

*Encountering Jesus  
in the Gospels*

**Other books published by the Orthodox Research Institute include:**

William C. Mills. *Our Father: A Prayer for Christian Living*

William C. Mills. *From Pascha to Pentecost: Reflections on the Gospel of John*

William C. Mills. *Prepare O Bethlehem: Reflections on the Scripture Readings for the Christmas-Epiphany Season*

William C. Mills. *Baptize All Nations: Reflections on the Gospel of Matthew for the Pentecost Season*

William C. Mills. *Feasts of Faith: Reflections on the Major Feast Days*

William C. Mills. *A Light to the Gentiles: Reflections on the Gospel of Luke*

William C. Mills. *Let Us Attend: Reflections on the Gospel of Mark for the Lenten Season*

Daniel Fanous. *Taught by God: Making Sense of the Difficult Sayings of Jesus*

Sebastian Dabovich. *Preaching in the Orthodox Church: Lectures and Sermons by a Priest of the Holy Orthodox Church*

Protopresbyter George Dion. Dragas. *The Lord's Prayer according to Saint Makarios of Corinth*

Alphonse and Rachel Goettmann. *The Power of the Name: The History and Practices of the Jesus Prayer*

# ENCOUNTERING JESUS IN THE GOSPELS

**William C. Mills**



*Rollinsford, New Hampshire*

Published by Orthodox Research Institute  
20 Silver Lane  
Rollinsford, NH 03869  
[www.orthodoxresearchinstitute.org](http://www.orthodoxresearchinstitute.org)

© 2011 William C. Mills

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the author or publisher.

ISBN: 978-1-933275-61-1

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	iii
Chapter One: Jesus the Bread .....	1
Chapter Two: Jesus the Shepherd.....	11
Chapter Three: Jesus the King.....	19
Chapter Four: Jesus the Peacemaker.....	28
Chapter Five: Jesus the Prophet.....	34
Chapter Six: Jesus the Rabbi.....	42
Chapter Seven: Jesus the Light.....	49
Chapter Eight: Jesus the Resurrection .....	56
Chapter Nine: Jesus the Judge.....	65
Chapter Ten: Jesus the Christ.....	74
Chapter Eleven: Jesus the Lamb .....	80

Chapter Twelve: Jesus the Vine.....	87
Chapter Thirteen: Jesus the Friend of the Poor .....	93
Chapter Fourteen: Jesus the Carpenter .....	101
Chapter Fifteen: Jesus the Wanderer.....	109
Appendix: Additional Titles of Jesus.....	116
Recommended Reading .....	118
About the Author .....	119

## INTRODUCTION

I have encountered many people who want to learn more about Jesus and who seek an authentic Christian faith but are tired of pleasant platitudes or dry dogmatic formulas that are often heard in Sunday sermons: “If you tithe, God will bless you” or “Just have faith and you will be okay” or even worse, the pastor will provide a long list of do’s and don’ts for their congregation, “don’t watch TV, don’t read the internet” and so forth.

Furthermore, people also encounter fire and brimstone images of Jesus, images that instill unnecessary guilt and shame rather than images of Jesus as a loving, merciful, and compassionate God. No wonder why so many people leave the Church! When people encounter narrow and limited images of Jesus, they leave Church half-empty, seeking more for their spiritual life.

One obvious response is to encourage people to read the entire Bible on their own, especially the New

Testament and particularly the four gospels. The Bible, however, is not the easiest book to read, and people need guidance and instruction. The Bible contains words, images, metaphors, that are often confusing to the modern reader. Furthermore, it seems that every year new books about Jesus are published, many of which are usually too scholarly for the average person who wants to learn about Jesus, but does not want to read an entire Bible commentary.

This book can help. *Encountering Jesus in the Gospels* highlights fifteen Gospel images of Jesus: Jesus the Rabbi, Jesus the Shepherd, Jesus the Lamb, Jesus the Resurrection, and Jesus the Peacemaker, among others. Each particular Gospel image focuses on one essential aspect of Jesus' ministry. Upon finishing this book, you might even find inspiration to read the gospels on your own and begin a more thorough study of the Bible.

