Contents

Introduction

Even after two thousand years of prayer, preaching, and commentary, we are still learning how to read the gospels. With more biblical scholars alive today than have ever existed, we are coming to appreciate, now more than ever, the role and skill of the gospel writers. After all, the human authors of the gospels are still our main interpreters of the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth.

Over those two thousand years, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount has intrigued scholars and laypeople alike and has been the subject of much study and debate. Many books have been written about Jesus' teaching and what he meant by it. In this book I want to pay special attention to the distinctive ways in which the evangelists Matthew and Luke present and interpret the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and in the Sermon on the Plain, Luke's version of these teachings.

At first this attention to similarities and differences may feel like scholarly fussiness. My hope is that you will soon begin to appreciate the authorial brilliance and pastoral wisdom of both Matthew and Luke as they mediate the sayings of Jesus for their respective audiences to help them live the faith. Such study eventually affects our own faith and life.

What we call the Sermon on the Mount is, of course, Jesus' speech in chapters 5 through 7 in the Gospel of Matthew. But there is another briefer version of that speech in Luke 6:20-49, which is sometimes referred to as the Sermon on the Plain (because Luke pictures Jesus speaking these words at the *foot* of a mountain, on a plain; see 6:12, 17). And Luke has conveyed much of Jesus' teaching that Matthew transmits in his longer version of the Sermon in other contexts in his gospel. Because Matthew's version of the Sermon is so much fuller, Luke's version has suffered comparative neglect over the centuries, much as the short Gospel of Mark had been overlooked because

almost all of Mark's narrative shows up in Matthew and because Mark *lacks* much of the *teaching* of Jesus that appears in Matthew and Luke.[1] Now I hope you will take the time to savor with me what we learn when we seriously consider Luke's version of the sayings of Jesus that appear in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount.

The Gospels: A Faith Understanding of Historical Realities

Before going further, it's important to review a recent phase in the history of gospel study because it sheds light on the approach I have taken here. You may have heard of a research project called the quest for the historical Jesus. This is a rather recent scholarly endeavor, just a little over one hundred years old. Aware that the four canonical gospels are not simply collections of historical data such as archival records but rather documents meant to interpret the memory of Jesus' words and deeds for the living of Christian faith, many scholars have tried to access "the Jesus behind the documents." The means for this quest have been the use of such tools as the history of first-century Palestine, archeology, first-century Roman and Jewish texts, comparative cultural studies, and certain criteria used to assess the historical authenticity of words and deeds attributed to Jesus.

However, some of these criteria rely on assumptions that don't necessarily assure us of historical accuracy. For example, one criterion—whether the sayings of Jesus are discontinuous with the Judaism of his time—presumes that Jesus' controversies on particular interpretations of the Mosaic law entailed a full-scale rejection of it. Yet there is no reason to assume that Jesus' prophetic critique of some of the leaders of Israel meant that he was rebelling against the essential traditions of this people. Another criterion—whether Jesus' sayings were discontinuous with the early church—presumes that the gospel writers put words in Jesus' mouth to validate their traditions and that

Jesus' followers failed to follow and transmit their master's teachings. But there is no reason to think that the early bearers of the apostolic tradition readily departed from the teaching of their Lord and Master, for whom they were willing to die.

Still, as the historical Jesus project has continued, the labor of some painstaking and careful scholars has yielded important insights, three in particular.[2] First, we have learned much about the historical context of Jesus and the early Christian communities, especially about the diversity of first-century Judaism. Second, this study has led us to take seriously the Jewishness of Jesus. For all the startling newness of the good news that he embodied and preached, that preaching can only be fully understood as spoken by an exponent of what scholars call second-temple Judaism, the faith and practices of the people of Israel that developed after the Babylonian exile in a variety of expressions.

