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John 10:7-9 English Standard Version

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The Differing, Yet Consistent Stories of Jesus.

We have four Gospels that in some ways tell the same story. Many people have described them as four different, and in fact, conflicting, biographies of Jesus. They argue that there are inconsistencies between the Gospels on details of Jesus’ life, with regard to the order in which events occurred in his life, and far more importantly, on what we should focus on when we contemplate our Lord’s teachings. But all this misses the point. To explain this, let me begin with an analogy. However, I’ll warn you that I’m using this analogy in a negative way – because this analogy, as we will see, does NOT hold.

When I was a boy in southern California, there was a crime committed one day in our town, Oxnard, California. Somebody stole a shotgun from a police car. There were multiple witnesses. I was not one of them, but the witnesses were all kids. They had seen the aftermath in the early morning; the police car had been parked in the center

of town, on the edge of a park that had a pagoda in it. All three of the kids attended my grammar school and one of them was a friend of mine. These kids were not together; they just happened to be passing by at the same time, all headed for school. All three of them saw someone walking away from the patrol car carrying the shotgun. One kid described it as a pump action shotgun, which was apparently accurate. But interestingly, the descriptions they gave of the man were completely different. They did not agree on height, ethnicity, or dress. The cops came to our school to interview the kids as they had reported what they saw to the sisters. That's what we did back then: when something happened, you went to the sisters, not to the cops, God being the higher authority. But what were the police going to do with three highly varying descriptions of the thief? I'll get back to this story.

So, why do we have four different Gospels? Well, because there *were* four. The people who put the canon together, the official Bible, in the late 300's had a problem. They wanted to have the story of Jesus' life and teachings in there, of course, but there were multiple seemingly authentic Gospels running around. In truth, there were more than four, but the others were almost certainly written long after the fact, and although they might well have contained some facts about Jesus and quotes of his that are accurate and are not in the other Gospels, they were not considered authentic enough. Primary factors in choosing the Books of the New Testament were that they be written

immediately after the life of Christ and that they not conflict significantly with what was widely believed to be the authentic teachings of Jesus. So, these other Gospels, such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter, were not included. There was, however, serious consideration given to integrating the four Gospels that we did keep into a single, coherent Gospel. A famous so-called “church father” named Tatian, in about the year 170 A.D., did bring the four Gospels together into one story. There have been other attempts at doing so, but in the end, it was decided that keeping the unaltered writings – even if they do conflict many details – was by far the better approach.

Maintaining the original stories, rather than artificially achieving complete agreement, was considered far more valuable. As modern people, with a cultural need for accuracy, we are very glad they took this approach and did not adopt Tatian’s Gospel.

Let’s start with Mark. His is a short, fast-moving Gospel. It is very vivid. He focuses heavily on Jesus’ miracles and teachings, and the amazed reaction that people have to Jesus. Mark is concerned with establishing Jesus’ authority as the Messiah. He gives extensive coverage to the trial and the agonizing death of Jesus, and Mark’s Gospel covers the resurrection only briefly. It is a short Gospel and has been described as the *Gospel of the Suffering Son of God*. Consider the quote below. It begins with “And”. He uses this word a lot, and he frequently uses the word “Immediately” at the beginning of sentences. He wants to keep us reading quickly, to keep us on the edge of our chair.

Mark 3:22-26, edited English Standard Version

²² And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "by the prince of demons he casts out the demons." ²³ And Jesus called them to him and said to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶ And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end.

The passage begins with: *And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "by the prince of demons he casts out the demons."*

Beelzebul was a pagan god, and probably the same god as the very famous Canaanite fertility god Baal. Jesus responds to the scribes by saying: *"Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, ²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin".*

Jesus is using irony here, by pointing out that the people who were accusing him of being in league with Satan are themselves agents of Satan. That's another key characteristic of the Gospel of Mark – the heavy use of irony.

Let's move on to Matthew. First, it is generally agreed that the authors of Matthew and Luke had Mark's Gospel on hand when they were writing theirs, and that they also drew on other written material that had been recorded by someone who knew Jesus or the Apostles, or was perhaps one of the Apostles, but this other material has been lost to history. It is also believed that none of the Gospel writers ever met Jesus – except John. And the authorship of all four Gospels was anonymous – regardless

of the fact that we attribute them to four people named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We do believe, though, that Luke is the Luke who was a physician, and who is mentioned in three of Paul's letters, and that he also wrote the Books of Acts.

Matthew's Gospel is the one that focuses most heavily on Jesus as the Messiah and as the one who fulfilled Old Testament prophecies. It is the Gospel that appears to have been written largely for recent, Jewish converts to Jesus' teachings, and who lived near Jerusalem. Non-Jewish converts tended to live further away from Jerusalem. It is also the Gospel that has been accused of being anti-Semitic. Matthew portrays the Jewish establishment of not only refusing to accept Jesus, but as viciously - and for self-centered reasons - turning against Jesus.

Matthew 23:27-39, edited English Standard Version

²⁷ *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.*

²⁹ *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' ³¹ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. ³² Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. ³³ You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? ³⁴ I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town. ³⁷ "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁸ See, your house is left to you desolate. ³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.' "*

Jesus shouts this at the Jewish leaders of the day: *You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?* Notice that Jesus is definitely claiming to be God having come to Earth as a man. He is condemning these people, and he is more than a prophet, who could only speak for God. He says: ³⁴ *I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town.*

Let's move on to Luke, the most literate of all the Gospels. It is considered to have the broadest audience. Luke presents Jesus as the Savior for all people, not just Jews or people who had already converted to the teachings of Jesus.

