Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew - Prologue

Chromatius of Aquileia (d. c. AD 407)

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[Translated by Stephen C. Carlson] § 1 The sacrament of our salvation and faith, though in all the divine scriptures, is especially contained in the evangelical preaching, in which the secret of the heavenly sanctuary is revealed to us even as the mystery of the Lord's passion and resurrection is revealed to everyone. However, the transcribers the gospel (as it is divided into four books) are: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, who once had been prefigured and predestined to the duty of this divine work, as the blessed Luke reported: Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compose a narrative of the things that have been fulfilled among us. (Luke 1:1) For Matthew is appointed by the divine authority and grace of the holy spirit to be the first to write down the gospel, then Mark and Luke, most recently of all John, after he came back, upon the death of Domitian Caesar, from Patmos, the island where he had been bound. After he had been posted on this island and written the Revelation, he was disclosed the gospel he was to write on account of the different heresies instigated by the devil that by then were beginning to spring up.

§ 2 Matthew certainly and John too belong to the number of the twelve apostles, who not only were with the Lord before the passion but also kept company with him after the resurrection for forty days. They carefully recounted everything they saw and heard according to what John testified in his epistle, saying: as we have heard and saw with our eyes and by our hand have been examined, these things we declare to you. (1 John 1:1-3) But Mark was Peter's disciple and interpreter. He did not see the Lord in the flesh but he wrote the gospel, filled full of heavenly grace and the holy spirit. Luke also did not see the Lord in the flesh, but, because he was very educated in the law (since he was a companion of Paul in everything), he wrote down the gospel carefully in his own name, expounding from the very beginning everything in the order of the matters as he learned with respect to the apostles, as he himself testified, saying: as those who have been there all along and those who had been ministers of the message handed down to us. (Luke 1:2)

§ 3 Therefore, the authority of these four evangelists is firm and steadfast, because they all composed by one principle. Of course, various principles are taught in their sure foundation, but they do not disagree among themselves on anything, because every one of them perceived

the same thing by faith concerning the Lord's incarnation, nativity, passion, resurrection, and also his twin advent. And because we endeavor to say some things about the gospels, the responsibility and situation of the matter advise us to test also the truth of the gospels prefigured from the law of the Old Testament, as surely the Apostle says: the law was a shadow of things to come (Heb 10:1), because neither can the new stand without the old nor could the old have any stability without the new. It is said that everything about them is more complete in their place when the message is to be from the two testaments.

§ 4 Thus, both the type and the number of the four gospels are clearly described in the law and the prophets, as in the four rivers that flow from one source in Eden, or in the four rows of stones that Aaron wore woven in the priestly garment on his chest, or in the fourfold row of twelve calves that Solomon set up under the bronze sea in the temple. In all of these, the expressedexamples of the future truth cannot be doubted. Hence also Elijah the Tishbite----not unknowing by the holy Spirit of the evangelical sacrament of the preaching to come, when he freed the people from error and turned them from idols to God----poured four jugs of water in the sacrifice he offered when he put the burnt offering on the wood and made it three times in number. And fire came down from the sky, as he openly declared even then the image of the coming hope, that is the sacrament of the cross and the number of the gospels and the grace of baptism and the faith in the Trinity, in which we are baptized and made a worthy sacrifice for God, coming upon us with fire from the sky, that is, his holy Spirit presented to us as a gift.

§ 5 But even clearer and plainer we find that through Ezekiel the prophet these gospels are depicted in the four living things whose appearance and shape are both described. Their likeness, he says, is the appearance of a human and the appearance of a lion and the appearance of a calf and the appearance of a flying eagle. (Ezek 1:10) Evident among these is certainly the form of the evangelists. Although they are depicted in different appearances for each changing principle, their preaching is nonetheless not different. In fact, the prophet, when he said that the appearances are specific to each, related that each of their four appearances is heavenly, that is, each living thing has the four appearances. The reason for this is not obscure, because it is meant that they are one, both individually and collectively. While he certainly distinguishes and separates them in connection with their appearances or number, the unity of preaching still makes them inseparable and whole, because you will find everything in each and the whole in all. But we must understand and get to know just this difference among the appearances. The appearance, he says, of a human, and the appearance of a lion and the appearance of a calf and the appearance of a flying eagle. The appearance of a human is understood as the gospel according to Matthew, a human since he began from the bodily birth of the Lord to make the introduction, saying:

