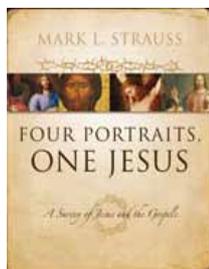


FOUR PORTRAITS – ONE JESUS

Book Title:

Four portraits – one Jesus:
An introduction to Jesus
and the Gospels

Book Cover:



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Review Title:

Four portraits – one Jesus

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English-speaking students of theology (and their lecturers!) are blessed with a wide choice of handbooks and introductions to the Bible for courses in biblical survey or introduction to the New Testament. Several good volumes are available from an evangelical perspective. There have been excellent survey volumes on the whole New Testament (e.g. Gundry, R.H., 2007, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 4th edn., Zondervan, Grand Rapids) as well as volumes on specific parts of the New Testament. This volume reviewed here belongs to the last category.

Strauss is professor of New Testament at Bethel Seminary in San Diego. Says Strauss:

To Christians worldwide, the man Jesus of Nazareth is the centrepiece of history, the object of faith, hope, and worship. Even those who do not follow him admit the vast influence of his life. For anyone interested in knowing more about Jesus, study of the four biblical Gospels is essential. (back cover)

The volume starts with a ten-page, detailed table of contents that enables the reader to use the book as a reference tool. In the brief introduction, Strauss describes the outline of the volume and his approach:

My goal is to produce a text which is both methodologically critical and confessionally evangelical. The text is critical in that it seeks to utilize the best literary and historical tools and resources available today. It has also tried to present the data in a fair and balanced manner, without glossing over problems or selectively manipulating results. The text is evangelical in that it is written from the perspective of one who confesses Jesus as Lord, and who believes that these Gospels are not merely human documents but the inspired and authoritative Word of God. (p. 19)

Strauss continues by saying that adopting the same evangelical mindset of the evangelists will allow us to more fully enter their world, and to hear the gospel story as it was intended to be heard as the good news of salvation achieved through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. The volume consists of four parts. The first part, 'Introduction to the four Gospels' discusses the genre of the Gospels ('What are the Gospels?', 23–42). In this part, Strauss addresses the following issues: 'Four Gospels, one Jesus'; 'The Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John'; the Gospel genre, 'Why were the Gospels written?'; 'The Gospel audiences: To whom were the Gospels written?'; 'Why four Gospels?'; 'Why only four gospels'; reading the Gospels today and an addendum on sources for information about Jesus outside the Gospels. In part one, Strauss also introduces the reader to recent methods in interpreting the Gospels ('Exploring the origin and nature of the Gospels: Historical-critical methods of Gospel research' and 'Reading and hearing the Gospel stories: Literary-critical methods of Gospel research', 43–65, 67–89).

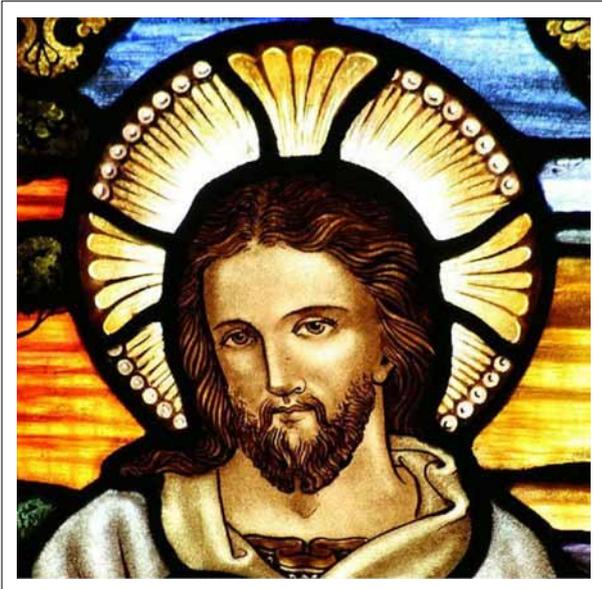
The second part outlines the historical setting of the Gospels (93–122), and describes the religious setting of first-century Judaism (123–148) and the social and cultural setting of the Gospels (149–167). The third part consists of a detailed introduction to each Gospel under the following headings:

Mark: The Gospel of the Suffering Son of God (171–211)
Matthew: The Gospel of the Messiah (213–258)
Luke: The Gospel of the Saviour for All People (259–296)
John: The Gospel of the Son Who Reveals the Father (297–343).