Luke 19:1-10 English Standard Version

19 *He entered Jericho and was passing through. ² And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. ⁴ So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. ⁵ And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. ⁷ And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." ⁸ And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." ⁹ And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."*

Zacchaeus climbs a tree to get a look at Jesus. He is so inspired by Jesus, that he declares: *"Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded*

anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.” Jesus then says: *“Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”* Luke shows Jesus as the Lord of the poor, of sinners, of Samaritans (who were related ethnically to Jews, but who considered vile by Jews), and of Gentiles. Luke focuses on the coming of the Holy Spirit and the ushering in of a new era. Luke likes to describe Jesus praying, and he focuses on the joy of God’s salvation.

Now, we look at John, which is a unique Gospel, compared to the other three. While the other three have very significant overlap, including many passages that are word-for-word identical, about ninety percent of John’s Gospel is unique, in terms of its wording. It seems to have been written independently. Key features of Jesus’ ministry are missing. There are no parables, no exorcisms. Five of John’s eight miracles do not appear in the other three Gospels. John does not describe Jesus’ baptism, his temptation, the transfiguration, or the Lord’s supper. Water is not changed into wine, Jesus does not talk to the Samaritan woman at the well, Lazarus is not raised, and Jesus does not wash the disciples’ feet.

John’s emphasis is on Jesus as the Son who shows us that God the Father truly loves his people. John tells us that God loves us so much that he sent his only son to save us. John uses simple Greek with a small vocabulary; the author probably did not know Greek well. And John does not portray the Jewish leaders of his time in an entirely

negative fashion, like Matthew. John's Gospel focuses on the dark duality of human life, declaring that people can be either of the world or of God, but not both. He talks about water, light, bread, shepherds, and gates as metaphors for Jesus. He shows us that the Holy Spirit mediates between us and Jesus.

John 10:7-9 English Standard Version

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⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

John's Gospel is intriguing. From a raw literary perspective, it is simplistic in language. But from the perspective of the story it is telling, it is deeper, more spiritual, more philosophical than the other three Gospels. "Synoptic" is related to the word "summary". The Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and Mark are called "synoptic" because they give very similar "summaries" of Jesus' life. Yet they still differ in their foci and their intended audience. John seems to have deliberately used a very different perspective because he wanted to focus on Jesus as the Messiah, as the person who came to save us from ourselves. He did not focus on the nitty gritty aspects of Jesus' life as a human.

Let's remember that the word Gospel is an Anglo-Saxon word that means "*good story*". That's what all four Gospels are: the joyous story of Jesus Christ, his actions, his

teachings, his place as the promised Messiah, and the way he showed us to live with humility, compassion, and forgiveness. They were written by different people with the same general mission, that of preserving the story of Jesus and creating documents that could be used to teach Christians about our faith. But the four Gospels were, to some extent, meant for different audiences, had different points they focused on, and most of all, have four somewhat different foci: the Gospel of the suffering Son of God, the Gospel of the Jewish Messiah, the Gospel of the Savior for all people, and the Gospel of the Son who reveals the Father as the loving God who sacrificed his only son. And yes, they order events in Jesus' life differently and tell stories of Jesus that are sometimes inconsistent with respect to unimportant details. We need to remember that this compulsion about non-fiction, that it be blow by blow, to every detail completely accurate is a modern standard. When the Gospel authors wrote, "truth" was all about getting the big points right, not the minor ones. People of Jesus' day and place would not have considered the Gospels to conflict with each other.

So, getting back to the stolen shotgun. The police were looking for specific details about the appearance of the suspect, not about the thief's purpose for existing on this planet. The cops wanted to bust him, not follow him. The descriptions provided by the kids who saw the man with the shotgun didn't do the cops much good. The details were all different. Many people try to discredit Christianity by pointing out that the Gospels

conflict on many minor points of fact, that they list events in Jesus' life in different orders, and that they even seem to disagree on the fundamental purpose of Jesus' ministry. But this is like viewing the Gospels as four different witness testimonies about a man who stole a shotgun from a cop car. The three kids who saw the man with the shotgun couldn't all be right, and that was indeed a problem. They were trying to tell a single, narrow, focused truth. But the Gospels tell a much bigger, far more sophisticated truth. They look at the life of Jesus from different angles. The Bible, Old and New, Hebrew and Greek, is very sophisticated. The people who put the canon together got it right. They left us with four different Gospels so that we could inherit a multifaceted recording of Jesus' life. The Gospels teach us how to live in a way that honors our God and honors all those made in God's image, that is, all people, and they do it with great subtlety. We need all four Gospels to get the entire picture. So be excited about having a very rich faith. If you have never actually read the Gospels, give them a try. Look at them not as detailed, eyewitness accounts given to a police detective, but as four views of an extremely complex savior. It's up to us to read the Gospels, to compare them, to listen to the special message of each Gospel. The four Gospels conflict on unimportant details, things that were not important to people of Jesus' time. But they absolutely do not conflict on any of the big points. They do also target themselves to different audiences, and they look at Jesus' message to us from four different perspectives. They differ, but they are

consistent.

Remember that God speaks to us through our Gospels – and God saw to it that four different perspectives have been handed down to us. It's those Gospels that together give us the complete Jesus, the person who taught us to have humility of spirit, to live in joy, to love the simplicity of a basic life, and to have a special sense of love for those who are in desperate need. Amen.