Third, the quest for the historical Jesus has further clarified the nature of the four gospels. Now we understand better than ever that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are indeed expressions of a *faith understanding* of the historical realities of the public life of Jesus of Nazareth. While the historical quest yields a picture of a "marginal Jew"—Jesus, the craftsman from Nazareth, who taught and healed and was crucified by the Romans—the gospels proclaim that Jesus was also the long-awaited Anointed One and, quite unexpectedly, also the Son of God, the Wisdom of God made flesh, and the risen Lord of the end-time people of God. The gospels claim, moreover, that Jesus' death and resurrection occasioned the promised end-time outpouring of the Holy Spirit that enables those who through baptism and faith become communities of disciples to live the way of life that Jesus taught his first followers.

Now more than ever, it is clear to us in the twenty-first century that the Jesus we Christians know and try to follow does not come to us straight out of history, without interpretation. Rather, Jesus

has been *mediated* to us by the authors of the gospels who transmit the faith understanding of their communities, an understanding eventually affirmed by the universal church as inspired. The results of historical-Jesus research are guesswork—educated and instructive guesswork, to be sure, but guesswork nonetheless. The four gospels remain for Christians the definitive interpretation of the *meaning* of the person and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. All else is commentary and application. The labors of historical-Jesus research have helped us appreciate that truth now more than ever.

The Gospel Authors as Literary Artists

In our own time, when there are more biblical scholars—men and women, lay and clerical—studying and analyzing these four relatively short documents, we have a greater appreciation than ever for the insight and craftsmanship of the authors of the gospels. We are discovering that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were *literary artists*. Some readers might find that a scary thought, suggesting that authorial creativity might somehow *come between* the person of Jesus and us would-be disciples. But this is really not the case. Let me explain.

I have spent the greater part of the past thirty-three years teaching Scripture, mainly to bright undergraduates. When we study the four gospels, we do a lot of comparing of the gospels, one with another, especially Matthew and Luke with one of their putative sources, Mark. In this we are replicating what New Testament scholars have been doing for the past sixty years or so. As you might expect, this comparative study reveals plenty of differences among the gospels.

Some people are troubled when they first confront these differences. It is natural to think of them as "discrepancies" and to compare the evangelists to witnesses in a trial whose testimonies fail to agree. The next natural thought is to "excuse" the evangelists for their differences with the idea that such differences are to be expected in any human

testimony. After all, four witnesses—even four participants—in a traffic accident will come up with variant versions of what happened, even minutes after the event. So, the thinking goes, why should we expect otherwise from the evangelists?

But this kind of explanation is misguided. Comparing the four evangelists to four eyewitnesses who cannot agree is the wrong analogy. It turns out to be a false way of framing the data. Detailed comparative analysis of the four gospels reveals that the differences among those documents are not random variations due to faulty human witnesses; these differences are usually *deliberate* changes, omissions, abbreviations, expansions, additions, and rearrangements. These alterations have been made to highlight certain themes and emphases that the author intends to communicate to a particular audience, at a particular time in the growth of the early church.

The practice of comparing a piece of writing with its source to seek the "mind" of the author who rewrote it is called redaction criticism. Here "criticism" is used in the technical sense of thoughtful analysis—as in art or literary criticism; "redaction" simply means editing or rewriting. The fruit of several decades of this kind of analysis of the gospels has taught us that those fascinating differences, far from being random variations, are the result of patterned editing. In each gospel the pattern of this editing of the tradition turns out to be coherent within the particular gospel taken as a whole. In Luke's case the variations are part of patterns that are reflected in the whole of a *two-volume* project, the Third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles.

This state of biblical scholarship yields some fascinating and pastorally valuable consequences for our understanding of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7 and the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-49), along with Luke's other parallels to some thirty-eight verses in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. It no longer seems reasonable to think of the Sermon on the Mount as a direct record (a "tape," if you will) of what Jesus said on a particular occasion in one place, and to

think of Luke's Sermon on the Plain as a record of what Jesus said, much more briefly, on another occasion in another place. It makes more sense to understand both evangelists working from sayings of Jesus available to them in written form.