**MAY THE REAL JESUS PLEASE STAND UP!** When you attended Sunday School as a child, you were probably told that there is one Jesus in the gospels. Your teacher was wrong. Wrong you say? Yes, wrong. Well, sort of wrong. According to historical records, there was a person named Jesus of Nazareth who had a band of followers called disciples, you may have learned about them too: Peter, James, John, Judas, Bartholomew, and so forth. You probably know that Jesus was betrayed by Judas, was crucified



by the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate, was buried, and was raised from the dead on the third day. However, while there is one Jesus, there are four different accounts or stories about this person Jesus.

We come to know Jesus through four Christian documents that we call the gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The word *gospel* literally means good news, as in the *good news* of Matthew or the *good news* of John. If we read just one of the gospels, we will have a limited and narrow view of Jesus and His ministry. For example, if we only read the Gospel of Mark, we will see that Jesus spends all His time running around Galilee performing a lot of miracles: cleansing lepers, healing the sick, and raising the dead. Mark's gospel, unlike the others, does not contain lengthy sermons or teachings. Mark's gospel is lean and mean. Mark's gospel is also the shortest gospel, it only has sixteen chapters. Matthew's gospel is much longer than Mark and includes the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord's Prayer. Matthew also includes the stories of Jesus' birth as well as His baptism in the Jordan River. When reading the Gospel of Luke, we begin Jesus' story not with Him but with His cousin, John the Baptist. Luke shows his readers the long line of prophetic activity stemming from the Old Testament, through John the Baptist, and then to Jesus. We see Jesus from His infancy until He is about twelve years of age, and then the next time we see Him, He is an adult who begins His preaching

and teaching ministry. John's gospel has an altogether different feel than the other gospels. In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks at length about eternal life and performs many miracles such as changing water into wine and raising Lazarus from the dead.

Parishioners often ask, "Well, which gospel shows us the *true Jesus*?" My answer is always the same, "They all do!"—an answer, of course, which people do not like very much. I then share with them the following example. While on the way home from work you witness a car accident, one car crosses over the yellow line in the middle of the road hits another car. You call 911, and a few minutes later the police show up. Very often the first thing that happens is that the police officer identifies people who saw the car accident so that he can ascertain the facts of the accident. If the police find more than one witness, all the better. However, having more than one witness may not always bring more clarity.

A few years ago while walking past the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, I witnessed a car accident. I was walking down the street towards Lake Michigan and all of a sudden a motorcycle came from my left side and slammed right into the back of an SUV. The driver of the motorcycle fell to his side and rolled a few feet until he stopped in front of me near the sidewalk. Thankfully, no one was hurt. From my perspective, the guy on the motorcycle did not put on his breaks quick enough and was driving faster than he

should have been, especially during rush hour. When the guy on the motorcycle got up from the ground, he began yelling at the driver of the SUV for cutting him off and not using his turning signal. While walking down the street, I heard the screeching of tires and the motorcycle hitting the SUV, but I did not see the problem with the turn signal nor did I see that the SUV had stopped. This is precisely the reason why police officers like to have more than one witness. One witness might not even have all the facts either.

We see from this brief example that the gospels do not give us a Polaroid picture of Jesus with specific details about His daily life: what He ate, what He drank, the clothes that He wore, or what He did every single day. When I was a young boy, I always wondered if Jesus liked soccer, which is a logical question for a ten-year-old boy! These particular questions, while they may pique our interest, are not really appropriate because the gospels are not interested in these questions. The gospels are nothing like the biographies of Abraham Lincoln or Eleanor Roosevelt, which present the reader with numerous details regarding personality traits, mannerisms, and daily activities. The four gospels are primarily interested with the good news of the Kingdom of God, a message repeated throughout the gospels and incarnated in Jesus' teaching and preaching.

I guess you can say that the four gospels provide us with a series of impressions of Jesus, like the nineteenth

century impressionist paintings by Monet, Renoir, or Cezanne, who painted with broad-brush strokes on large canvases that depicted persons and places in basic shapes and contours, but offer little by way of precise details. The impressionist painter invites the viewer to connect the dots on his or her own in their minds eye. These very broad impressions make up the complete picture. When looking at the four gospels, we can look at Jesus' many names as broad-brush strokes giving us different images of His life and ministry. When looked at on their own, each impression gives us one aspect of Jesus; however, when taken together in full, they give us a more nuanced and overall picture of Jesus' preaching and teaching ministry.

