 6:35; 7:31; etc.

