

Dr. Robert C. Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Session 8, Literary Approach to the Gospels -- Genres Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Session 8, Literary Approach to the Gospels -- Genres, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. Newman's lecture explores the Gospels as literary works, questioning their genre and analyzing their techniques. He examines four potential genres: biography, propaganda, dramatic history, and story collections, ultimately leaning towards biography but acknowledging elements of the others. **The lecture then discusses techniques used by Gospel writers, such as restraint, concise accounts, concrete narration, material selection, variety, and sampling.** Finally, it considers the characteristics of Jesus' speeches, including their aphoristic, poetic, subversive, patterned, structured nature, and fusion of genres. **Newman references Leland Ryken's work as an important resource for understanding the Gospels from a literary perspective.** He concludes by outlining the remaining topics to be covered in the Synoptic Gospels course, such as the synoptic problem and form criticism.

2. 24 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Session 8 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (New Testament → Gospels → Synoptic Gospels).



**Newman_Synoptics
_Session08.mp3**

3. Briefing Document: Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Session 8, Literary Approach to the Gospels -- Genres

Okay, here's a briefing document summarizing the main themes and ideas from the provided lecture excerpt.

Briefing Document: Synoptic Gospels as Literary Works

Main Theme: This lecture segment focuses on analyzing the Gospels as literary works, exploring their genre and literary techniques. It moves from considering the Gospels' overall form to examining specific techniques used by the Gospel writers and characteristics of Jesus' speech.

Key Ideas and Facts:

- **Gospel Genre:** The lecture explores four possible genres for the Gospels: Biography, Propaganda, Dramatic History, and Collections of Stories.
- **Biography:** While not modern scholarly biographies, the Gospels resemble *ancient popular biographies* written with practical concerns and intended for exhortation. They aim to acquaint the reader with the historical Jesus and give an account of his deeds and words, though not exhaustively. John explicitly states this limitation, stating his purpose "is that you might believe that Jesus is a Messiah and that you might have life through his name." The Gospels differ from ancient biographies by focusing more on Jesus' death and reactions to him. The conclusion is that the biography genre is the "closest thing we have in antiquity to these particular Gospels."
- **Propaganda:** While the Gospels seek to convince readers of Jesus' importance and elicit a response, they *lack typical propaganda features* such as "playing fast and loose with the truth," "giving events a particular spin," and "working on people's fears or prejudices." The Gospels "invite a reader response, but it's not mainly the response of just getting you interested in him or admiring him... Primarily, what they're trying to evoke is a response of faith or trust in Jesus."
- **Dramatic History:** The Gospels present a dramatic story of a real historical figure. Newman cites Roland Frye, who compares them to Shakespeare's historical plays and Shaw's "St. Joan". Key aspects of dramatic history applicable to the Gospels include: a fair representation of events, targeting a broad audience, and condensation due to limited space. The "key practice in dramatic history is to use

representative or sample persons...sample incidents...and actions...to give an accurate picture while keeping the length within bounds."

- **Collections of Stories:** The Gospels are presented as collections of incidents, speeches, and sayings, unlike modern uniform biographies. This makes them more action-packed and allows them to highlight Jesus' person, work, and responses to him. "Using a collection of stories allows you to use varied materials as well." These stories were likely used independently by apostles. The lecture notes that there are various categories of brief narratives (encounter, passion, birth, controversy).
- **Techniques Used in the Gospels:** The lecture identifies six techniques employed by the Gospel writers:
 1. **Restraint and Objectivity:** Authors "let Jesus speak" without excessive evaluative comments, influencing the reader primarily through the *selection of incidents*.
 2. **Concise Compressed Accounts:** Especially in the Synoptics, incidents are presented as single scenes with few actors and economical use of words.
 3. **Very Concrete Narration:** Specific incidents, short vivid descriptions, and direct discourse are used to avoid bland generalizations. Characterization comes through the actor's words and actions.
 4. **Selection of Materials:** Authors emphasize particular incidents or items through the amount of space devoted to them, the use of dialogue, and the expectations raised in the reader's mind. "Without actually using evaluative words, the author can communicate his emphasis by the amount of space he devotes to a particular incident."
 5. **Variety:** Alternating actions, words, miracles, controversies, followers, and opponents to maintain reader attention.
 6. **Sampling:** Providing samples of Jesus' speech and actions rather than full reports.
- **Characteristics of Jesus' Speeches:** The lecture, drawing on Leland Ryken's work, describes Jesus' speeches as:
 - **Aphoristic:** Short, memorable, and proverb-like. E.g. "do not judge, or you too will be judged."
 - **Poetic:** Employing Hebrew parallelism, concrete images, metaphors, similes, paradoxes, and hyperbole.

