

QUEST 52

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A Reading Strategy for the Gospels

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The four gospels are unique documents. There is really nothing quite like them in all the ancient world. In some ways they read like Greek history, with interest in political rulers and cultural details. In other ways they read like Roman biographies of the day. Yet only two of the four (Matthew and Luke) have anything to say about Jesus' birth and childhood. Moreover, all four books are dominated by just two days in Jesus' life — the day he died and the day he rose. These two events are portrayed in the gospels as two sides of the same coin. Throw in the ascension and you have the trilogy of "lifted up" terminology. This "exaltation" of Jesus towers over all the stories and events of the gospels and colors them all.

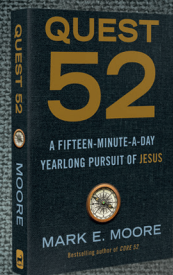
Thus, we come up with this axiom: **The gospels must be read in the shadow of the cross.** This is particularly true of the synoptic gospel (i.e., Matthew, Mark and Luke). We should ask of each story, "How does this relate to the cross?" This may not work equally well for each pericope. But it will shed a great deal of light on much of what we read. For example, read Luke 2:21–38 in the shadow of the cross. See what comes to light. Even in this unlikely passage a number of prominent "cross" themes appear: Purification (22), law (22), Jerusalem (22), consecration of every first-born male (23), sacrifice (24), consolation of Israel (25), Christ (26), temple (27), salvation (30), light for revelation to the Gentiles (32), falling and rising (34), sword pierces your own soul (35), redemption of Israel (38).

Or consider Luke 8:51–56. Here we have two women healed. They are bound together by the mention of twelve years. For the first it was her age, for the second it was the length of her illness. Jairus, the synagogue ruler convinces Jesus to come to his house. His daughter was deathly ill. On route, this woman with a long-standing gynecological problem grasps the tassel of Jesus' prayer shawl. She was acting out a common superstition. Many in those days believed that the prayers of a righteous man would become imbedded in the tassels of his shawl. For whatever reason, God respected her faith, and she was instantly healed. Almost everyone was overjoyed. Jairus is a bit impatient and about to become perturbed. His servants run to him, announcing that his daughter just died. Jesus grabs his attention and attempts to bolster his faith. Eventually all would be well.

Why tell such stories? Ok, the raising of the dead thing is quite cool. But who wants to talk about inordinate uterine bleeding? Why do the Synoptics record this? Read in isolation this is perplexing. In the shadow of the cross, however, it comes to light. Where else are blood and death pulled together? Indeed, these two women don't merely demonstrate the power of Jesus. They stand as mirrors that reflect our own problem with blood and death. They prefigure the work of Jesus on the cross.

Now John is an altogether different bird. He wrote his gospel some sixty years after the ascension. He's had a lot of time to think. He's a pretty good thinker, too! His book has no parables, only allegories; he has few quotations, but hundreds of O.T. allusions; and he opts for theology rather than history. In short, rather than reading in the shadow of the cross, **we must read John in the shadow of the church.**

This can be seen in his "I am" statements ("I AM" 8:58; bread, 6:35, 41, 48, 51; light of the world, 8:12; 9:5; door of the sheep, 10:7, 9; good shepherd, 10:11,14; Son of God, 10:36;



QUEST 52

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resurrection and the life, 11:25; way, truth and life, 14:6; true vine, 15:1, 5). Here John marches through the dominant expectations of the Messiah and points them to Jesus. Or they could be seen in John's deep ecclesiastical phraseology. For instance, he records Jesus' words to Nicodemus, "Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom" (John 3:5). The Christians of John's day could hardly read these words without thinking of Christian Baptism. Yet this sacrament had not yet been invented. Only its precursor was available through John the Baptist. Consider John 6:52–53, "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you have no life in you." This obviously conjures up thoughts of the Eucharist which was still two years off. Or again, John 7:38–39, "Streams of living water will flow from your inner most being." This has relation to the Holy Spirit who had not yet been given. How about John 19:34? Blood and water flowed from Jesus' side. If you trace these two liquids through John's literature, you will find them to be the libations of life. John writes with incredibly rich and deep theology.

The clearest view of John's concern for the church, however, is found in his miracles. He only chooses seven, you know. If you have read Revelation, you know about John's penchant for seven. It is a highly symbolic number. Unlike the Synoptics, who pile miracle on miracle, John carefully selects seven. Each of these are chosen from hundreds of possible stories, because they so clearly illustrate what Jesus is all about. In essence, these miracles don't merely demonstrate Jesus' power, they illustrate his kingdom. (See the chart on the following page).

These miracles are enacted parables. They speak about life in the kingdom; they trace the process of conversion (cf. 20:20–31). These miracles don't just tell *their* story, they reflect our own. The Gospels, therefore, are not bland history. They are carefully constructed narratives with poignant theological purposes. They demand a more intense reading, a more spiritually sophisticated analysis, than they are general granted. These two simple rules — Read the Synoptics in the shadow of the cross and read John in the shadow of the church — will help Jesus' disciples mine the depths of these documents about his life.