**S**O WHAT'S IN A NAME ANYWAY? Every day we encounter different types of names: street names, city names, restaurant names, store names, as well as the various names found in creation, dog, cat, house, truck, trees, plants, animals, stars, and planets. Names are everywhere. When we are introduced to someone new, the first thing we generally say is, "Hello, may name is . . . , what is your name?" Names are such a big part of our life that we forget how essential they are to our daily life.

The Bible is full of names, many of which are very strange, how many of your friends are named Delilah, Methuselah, or Nebuchadnezzar? Or how about place names such as Gilgal, Phoenicia, Bethsaida,

or try this one — Caesarea Maritima? When was the last time you heard the names Shadrach, Meshach, or Abednego? Probably not recently!

Even if someone has never read the Bible, they most likely have heard of the name Jesus. He is very popular in our modern culture. At least once a day I see either a billboard sign or bumper sticker with the name Jesus on it. The average Joe or Jane Doe may even know a little something about Jesus' life and ministry: that He was born in Bethlehem, lived in Nazareth, had a band of twelve men called disciples, performed miracles, was crucified, and rose on the third day. If you ask them anything else, their faces go a blank because that is where their knowledge ends. I used to begin classes on the New Testament with a quiz about Jesus, and even some of my *devout* Bible reading students failed.

Did you know that the New Testament contains over seventy-five different images or names of Jesus: Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God, Son of Man, Christ, the Lamb of God, the Bread of Life, Emmanuel, as well as the Alpha and Omega? That is a lot of names! As you can see, the Gospel's authors used common everyday images, like light, bread, shepherd, prophet, to explain Jesus to the people.

Names have always been important. During the Middle Ages, most people lived in small hamlets or villages that were scattered across the countryside. People performed different types of work from bak-

ing to glass blowing, some were farmers and day laborers, and others were soldiers and craftsman. In the ancient world, people were identified by their work or vocation: Mary the Baker, Tom the Miller, or Bill the Farmer. Over time, these names were eventually shortened: Mary Baker, Tom Miller, and Bill Farmer. I always wondered if my Danish ancestors had windmills on their property, hence my last name Mills.

While everyone has first and last names like John Smith or Jane Doe, we also have other names that reveal our role or place society. These additional names or titles provide a broader perspective on life. Below is a list of additional names or titles:

Priest

Husband

Dad

Cook

Gardener

Author

Friend

Neighbor

When introducing myself, I usually say, “Hello, my name is Bill.” This short introduction gives you a very limited idea of who I am. However, if I say, “Hello, my name is Bill and I am a pastor,” you now know that I lead a Christian congregation, but your image of me is still rather limited. If I say, “My name

is Father Bill,” you will know that I am a priest; however, you need additional information to learn which Church I serve.

Furthermore, through our conversation, you may find out that I love cooking and gardening. Therefore, your mental image of me will broaden: Bill the priest who is also a cook and gardener. In other words, the more information you have about me, the better you will begin to know about my life and my interests. This same principle applies to Jesus. It is one thing to read about Jesus of Nazareth who lived in Galilee and performed miracles, but then it is something different to find out what it meant that he was a Rabbi and that He called Himself a Shepherd and the Bread of Life.

Hopefully, after reading this book, you will have a much broader and nuanced vision of Jesus of Nazareth and His universal call for love, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. You will learn about a Jesus who cannot be pigeon-holed into a box. As you begin reading, you will find yourself on a life-long spiritual journey.

I encourage you to read this book slowly. Read a chapter one time in order to get a basic understanding and then read it again more slowly. Take time to look up the additional scriptural references in the chapter, since they will add to your understanding. You might want to ask yourself, “What does this particular image of Jesus say to me?” or “How does this particular aspect of Jesus’ life affect me?” Each chapter also includes several *Food for Thought* ques-

tions, which will also add to your reading. The *Food for Thought* questions will also help with small group discussions, especially if you are using the book for group Bible study or for your spiritual journaling.



## CHAPTER ONE

---

# JESUS THE BREAD

*“I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is My flesh” (John 6:48–51).*

I love baking. When I am not at the computer or in the backyard tending my garden or out taking a long walk at the park, you will find me in the kitchen. When we built our new house, we requested that our kitchen have two ovens for my gastronomic creations: pizza, meatloaf, roasts, bread, cakes, and pastries. I enjoy a variety of activities, but baking is my favorite. There is nothing better than squishing your fingers in flour, water, and yeast mixture, making a big mess in the kitchen.

