

The Synoptic Gospels: A Journey Into the Kingdom

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Matthew
Mark
Luke

Volume II:
*From the Desert
to the Mount*

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• CHAPTER THREE •

From the Desert to Nazareth

Identity's Way

We have followed this path through the first three Gospels, beginning in *Volume I* of the *Journey*.

It was there that Mark proclaimed, in his opening verse, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Matthew's birth narrative unfolded with a heady grandeur and charted a course in the direction of true kingship. Not the tyrannical edicts of Herod the Great, but the redemptive acts of God anticipated in the coming of the Christ Child. This offered us early glimpses of the kingdom of heaven.

Joseph's version featured dazzling angels and wise men, proclaiming anew God's saving action. He will lift up the poor and bring down the mighty.

A challenge that the Myers-Briggs system poses is how to use one's preferences and strengths for the best possible outcomes. Another challenge is how to develop the less-preferred aspects of one's personality. Here, we have indirectly explored how the thinking-versus-feeling component of the Myers-Briggs personality indicator offers a way of looking at our faith lives.

Which is your natural approach to being Christian—through the head, or through the heart? If you know your Myers-Briggs type, does it suggest areas in which to improve your spiritual life?¹³

My Myers-Briggs type is ENTJ. We ENTJs tend to interpret the world first by thinking. A preference for thinking over feeling can make it more difficult to speak the language of the heart than the language of the head. As you might suspect, this trait has made it a struggle to write those portions of this chapter on faith being a matter of the heart! Have you had similar experiences—where you needed to approach the world by leading from your weak side? What were those experiences like? How has your faith journey supported you in these moments?



† *Matthew 4:12–17 Jesus appears publicly in Galilee*

¹²Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— ¹⁶the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned."

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

¹³Those interested in learning more about the Myers-Briggs test can visit the following websites: <http://similarminds.com> or www.humanmetrics.com/cgi-win/Jtypes2.asp—both of which provide information free of charge.

1. Other than their comparative lengths, what differences do you note between Mark's and Matthew's texts? What might Matthew's purpose be in reworking his source material?
2. Matthew connects us to the OT prophet, Isaiah. Why do you think he does so?
3. How do you respond to the description of Galilee as a place where Gentiles dwell in darkness, but receive light?

Matthew was a Jewish Christian who focused much of his literary effort on maintaining continuity between the Old Order and the New. He also sought to advance the kingdom by evolution rather than revolution. Here, Matthew follows that pattern as he elaborates on Mark's story by nudging it in the direction of Gentile inclusion, using implications from the Old Testament as his tool.

Matthew's Linguistic Pattern

It is important to notice how Matthew's language about the kingdom differs from the other Synoptics. Mark and Luke use the phrase "kingdom of God" without hesitation. Matthew, on the other hand, is a carefully observant Jew. Consistent with that tradition, his practice is not to use the name of God, but to make indirect references to him. Here, as well as many times throughout his gospel, Matthew uses the phrase "kingdom of heaven" instead.

Matthew's Jesus neither makes reference to the *kairos*, nor calls his audience to believe in the good news. Still, Matthew preserves Mark's signal about the emergence of Jesus as a new movement leader by making reference to the arrest of John the Baptist. Even with its changes, the passage sustains Mark's sense that a critically important time has arrived.



The Kingdom Writ Large

To reinforce his belief that an earth-moving shift is at hand, Matthew relies yet again on his preferred practice of interpreting the current moment in light of the OT tradition. He sees the hand of God in Judaic history, pointing toward a future for all humanity. Matthew invites our attention to a passage from Isaiah that shows us something about the theological significance of Galilee, the place to which Jesus has withdrawn.

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

**²The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined (Isa. 9:1–2).**

This OT text points away from gloom and anguish and in the direction of boundless hope. It moves toward a world no longer constrained by alienation and darkness. By evoking Isaiah, Matthew tells his audience that a new age is dawning; one where the darkness melts away in the face of the glorious light, and where gloom is banished.

Matthew also offers a subtle strand of thought for his community to pick up and follow. While it may be a momentary struggle to open the church's mission to Gentiles, doing so has always been within the redeeming plan of God. One needs only to look at Isaiah to see it revealed of old.



Why Galilee?

But what is Galilee—this place where a light is to shine in the darkness—like? Matthew first placed Jesus in Nazareth of Galilee as a child. He told how Joseph led the Holy Family there after the death of King Herod (Matt. 2:19-23). As an adult, Jesus left his home and went to the Jordan River, in Judea, where he was baptized.¹⁴

Now, after John's arrest, Jesus returns to Galilee—but relocates within that province by moving from Nazareth to Capernaum. Matthew does not tell us why.¹⁵ We will see later in his gospel, though, that Capernaum continued to be Jesus' base of operations, his "own town" as Matthew calls it (Matt. 9:1).