The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham, (Matt 1:1) etc. He announces his birth by this human origin. Because of that, it is thus described as the appearance of a human. Now, the appearance of a lion is understood to be the gospel according to John, because, when the other evangelists had said that Christ our God is made

human according to the assumption of flesh and born of the virgin, he revealed his timeless and divine birth in just the beginning of his message, saying: In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and God as the Word, (John 1:1) etc. With this voice, the preacher of such divinity roared like a lion to frighten off the heresies.

§ 6 The Apocalypse also mentioned these living things, but we must carefully examine why, when the prophet had said that the first appearance was of a human, then of a lion, did the Apocalypse put the appearance of the lion earlier in reversed order, saying The appearance of a lion and the appearance of a human (Rev 4:7), because we must point out it is so, not accidentally but for a particular reason. For Matthew has thus been described first in order in with the prophet in the appearance of a human, because he was to write down the first gospel. But John is brought earlier for this reason in the Apocalypse, because he surpassed everyone in preaching the timeless and coeternal Son of the Father by the excellent beginning of his preaching. Thus, he is placed later as to time or order, but he is regarded first as to faith since he would know the secret, divine mysteries from reclining on the Lord's bosom. But the fact that John is preferred in connection with faith does not detract from the other evangelists since they all were directed by one and the same Spirit to the complete instruction of the Church and wrote about the Lord necessarily and completely. For, because many different heresies were to come, the holy spirit so impacted the writing of each as to expound the complete and perfect sacrament of the heavenly faith through all of them, by which it confuted all enemies of the truth together.

Finally, the Holy Spirit at once opposes those wretched people who deny that the Son of God was born of a virgin for our salvation, judging this as unworthy for God, through Matthew and Luke. Through them, it clearly discloses both the birth of the Lord according to the flesh and the conception and labor of the virgin. However, those who dared blaspheme the true divinity of the Son of God and the unlimited nature of his eternity, denying in particular that he was born of the Father and is true God and had always been with the Father, St. John and Mark nonetheless oppose at once, condemning the infidelity of their blasphemy, testifying in the beginning of his gospel that the only-begotten Son of God is God.

§ 7 But as we are all carefully following this along, I seem to have gone on longer than I intended to. Let us now go back to the order. Thus, St. John is described in the appearance of the lion, as best comprehended. The gospel according to Luke, however, is recognized in the appearance of the calf, because he wrote according to the law as he began from the priesthood of Zacharias saying: In the days of Herod the king of Judea, there was a certain by the name of Zacharias from the order of Abijah and his wife of the sons of Aaron, etc. For that reason, however, he has been represented by the person of the calf, because the law he wrote according to had decreed for a type of a future truth that, among other sacrifices, a calf be offered for the sins of the people. Hence, not undeservedly, only this evangelist made mention of this fattened calf, which was killed for the salvation and return of the lost son in the joy of the exulting father, because St. Luke so made mention as he declared that our

Lord and Savior has suffered for the sins of the human race according to the preceding form of the law.

