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Gospels read in ancient order inspire spirituality, author says

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"In my experience as a psychotherapist, there's not a psychological text out there more profound than the gospels in their correct sequence." Alexander Shaia, psychologist and Bible scholar

In the early days of the Christian church, the four gospels Matthew, Mark, John and Luke were read and taught in sequence for a particular effect.

"That's the only way Christianity read the gospels for 1,000 years," said Alexander Shaia, author of "Beyond a Biography of Jesus: The Journey of Quadratos, Book I" (Cold Tree Press).

"You pray these four and your life changes," Shaia said. "They could see the fruit in their lives when they prayed these."

Shaia, who grew up in Birmingham as the grandson of Lebanese Christian immigrants who founded Shaia's clothing store in Homewood, now leads spiritual retreats as director of the Blue Door Retreat in Santa Fe, N.M.

He has been researching the ancient arrangement of the gospels in worship. "There is a profound rhyme and reason to the canon," Shaia said. "In my experience as a psychotherapist, there's not a psychological text out there more profound than the gospels in their correct sequence."

The liturgical cycle

In the 1940s, when the Roman Catholic Church opened up the Vatican libraries for research, the ancient three-year liturgical reading cycle, which fell into disuse in the Middle Ages, was rediscovered. It was reinstated by the Catholic Church in the 1970s, and within a decade, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists and the United Church of Christ began using what became known as the universal lectionary.



Passages from the gospels are read each Sunday in order: Matthew, Mark, then Luke, with John divided into parts read in the middle of each of the other three, linked to Lent and Easter. "The gospel of John is extremely exalted, more ecstasy than is good for us, so they balanced it out by placing John in the middle of other three," he said.

Shaia believes it's no accident that these four gospels were chosen for the biblical canon, and that they were arranged in this way for liturgical readings.

"It's a universal sequence about how we grow and spiritually transform," he said. "They were choosing the gospels to be a process of spiritual transformation. That was more important than a biography of Jesus. Read in a particular way, the gospels tell the story of spiritual transformation that happens in us."

Shaia coined the term "Quadratos" to describe the four-part growth system he says characterizes literature, art and spirituality.

The four-fold journey

In Judaism, the Exodus story has four steps to transformation: Escaping slavery, wandering in the wilderness, arriving in the Promised Land, and making the Promised Land the long-awaited home and place of community.

Shaia believes the four-fold journey is a universal spiritual truth also evident in the four Noble Truths of Buddhism and in the epic accounts of Shiva and Vishnu in Hinduism.

Early Christian leaders understood the four-step process.

"There is just one revelation, but it must have four accounts, for natural and divine law is quadriform," Bishop Irenaeus wrote in 180 A.D.

"Irenaeus in the second century was the first person to say these were the four gospels," Shaia said. "It wasn't just a matter of choosing any texts. There had to be four; it had to be these four."

Of the 50 or more gospels written in the early centuries of Christianity, many scholars have argued that those just as easily could have been chosen as holy Scriptures.

Shaia disagrees. He said he has read and studied the Gnostic gospels and other apocryphal texts. There are good reasons those texts didn't make it into the biblical canon, he said.



"They are not the critical texts of Christianity and they will never be," Shaia said. "These four gospels were written in a different way than any other text."

Shaia graduated from John Carroll High School in Birmingham, earned a degree in anthropology and religious studies from Notre Dame University, got a master's degree in education from UAB; a degree in religious education from Seattle University, and a doctorate in clinical psychology from the California Institute for Integral Studies in San Francisco. He set up a private counseling practice through a Catholic retreat center in northern California.

His grandfather, Shaia George Shaia, and his wife, Bedora, built the brick structure that still houses Shaia's clothing shop in Homewood. They opened the shop in 1922 and it's still run by relatives. "It stayed in the family and the same building," Shaia said. "I grew up working in the store all the way through college. They have an incredible passion."

Shaia often does seminars for pastors of mainline churches to help deepen their preaching skills. "I help them preach the sequence of spiritual life the gospels are giving us," he said.

He said Catholics and Protestants embrace the emphasis on why the four gospels were chosen and why they are still important. "People are so relieved to know the spiritual logic behind the choices," Shaia said.

"I've found a spiritual logic in these four which I think is irrefutable," he said. "If you believe Jesus the Christ lived, died and rose and is with us, then we have a wisdom with us that helps us find the answer."

"The authors are telling a universal story through the life of Jesus. Each of the gospel authors looked at the situation; they wrote to answer their people. Setting the text in the lives of the community makes them present-moment experiences of Jesus the Christ living today."

"In metaphorical language, they describe a deep internal reworking of life. Within each gospel you can find the personal story of transformation. They address different aspects of life in different phases."

Four Steps of Spiritual Growth

BACKGROUND

Alexander Shaia, author of "Beyond the Biography of Jesus," summarizes the role of the four gospels as portraying a four-step process of personal spiritual development: from



disruption to transition to finding a new place and establishing community. The universal lectionary, which uses the ancient order, starts with Matthew and Mark and always ends with Luke in its three year-cycle, with John interspersed into readings of the other three gospels, mainly on the Sundays of Lent and Easter. "For the early Christians, Luke was the fourth gospel," Shaia said.

MATTHEW

This gospel was written in Antioch in the 70s A.D. following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. "The community was asking the same questions we asked after 9/11," Shaia said. "Some people said it was the end of the world; but the gospel says God has not gone away from us. It is a profound prayer during a moment of great grief, that Christ is here leading you through this experience."

MARK

This gospel was written in Rome in the mid-60s A.D. during Nero's arrest and brutal persecution of Christians. "In the city of Rome, Christians had been condemned by Nero for the fire in 64 A.D.," Shaia said. "You could be executed because someone says you're a Christian. Peter and Paul are killed. There is agony and a sense of abandonment. He says live with hope, stay true to your values."

JOHN

This gospel was written in Ephesus at the end of the first century in a time of harmony and abundant growth in the Christian community. "Suddenly, something new arrives--a fresh concept, attitude, relationship, a way of life, an epiphany," Shaia said. John is talking to people from all different faith traditions, saying that what's underneath your religion is a reality that's been there since the beginning."

LUKE

This gospel is written late in the first century from Antioch to the emerging Christian communities across the Mediterranean as Christians and Jews separated from each other and official Roman persecution begins. "Luke is saying, 'We will not become bitter or resentful as we suffer the consequences of being Christian; we will change the Roman Empire.' By the spiritual value of love, they changed the Roman empire in 200 years without a battle, changing one heart at a time," Shaia said. "That's the whole text of Luke."

See: <http://www.quadratos.com>

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