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Putting together the pieces

Author says the four gospels represent practical applications in modern-day faith

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Alexander J. Shaia spent a quarter-century "wrestling and gnawing and questioning" his Christian faith before he had a eureka moment in 2000.

The resulting book addresses the contradictions that continue to swirl around early Christianity and provides an almost literal road map for modern Christians on their spiritual journey.

"Beyond the Biography of Jesus: The Journey of Quadratos, Book I" addresses the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. A second volume, scheduled for release in a few months, will cover Luke and John.

"The final chapter just keeps being rewritten and rewritten and rewritten," said Shaia in a telephone interview from California recently, where he was leading a workshop on "Quadratos."

He grew up in Birmingham, Ala., where his Lebanese family practiced the Maronite Catholic tradition of their homeland. He holds degrees in cultural anthropology, counseling education, religious education, pastoral psychotherapy and a doctorate in clinical psychology, and has spent his adult life trying to pin down some of the contradictions in his faith.

He was "just intuitively sensing there was another picture underneath these texts," he said. "It just kept slipping around. I'd read a book and I'd do some research, talk to this author. It was like collecting the pieces of a mosaic, but the keystone piece kept slipping away."

His eureka moment came when he understood why the early Christian church had selected from many gospels the four that became "the Gospels" -- Mark, written first;



Matthew; Luke; and the poetical John. For hundreds of years, Christian churches read the four Gospels in a non-chronological reading sequence that takes three years to complete. The three-year reading and prayer cycle lasted until the Middle Ages, when it was abandoned for a 52-week reading cycle that focused on the life of Jesus, but was reinstated by most Christian churches in the last decades of the 20th century.

It's Shaia's belief that the four Gospels are more than contradictory chronicles of Jesus' life, but rather represent practical applications in modern-day faiths, even beyond Christianity.

In a nutshell, the Gospels provide advice on "how do you face change, how do you endure suffering, how do you receive joy, and how do you serve?" said Shaia.

The key to understanding, he said, is knowing the circumstances of the communities for which each Gospel was written.

Matthew, for example, was written in Antioch in the 70s A.D., after the destruction of the Great Temple in Jerusalem, for a community experiencing great loss. "Initially frozen, we decide to move forward into the unknown, unexplored," writes Shaia.

Mark was written in Rome in the mid-60s A.D., for a community being systematically eradicated by the Roman emperor. "As we move into the unknown and unfamiliar, we find ourselves bewildered, anxious and beset by struggle and conflict on all sides," he writes.

John's Gospel was written in Ephesus at the end of the first century as Christianity was growing. "Suddenly, something new arrives -- a fresh concept, attitude, relationship, a way of life, epiphany," Shaia writes.

The Gospel of Luke was written late in the first century from Antioch to the new Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean region. "We enter a time of gradual maturity as the new becomes familiar, learning its lessons, making them useful in everyday life and strengthening relationships in faith and community," Shaia writes.

When the overview of his book fell into place, Shaia recalls "those early days when there's excitement and you think maybe you've got it."

But he still wasn't sure, until he began to research more carefully the communities to which the four Gospels were addressed.

"In about three months, all the pieces fit. It was affirming and confirming," he said.

At the same time, Shaia's understanding didn't contradict any of his previous studies of Christianity.



"Since my early days at the University of Notre Dame in the early '70s, I had intuited that there was something special about the four Gospels and their sequencing, and especially their sequence of how they were to be read. They'd always moved my heart, even when they were illogical. And when my heart had moved and my head is questioning, my practice is to just stick with it. Let's see if we can find a way to make the logic and the heart match."

Beyond Christianity, Shaia has heard from leaders of other faiths that there are parallel four-part sequences -- for example, the four noble truths of Buddhism, the four great movements of the Exodus story in Judaism, a progression of four in Hinduism's accounts of Shiva and Vishnu.

"If we could talk about our basis for spiritual practices instead of arguing over our names for God, it would be, 'Wow!'" Shaia said.

"There's something about this metaphor that seems to gently move us out of the boxes we've built up, and if can just do that an inch, wow!"

INTERESTED?

Alexander Shaia will sign copies of "Beyond the Biography of Jesus: The Journey of Quadratos, Book I" at 1 p.m. Friday at Circle Books, 478 John Ringling Blvd., St. Armands Circle. Call 388-2850.

Book 2 of "Beyond the Biography of Jesus: The Journey of Quadratos," about the Gospels of Luke and John, is scheduled for release in a few months.

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