Bread is one of the basic staples of life, and most people eat it at least once a day: toast in the morning, a sandwich for lunch, or a buttered roll or biscuit with dinner. Bread is also known throughout the world; in Spanish-speaking countries, it is called *pan*, in India it is called *chapatti* or *naan*, and in Greece and Lebanon its *pita*.

Three years ago, I went on a ten day Holy Land pilgrimage. One day while walking in Old Jerusalem, I spotted an elderly man pushing a silver cart. Stacked on top of the cart were mounds of freshly baked rectangular sized pita breads stacked at least three feet high. Within minutes, a small crowd formed around the man and his cart. Everyone wanted a loaf of his fresh bread. The man stayed there until all the bread was sold and then wheeled the cart away. His work was done for the day. Every day the man wheeled his cart into the street and every day people bought his bread.

Bread is also mentioned in the Bible. In Exodus, God instructs Moses to leave Egypt because Moses is going to lead the Israelites from slavery to freedom. God's message came so quickly that the Israelites did not have time to pack; they took their belongings and followed Moses across the Red Sea. However, there was a problem. The Israelites left Egypt so quickly that they did not have any food. What were they going to do?

God always had a plan. God told Moses that He was going to send them bread from heaven, which

He called manna. The Bible says that manna looked like white frost on the ground or little puffballs of cotton or white flakes. God commanded the Israelites to gather the manna every day, and gather double portion on Friday since the next day was the Sabbath day, a day of rest. The Israelites must not have liked the manna very much, because they complained to God. They certainly must have eaten a lot of bread during all those years in the wilderness.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus performed many miracles: cleansed the lepers, changed water into wine, cured the blind, and raised the dead. Perhaps one of His most famous miracles is the multiplication of loaves.

While each gospel retells the story a bit differently, John tells us that Jesus went up to a high mountain. There were crowds of people, mostly peasants and farmers, who followed Him all day. It was late in the day, and Jesus looked out and saw the great crowds of hungry poor peasants waiting to eat. His disciples were there, and since they too were tired, they asked Jesus to send the crowds away so that they could rest. The disciples did not want a couple thousand people hanging around at dinnertime! Yet, Jesus refused their request. He fed the people:

*After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they*

*saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?' Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world' (John 6:1-14).*

Jesus ordered His disciples to have the crowds sit down. Jesus then took five loaves of bread and two fish and looked up to heaven, blessed them, broke them, and then gave them to the crowds. John tells us that five thousand people were fed that day, and Matthew tells us that not only was it five thousand men but women and children also. This same story is retold in the other gospels as well (Mt. 14:13–21; Mk. 6:32–44; Lk. 9:10–17).

The gospels portray Jesus as the great provider. In the beginning of John's gospel, Jesus attends a wedding. The wine ran out and his mother asks the servant to bring several jars of water. Jesus then obliges His mother and changes the water into wine, providing enough wine for the crowd. Jesus fed five thousand and seven thousand people with a few loaves of bread and fish. Just before his death, Jesus ate His last Passover meal with His disciples in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. During the meal, Jesus took bread and said, "Take, eat, this is My body which is broken for you," and then a cup of wine and said, "Drink of it all of you, this is My blood." Jesus' last command to His disciples was to break bread with one another, to share a meal. Every time they shared this meal, they were supposed to remember Jesus and His mission. Many Christians throughout the world still celebrate this special meal, which is called the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper, a special meal of bread and wine to remember Jesus and His life-giving words. Roman

Catholics refer to this meal as the Mass, and Eastern Christians, namely Byzantine Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, call it the Divine Liturgy.

Every Sunday, we gather together and celebrate the same meal that Jesus served for His disciples. However, we often forget that Jesus comes to us in the *broken bread* as we hear in the gospels, “Take, eat, this is My body which is *broken for you*.” Jesus comes to us in His frailty and brokenness. I always found this hard to believe that the same person who walked on water, who raised the dead, who cured lepers, comes to us every week in His brokenness. As a psychologist friend once told me, pain speaks to pain, or suffering speaks to suffering. The word *sympathy* means to feel pain with someone else, to identify your pain with someone else’s pain. Every Sunday Jesus identifies with us in *our* fallen humanity, *our* sinfulness, and *our* brokenness. In turn, Jesus asks us to do the same with the rest of the world. In the multiplication of loaves, Jesus does not feed the crowd Himself, He tells His disciples, “*You give them something to eat*” or in other words, you feed them.