To be sure, the appearance of the flying eagle is understood as the gospel according to Mark, who began with a prophetic testimony saying: The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ Son of God, as is written in Isaiah: Behold I send my angel before my appearance. A voice crying in the wilderness: Prepare the ways of the Lord, make our God's paths straight. (Mark 1:1-3) And because the eagle is often described as the form of the holy spirit, who has been spoken in the prophets, he is thus depicted in the appearance of an eagle. For also only he reported that our Lord and Savior flew away to heaven, that is, wetn back to the Father, as David had said: He ascended above the Cherubim and flew; he flew above the feathers of the wind. (Ps 17:11 [18:10]) § 8 Finally, as we know that the reason for such a sacrament is arranged in each of the evangelists by the Holy Spirit, the same appearances also combine in the person of our Lord and God. For, he is understood to be a human because of the flesh that he took on from the virgin, and the calf because of what he himself offered as a sacrifice worthy of God for our sins, and a lion for the power of the virtue that defeated death in triumph, allowing in himself none of the brunt of outside fears, and an eagle because, when the mystery of the passion was completed as an eagle flew to heaven, the booty of human flesh it snatched from our jaws has been taken with him.

§ 9 For the same reason in the prophet Zechariah we also read the foretold number of the evangelists, reported by the prophet like this: I saw, he said, four chariots going out of two mountains ,and these mountains, he said, were mountains of bronze. In the first chariot were red horses, and in the second chariot were black horsed, and in the third chariot were white horses, and in the fourth chariot were different and dappled horses. And I said to the angel who was speaking to me: What are these, lord? Responding he said to me: Do you not know what these are? And I said: No, lord. And he told me: These are the four winds of the sky that stand with God before the whole earth. (Zech 6:1-5) And so this is the number of the chariots.

In fact the following rationale, promulgated by prophetic reason, teaches us to perceive a type of the gospel truth: we notice that the gospels have also been clearly designated in these chariots. He declared that the four horses are described in four parts, as we best recall, because each of the gospels must be understood in the four and the four in each. Although the preaching of the evangelists would rightly seem to be in four portions, they still are undividedly of one mind for the unity of the faith. In fact, we know that the gospels were clearly prefigured in these chariots, because the prophet asked the angel speaking to him about what these were and he was told this: These are the four winds of the sky that stand with God before all the earth, which he reported by God's command to have circled all the earth. And if we have not considered the saying about these winds (which blow through the lands and generate waves or brew up storms), it is simple enough to understand that, when they have been described in the prophets desiring only the divine and eternal heavenly things, the Lord deservedly adds more: These are the ones that circle the earth; they soften

my fury (Zech 6:8). As we perceptively have recognized, the divine wrath, which was over people's sins, cannot otherwise be appeased except through the gospel's preaching, which runs throughout the globe and gives both the remission of sins and salvation to the human race.

§ 10 Yet the arrangement of the world rests upon the rationale for this evangelical number: for we recognize the four seasons that the year progresses through and the four corners of the earth that the four guardian angels are assigned to, referring to the Apocalypse. § 11 And although there are said to be four gospels because of the number of the evangelists, even though there is only gospel among them all, as the Lord said: And this gospel will be preached through the whole globe (Matt 24:14). He did not say gospels but gospel. The apostle described this too when he says: If anyone has preached to you a gospel other than what you have received, let them be accursed. (Gal 1:9) Hence, it is plain that there are certain four books of the gospels, but one gospel is counted in these four books. And for that reason one must not be prejudiced should we sometimes say "gospels" because of the number of evangelists or when we name the gospels in this way as the most important books or when we designate the number of the evangelists according to the usual custom of the majority. Indeed we both confess and believe that there is one true gospel according to the authority of the Lord or even the apostle.

§ 12 Although we have wanted to establish the number of evangelists from a painstaking study of the various testimonies of the prophets, I have extended the sermon longer than I have intended to. But we strive to investigate the order of the gospel according to Matthew, even with little insight and a mediocre sermon. Notes 1. The Latin text used is that of R.ÉTAIX and J. LEMAIRE, CCSL 9A (1974). Tractatus lxi in euangelium Matthei, (CPL 218), also in PL 20, cl. 327. This is the author's prologue to a series of sermons which were mainly transmitted in the manuscripts under the name of John Chrysostom. Their correction attribution was recovered by Étaix and Lemaire in the 1960's. This prologue has been seen as having interesting parallels to the Muratorian canon. Chromatius also wrote another series of sermons (CPL 217).

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.