The consensus of scholarship understands the data of our documents in the following way.[3] Matthew and Luke both had access to a version of the Gospel of Mark and a collection of Jesus' sayings that scholars have dubbed "Q" (for *Quelle*, the German word for "source"). We do not have a manuscript representing the text of Q. What is called Q is a hypothetical source posited to explain the fact that both Matthew and Luke follow Mark's arrangement of the episodes of Jesus' public life, death, and resurrection. However, when it comes to the majority of Jesus' *sayings*, both authors have access to a common body of sayings that do not appear in Mark, but they arrange those sayings in different ways. For example, whereas Matthew transmits the Lord's Prayer in the middle of the Sermon (6:9-13), Luke chooses to have Jesus teach that prayer on the road to Jerusalem (11:1-4) and to link it with a parable of the friend at midnight (11:5-8) special to Luke.[4]

Matthew mainly arranges the sayings in five major speeches that punctuate his rendition of Mark's narrative, while Luke prefers to present those sayings in other ways, especially as taught by Jesus during his journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. Indeed, Luke expands that journey, which occupies a single chapter in Mark (10), into a nine-chapter section, apparently to accommodate material that came into his hands without a narrative framework. Of the sayings of Jesus that Matthew "packages" in his Sermon on the Mount, Luke incorporates about a fifth of them in his Sermon on the Plain, and around a third of the rest, he conveys in other parts of his narrative. While a few scholars think that Matthew worked with a copy of Luke, most understand Matthew and Luke to have worked independently of one another, using a version of Mark and the sayings source called Q. What does this mean when it comes to the Sermon on the Plain and

the Sermon on the Mount? If neither Matthew nor Luke is reading the other's work, it means that both have access to a sermon, embodied in Q, which begins with beatitudes; addresses issues of love of enemies, nonviolence, and judgment; and ends with the similitude about the wise and foolish builders. Each evangelist, then, elaborates that speech in his own way, according to how it fits his respective narrative of Jesus' life and works.

Comparing Matthew's and Luke's Renditions

Given that we have a growing respect for the evangelists' differences, along with their artistry and the integrity of their works as unified wholes, and given that we also have a deeper appreciation of the evangelists' role as our primary interpreters of Jesus' meaning, I am moved to try to write a fresh book on Matthew's Sermon on the Mount with attention to Luke's rendition of much of the same teaching.[5] In each case, our main framework will be the canonical context. That is, we will attend especially to the Old Testament background that throws light on these teachings. Second, our main framework for attending closely to Matthew's understanding of Jesus' teaching will be the rest of Matthew's gospel. Similarly, our main tool for hearing Luke's understanding of Jesus' teaching will be Luke's rendition of those teachings in his Sermon on the Plain and in his way of contextualizing other sayings that parallel Matthew's Sermon throughout the whole of his work, in both the Third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles.[6]

Finally, since Matthew and Luke were passing on the teachings of Jesus for the purpose of serving "the life and mission of the church" (the theme of the 2008 synod of the world's Catholic bishops on the Word of God), I will give my interpretations of how these teachings speak to us today, as we attempt to live as followers of Jesus. Since this book means to be informative in a basic way and also to be pastorally suggestive, the format will be the following:

Taking one unit of teaching at a time—sometimes a cluster of verses that seem to go together, sometimes a single verse, when it calls for that kind of attention—I will first give the passage in the 1986 New American Bible translation, the version currently used in Roman Catholic liturgies. (I have taken the liberty of using italics in these passages when necessary to make a point.) When I occasionally use a translation of the Bible other than NAB, such as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) or the New International Version (NIV), I will cite it after the Scripture verse quoted. I have also made occasional reference to other translations, including the King James Version (KJV), the Rheims, the Jerusalem and New Jerusalem Bibles (JB and NJB), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the Good News translation, and the Christian Community Bible.