Most scholars agree that Jesus' boyhood home of Nazareth was an insignificant agricultural village, not far from a major trade route connecting Syria to Egypt. These places were within the eastern reaches of the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus. Earlier, they had been part of the vast world that Alexander the Great had conquered, which, after his death had been carved up and divided among his leading men. The whole area came under Roman dominion when Octavian (later called "Augustus") defeated an armed alliance between Marc Anthony—Octavian's rival for Roman leadership—and Cleopatra, who was Anthony's paramour and the Ptolemaic Queen of Egypt. After Octavian's naval victory at Actium, the Roman Revolution ended. The Eastern riches gained by the victory greatly enhanced the Roman treasury. Places like Antioch, Syria and Alexandria, Egypt—which had from long ago been collecting points for the accumulation of awesome wealth—now belonged to Rome.

The best estimates are that Nazareth was a little stop on the road connecting great cities of the eastern Mediterranean. It had somewhere between 200 and 2,000 residents at the time of Jesus. Citing the first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, William Barclay suggests a more sizable place, perhaps 20,000, but finds little support among other scholars.¹⁶ But by virtue of its location, and

¹⁴See *Volume I of the Journey*, at chapter 10, when Jesus meets John at the Jordan to be baptized.

¹⁵We will see Luke provide his own explanation later in this chapter.

¹⁶Josephus was a Jewish aristocrat whose life was spared in the Jewish rebellion of the late 60s and early 70s C.E. He had foretold that the Roman general, Vespasian, would ascend to the status of emperor. Vespasian did, and kept Josephus on. While we might regard Josephus as a generally honest (if politically astute) historian, his information was somewhat limited by the constraints of his day. He also shows an occasional tendency to exaggerate in ways favorable to the accomplishments of Rome, perhaps to maintain a little cushion of security among his patrons.

Roman Empire During the First Century



its proximity to larger places, such as the city of Sepphoris only three miles away, citizens of Nazareth may have had considerable access to the larger world, making it something other than the proverbial backwater that was often portrayed.

Jesus leaves this small pocket of Galilee for the presumably larger town of Capernaum, twenty-odd miles away. Both towns were within the territory governed by Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, who would later have John beheaded. Capernaum, on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, was two-and-a-half miles below the point where the mouth of the Jordan River entered the sea.

Archaeologists have located a place believed to be Capernaum. There, they have dug inside a fifth-century limestone synagogue to reach a first-century basalt one. Nearby, they have also discovered a fifth-century church. It is constructed over a fourth-century “house church” which, in turn, is built over the remains of a first-century home. The innermost area contains inscriptions

(probably made by pilgrims) identifying it as the home of the disciple Peter, whom we will meet in the next chapter of this volume.¹⁷

Despite the low opinion that Isaiah expressed of Galilee—at least until the time when he expected God to intervene—it appears to have been a remarkable place. It was densely populated, fertile, and diverse. Barclay describes a people who were innovative, energetic, temperamental, contentious, courageous, chivalrous, and ready at the drop of a hat to try to throw over the existing establishment.

Galilee was also a place of cross-cultural currents. At the time of Christ, it was much more liberal in accepting new ideas than was the rest of Palestine. Among the possible reasons for its openness were its status as a trade route and its proximity to numerous predominantly gentile areas, including Syria, Phoenicia, and Samaria. It was a place much more likely to be receptive to a new way than Jerusalem, for instance, would ever have been.

Here, then, is a place where Jesus can preach and find an audience at least willing to listen. Perhaps he can even preach in the Capernaum synagogue our archaeologist friends have excavated. Here, he can introduce ideas of what heaven's realm on earth would look like. Here, he will begin his public ministry.

1. How have you tried to envision the places where Jesus spoke? Have they looked sacred? Grubby? A little of both?
2. Matthew seems to paraphrase and interpret scripture more than quote it. How do you respond to his use of the Old Testament here?
3. The phrase “kingdom of heaven” makes some people think of the afterlife. Does it give you that association? What images does it invite? Does knowing that “kingdom of heaven” is an editorial revision of the term “kingdom of God” affect your general impression?
4. How do we experience the “kingdom of God” in this world? How might it be connected to an afterlife?

¹⁷See *Harper's Bible Dictionary* at 154–55, the primary source of this information on Capernaum, for greater detail.