The fourth part offers the reader a fine survey of the life of the historical Jesus. It begins with an introductory essay ('Searching for the Real Jesus', 347–382, examination of the Jesus quests of the last three centuries with an obvious emphasis on North American research) and a succinct treatment of 'The historical reliability of the Gospels' (383–398), which allows for a reconstruction of the life of Jesus. After a survey of 'The Contours and Chronology of Jesus' Ministry' (399–424), Strauss describes the life of Jesus under the following headings: Jesus' birth and childhood, the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the message of Jesus, the miracles of Jesus, the Messianic words and actions of Jesus, the death of Jesus ('He viewed his coming death through the lens of the restoration theology of Isaiah and the prophets: as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the people, accomplishing a new exodus and establishing a new covenant bringing true forgiveness and an intimate knowledge of God', [535]), and the resurrection of Jesus (425–524; for more detailed treatment see the substantial volume by Bock, D.L., 2002, *Jesus according to scripture: Restoring the portrait of the Gospels*, IVP, Nottingham; and the recent collection by Bock, D.L. & Webb, R.L. (eds.), 2009, *Key events in the life of the historical Jesus: A collaborative exploration of context and coherence*, WUNT 247, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen. A 'Conclusion' of 18 lines ('[t]he claims made by Jesus and by the evangelists who interpreted him cannot be studied from a merely objective, neutral position. By its very nature, the gospel of Jesus Christ demands a response from the reader' [525]), a glossary from 'abomination of desolation' to 'Zeitgeist' (526–540) and an index end the volume.

For most chapters, Strauss provides a chapter overview, the objectives ('After reading this chapter, you should be able to ...'), a summary, a list of key terms, discussion and study questions and a bibliography of resources for further study. The volume is illustrated with charts, maps, pictures and other illustrations. In contrast to some proponents of Jesus research and the constant barrage against the Jesus of the Gospels and of the church in many media (which tends to repeat old arguments over and over again), Strauss has shown, in this volume, that it is possible to appreciate and to believe in the historical Jesus and to do so with good historical reasons and intellectual integrity. In short, Strauss has provided a masterpiece in clarity and a very user-friendly, basic textbook on the world of Jesus, on the Gospels, on the historical Jesus and on all the research issues involved. I (and many others!) envy English-speaking students for having such a text-book available.

In view of the recent resurgence of interest and weight given to various apocryphal gospels – particularly in North American research and the media – Strauss's focus on the four canonical Gospels is much



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The forth part of the book offers the reader a fine survey of the life of the historical Jesus

needed. That said, at least a short summary and assessment of the apocryphal gospels and their portrayal of Jesus would have been useful and may even be said to be essential. As it is, Strauss gives us only 19 lines on the question of why there are only four gospels (32) and only briefly refers to some of the apocryphal

gospels on pp. 40–42 (the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, the Secret Gospel of Mark, other gospel fragments, infancy gospels, ‘While the apocryphal gospel writings may contain an occasional authentic saying or event from Jesus’ life, they are for the most part late, legendary, and dependent on the four canonical Gospels. They provide us with little help’, 42); on these issues see, for example, Evans, C.A., 2008, *Fabricating Jesus: How modern scholars distort the Gospels*, IVP, Nottingham. A short chapter covering the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Gospels, the use of the Gospels in the church and a reference to the study of the Gospels in pre-modern times would also have been helpful.

This volume of Strauss’s provides the reader with user-friendly introductions to the New Testament and its content. While they are well informed on current research, their aim is for students to read, understand and appreciate the texts themselves. This is welcome in view of the increasing number of students in many training institutions who – for a variety of reasons – do not come to their theological training with a sound knowledge and command of the New Testament. They need volumes such as those of Strauss *before* they turn to volumes which focus more on critical scholarship of the New Testament rather than the actual content of the New Testament itself.

Perhaps the biblical subjects are often perceived negatively or as irrelevant by students in theological training because they often hear more of the assured conclusions of scholarship rather than the voices of the biblical texts themselves. In many cases students are more likely to remember that Paul did not write the Pastoral Epistles rather than remember the content and theology of these epistles. In other words, these students are very often robbed of the joy and excitement of making their own discoveries and of reaching their own conclusions. ■