

The Synoptic Gospels: A Journey Into the Kingdom

by Edward L. Bleynat, Jr.

Matthew
Mark
Luke

Volume II:
*From the Desert
to the Mount*

Foreword by Phyllis Tickle, best-selling author and founding religion editor of *Publishers Weekly*



R. BRENT AND COMPANY
Asheville, North Carolina
rbrent.com

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While we spent a fair amount of time in *Volume I* talking about Mark, including its centrality to the story of Jesus, we spent very little time *within* Mark. Some of that pattern will continue in this volume, as we must go farther in our Synoptic journeys before the central place Mark occupies in the canon becomes apparent. Throughout this series, when there is a passage of Mark to study, and a parallel segment from Matthew or Luke also appears, we will typically study Mark first. That way, we can see what the source has to say before seeing how Matthew or Luke have used Mark's material.

We can remember from *Volume I* that Mark starts directly and bluntly with a proclamation of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. Mark then brings us quickly into the prophetic presence of John, who baptizes Jesus in the waters of the River Jordan, where the voice of God calls him "my Son, the Beloved" (Mark 1:11).

The Gospel According to the People of Q

The other source used by both Matthew and Luke is the sayings gospel, Q. The Q tradition likely dates from the 50s A.D. in Galilee, where Jesus had lived out much of his teaching and preaching mission. Q presents Jesus as the Sage of Galilee, whose prophetic wisdom comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. While archaeology has not yet produced a copy of the Q text proper, we can nonetheless find its words preserved in the sections of Matthew and Luke that present Jesus' major teaching discourses. There is some thought that different versions of Q were in circulation, some in Aramaic (the primary spoken language in Galilee) and others in Greek (the primary written language in the eastern Mediterranean world).

Foremost among these is the Great Sermon. The better-known version of this compilation—the Sermon on the Mount—is found in Matthew. A different version is found in Luke's Sermon on the Plain. Both passages start with beatitudes, which proclaim God's blessings in an unexpected fashion. In this second volume of the *Journey*, we will spend much of our time studying and reflecting on Matthew's rendering of the Great Sermon, first by focusing on its origins and themes in this introduction. Detailed study of Luke's version will be saved for the next volume.

There are no birth narratives in Q, no miracles, no exorcisms, no passion story. It is, first and foremost, a preservation of the words of Jesus—something Matthew in particular treats as the core of Christianity. Many Christians (especially evangelicals) squirm at the notion that Jesus’ priorities are found more in our living out his teachings than in our properly confessing his identity. What I mean is this: Within the evangelical and other Christian traditions, there is a tendency to subordinate the importance of Jesus’ ethical teachings about a way of life grounded in justice and mercy. Instead, to these groups, the defining standard for being a Christian is a personal encounter with Jesus in which the sinner acknowledges his condition, prays for forgiveness, professes faith, and “accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.” Ethics—the “do” sections, instructing us to love our enemies, and even the “do not” sections, describing a number of offending behaviors—take a backseat to the personal encounter with Jesus about our sinfulness and God’s forgiveness.

While I do not deny the authenticity, importance, or biblical foundations of these sorts of personal encounters, I do question their emphasis. It seems that such an approach can lead to preoccupation with personal sin and forgiveness at the expense of the communal experience and practice of the transformative power found in the life and teachings of Jesus. Q stands as a witness against relegating justice and mercy to second-tier status.

The abiding images of Jesus as preacher and teacher come from the synoptic witness and, most especially, from the Q material within it. Its words call us away from life along the socially acceptable path of least resistance, where we adopt society’s standards of decency as determinative of right and wrong. Once we follow that cultural path, we risk losing sight of the radical, entirely self-sacrificial call of Christianity, and fall into a sort of civic religion run amok. The unsettling words of Q demand more—complete commitment to living out the values of the kingdom of God.

We will see in the Sermon on the Mount just how impossible this calling is. It will remind us that *committing* to kingdom values and *achieving* them are two entirely different propositions. And, our inability to achieve them may return us to the best part of evangelical theology, now viewed through a different lens: that living in a right relationship with God, ourselves, and each other is not dependent on our efforts, but on God’s empowering grace.

Q is paradoxical. It reminds us that our inability to live out kingdom values does not excuse us from trying to do so. It calls us toward ever-greater effort, as we acknowledge that our relationship with God is not centered primarily on our sinfulness, but on our redemption. This realization liberates us to live out those kingdom values because God's grace erases our sinful state before we even became fully aware of it. As St. Paul says to the Christians of Rome: "For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life" (Rom. 5:10). Similarly, he writes these words of reassurance to the Christian community at Corinth: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (2 Cor. 5:18–19). Having been assured of God's love and acceptance of us, we are called to the next step: determining what to do with it.

From the vantage point of having received God's grace, and so not having to be preoccupied with our own sinfulness, we can consider the Q sayings anew with reassurance rather than anxiety. From there, we may see how Q proclaims the heart of Christian living, brought to us in Matthew and Luke.

Each gospel contains unattainable and unavoidable calls toward that Christian living. Luke has simpler versions of shared Q sayings; Matthew, more complex ones. For this reason, many scholars believe that Luke's version more closely approximates the original text, which was handed down during the oral period before being reduced to writing. Matthew's version often appears to be a more spiritualized rendering of the Q material, suggesting that the author adopted a contemplative approach to the material and exercised greater editorial freedom.

In *Volume I*, we were introduced to Q when John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness baptizing in the River Jordan. In his inimitable fashion, he addressed those who came out to him as a "brood of vipers," securing his place in religious history with evocative, frightening words. Having started with this passage in *Volume I*, we will soon see in *Volume II* how broad a range the Q material encompasses, spanning from the harsh condemnation of the wicked to the gentle reassurance of the sufferers. The Q tradition contains such a wide range of material that some scholars believe it was an organic document,

circulated among various Christian communities in Galilee where the followers of Jesus felt free to add sayings preserved by their own oral traditions to a developing body of work. The end result may reflect an editorial process with several layers of different themes that present not just one scribe's record of the received words of Jesus, but a mixture of memories and experiences from the people of Q.

The Gospel According to St. Matthew

The Gospel according to St. Matthew is likely the second of the canonical Gospels written. It was probably composed between 75 and 90 A.D. and incorporates most of Mark, as well as a version of the Q material. Matthew also has traditions unique to his own book and community.

Matthew cites the Old Testament extensively and shows the greatest familiarity with Jewish scripture, tradition, history, and culture. It also shows considerable hostility to certain segments of the Jewish power structure, a portrayal that in places more likely reflects the events and experiences of his own time than of Jesus' time. This aspect of Matthew is most pronounced concerning the Pharisees, whom the gospel depicts as powerful and hostile opponents of Jesus.

Historically, the strength of the Pharisaic movement in Galilee was much less significant during the life of Jesus than it became during the period after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E.⁸ At that time, the temple cult, previously the seat of Jewish power, fell apart and dissolved into history. Jewish religio-political authority shifted to rabbinic movements, where an influential new form of orthodoxy was gaining prominence beyond the ruins of Jerusalem and was becoming hostile to the growing Jesus movements. Given

⁸This series uses "B.C." ("before Christ") and "B.C.E." ("before the Common Era") interchangeably. Similarly, "A.D." ("Anno Domini" or "the year of our Lord") and "C.E." ("the Common Era") are also used interchangeably. If there is a tendency here to use one style of abbreviation more than the other, it is that the "Common Era" references are often tied to events that would have had considerable significance to the non-Christian world. The traditional labels are more often used to mark events having greater relative significance to Christian chronology. Sometimes, though, the usage is just plain arbitrary!