Second, using the scholarly and pastoral tools at my disposal (dictionaries, articles, commentaries, concordances, and some forty years' experience of teaching and preaching), I will grapple with the question of what the teaching meant *then*, that is, in the first century, both before and after that first Easter.[7] I will follow the structure of the teachings in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Then, where the Gospel of Luke has a parallel version of the saying or passage, I will do the same study of Luke's version in Luke's context, meaning the whole of Luke–Acts, where the complete documentary context seems pertinent.

Third, I will do my best to apply that understanding of the original meaning of Jesus' teaching in the context of the two gospels to the life and mission of the church *today*. This is the challenge for any Christian; it is especially the work of the homilist. At the end of the day, application is a deeply personal matter. But since we are participants in a faith community with a long history of interpretation, I will also try to recognize how some postbiblical exponents of the Christian tradition have understood a given passage and how their applications of the text might help us actualize the teaching of Jesus today. Since Jesus' teaching on the nonviolent response to hostility

and on love of enemies has been a particular challenge over the centuries and offers a special challenge to us today, I shall devote some extra space to a review of the development of the Catholic magisterium on war and peace.

It's important for me to note that in addition to referring to the original Greek of the gospels when that seems helpful, I will sometimes refer to the Greek version of the Old Testament. This may seem pedantic. But the fact is that the authors of the New Testament wrote in Greek, and the version of the Bible they were most familiar with was the Greek translation. When they wrote in Greek, the words they used carried associations absorbed from their use in the Greek Scriptures. And when the evangelists quoted the Scriptures of Israel, it was usually the Greek version that they cited. The Greek Old Testament is known as the Septuagint—"the Seventy"—so called because of the legend that a group of seventy translators independently came up with identical translations. So the Roman numeral for seventy—LXX—has become the conventional sign for the Septuagint. When you see LXX next to a Scriptural citation, it is not a reference to some obscure manuscript; it simply identifies the quotation as coming from the standard version of the Old Testament used in the early church (before the Latin version became the dominant version used in the Western world). When I quote a Greek phrase (in the more familiar Latin alphabet, of course), it is not with the expectation that you know Greek, but that you will recognize similarities and follow connections between a given Septuagint passage and the New Testament verse under consideration. Don't be put off by an occasional citation of a Greek word; sound it out, and you will likely remember it when you see it again. You will be surprised at the fresh connections you will begin to make.

Finally, a word about the label "Old Testament": Understandably, there is some Jewish sensitivity about Christians referring to the Hebrew Scriptures as "the Old Testament." It sounds like a dismissal,

as if the New Testament supersedes the Hebrew Scriptures in such a way that the latter renders the former irrelevant and invalid. So in recent years, people have tried "the Elder Testament," "the First Testament," "the Jewish Scriptures," and "the Hebrew Scriptures." However, following the advice of two Jewish colleagues—one a highly respected local rabbi and the other an eminent New Testament scholar (yes, a Jewish scholar of the New Testament!)—I shall use the conventional label, the Old Testament.

There are several reasons for using this label. First, the evangelists more often use the Greek version, and the name "Hebrew Bible" refers to the Hebrew version. Second, the version most used in the Christian churches during the first fifteen centuries (and still used by most Christians today) follows the Greek canon, which contains seven more books than the Hebrew Bible. Third, the ordering of the books is different in the Christian Bible. Whereas the Jewish Bible is arranged in three parts—the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings (hence the name Tanakh, an acronym derived from the Hebrew names of the three divisions: *Torah, Naviim, Khetuvim*)—the Christian Old Testament is arranged so that the prophets come last, as a bridge to the New Testament pointing to Jesus Christ as the fulfillment. "We have the Tanakh; you have the Old Testament," my Jewish New Testament colleague observes.

Now let us begin by seeing how Matthew and Luke prepare us to hear their versions of the Sermon.