Many people take this feeding image to heart. Sara Miles, journalist and author of the book *Take This Bread* and more recently her new book *Jesus Freak*, is an adult convert to Christianity. In her two books, Miles describes her newly found ministry as coordinator of her parish food program. Through Sara’s reading of the gospels and living and praying

with the Christian community at St. Gregory of Nysa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, CA, Sara realized that Jesus was dead serious about feeding people and that, at the feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was given to the disciples not to remain in Jerusalem, but to go out and preach, heal, and feed.

After months of planning and organizing, Sara convinced her parish that they needed to start a food pantry ministry out of their Church. St. Gregory's is located in a very transient neighborhood, which includes many homeless, poor, and hungry people. A small idea blossomed. Today, hundreds of homeless people, black, white, brown, men and women, young and old, come for a hot lunch and share hospitality and fellowship with the members of St. Gregory's. Not only do these people receive a hot meal, but they are also encouraged to take a bag of fresh fruit and vegetables with them when they leave.

Most food banks are located in multi-purpose buildings or in Church basements, but not at St. Gregory's! Sara made sure that her food bank was located right in the middle of the Church building, where every Sunday her fellow parishioners hear the Gospel and break bread. Once a week tables and chairs are set up around the altar, and people come and eat, re-creating in a way Jesus' multiplication of loaves miracle. Sara and her fellow parishioners are convinced that Jesus is the Bread of Life and share their own bread with their neighbors and friends.

Sara, of course, is not alone. She stands in a long line of other men and women devoted to caring for the poor and hungry, both in very physical and more often in spiritual ways. Dorothy Day, the editor of the *Catholic Daily Worker*, a nationwide newspaper, and social organizer, established houses of hospitality around the slums of New York City. Every day workers at these houses served thousands of indigent men and women, many of whom were alcoholics, drug users, and prostitutes. Dorothy did not care. She was following Jesus' command to feed Jesus' little flock. The Orthodox nun and writer Mother Maria Skobtsova did the same thing as Dorothy. During World War II, Mother Maria searched and scoured the dumpsters and garbage cans of Paris searching for scraps of food, which she brought home to her small community on Rue Lourmel so she could make soup and feed the hungry men, women, and children. There are hundreds of people like Sara, Dorothy, and Mother Maria, who fed and continue to feed the hungry and homeless.

Many people are also familiar with the work and ministry of Mother Teresa of Calcutta who not only took care of lepers and infants, but she fed lots of people not only with her spiritual wisdom and teachings but also with food. The poor and hungry would line up every day outside her spiritual houses in order to receive some bread, rice, and fresh water. One could also include other noteworthy persons of faith,



such as the late Catholic priest and spiritual author Henri Nouwen, who devoted his life to caring for the mentally ill at the L'Arche center in Canada, or the Orthodox monk and hermit, Herman of Alaska, who lived a simple life on Kodiak Island, where he helped the poor, orphan, and abused.

By feeding and serving other people, whether it is a hot cup of coffee and a bagel, or through feeding them with a kind word or a hug, we are following Jesus' command to love our neighbors. Often we forget that the small things in life are the ones that matter the most. There were times in parish ministry when I was down and out and one of my friends called me every day just to make sure that I was okay. He was feeding me with his kind words. Every day I am fed and nourished in so many ways, a continuation of Jesus' ministry as the Bread of Life, offering Himself as food for His followers. The least we can do is share some of our bread with those people around us, a way to continue Jesus' feeding ministry.

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

1. Take some time to reflect on Jesus as the Bread of Life. How is Jesus bread for you? How does He nourish and feed you?
2. When Jesus multiplied the loaves and fish, the Gospel of John says that there were twelve baskets full of food left over. Jesus provides an abundant feast. How can you share your abundance with others? How can you share your life with those who are in need? What prevents you from sharing your life with others?
3. Take time and think about the people or organizations that have fed and nourished you during your lifetime. Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for these people as they continue to feed and nourish the world.
4. For further reading: John 6, Matthew 20, and Mark 15, Luke 24, John 21.