- **Patterned:** Using repetition and balance. E.g. "Ask and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you."
- **Subversive:** Attacking conventional thinking and undermining everyday values. The Beatitudes are given as an example. "Blessed are the poor. Who generally thinks the poor are blessed?"
- **A Fusion of Genres:** Combining blessed statements, character sketches, proverbs, satire, lyric elements, and parables. The Sermon on the Mount was highlighted as having "a bunch of genres brought together in a pretty short speech, which would be very unusual for sermons and such today by pastors and such."
- **Structured:** Simple, artistic, with single or threefold examples.
- **The Sermon on the Mount:** This speech is highlighted as an example of Utopia. "There's no society like this on earth, though I think Jesus' hint is this is what my followers should seek to produce, a society like this."
- **Overall Assessment:** The Gospels are "basically biographies" with story-like features. They aim to promote belief in Jesus while avoiding typical propaganda techniques. They also resemble dramatic history by conveying the drama of Jesus' coming in a concise manner.
- **Recommended Resource:** The lecture recommends Leland Ryken's works, including "Words of Life: A Literary Introduction to the New Testament" (expanded to "Words of Delight" encompassing the whole Bible) and his contributions to the "Dictionary of Biblical Imagery."

4. Study Guide: Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Session 8, Literary Approach to the Gospels -- Genres

Gospel Genres and Literary Techniques: A Study Guide

I. Quiz

Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. What are the four proposed literary forms of the Gospels discussed in the lecture?
2. In what ways do the Gospels resemble ancient biographies?
3. Why does the lecture argue against labeling the Gospels as simple propaganda?
4. How does Roland Fry characterize the Gospels as "dramatic history," and to what types of literature does he compare them?
5. How does the structure of the Gospels as a "collection of stories" enable them to be more action-packed?
6. What is meant by the Gospel writers' "restraint and objectivity" and what technique do they use in this regard?
7. Explain the significance of "concise compressed accounts" as a technique in the Synoptic Gospels.
8. How does "concrete narration" enhance the storytelling in the Gospels?
9. What are some of the techniques that Gospel writers use when selecting materials?
10. Describe the variety of speech and writing styles that are evident in the Gospels.

Quiz Answer Key

1. The four proposed literary forms are biography, propaganda, dramatic history, and collections of stories. Each form captures different aspects of the Gospels, but none is a perfect fit on its own. The lecture suggests that biography is probably the best overall description.
2. The Gospels resemble ancient biographies in their intent to acquaint the reader with a historical person, to give some account of the person's deeds and words, and to serve practical concerns, such as exhortation. However, the Gospels

concentrate on Jesus' death and reactions to Jesus, making them unusual compared to ancient biographies.

3. While the Gospels seek to convince readers of Jesus' importance, they lack the manipulative features commonly associated with propaganda. They don't play on fears, prejudices, or emotions in the same way that propaganda typically does, but allow events and reactions to speak for themselves.
4. Fry characterizes the Gospels as a fair representation of historical events aimed at a broad audience, similar to the historical plays of Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw. Dramatic history condenses events and employs representative figures and incidents to convey an accurate picture within a limited scope.
5. Structuring the Gospels as a collection of stories allows for a focus on specific incidents, speeches, and sayings of Jesus, creating a more action-packed narrative than a uniformly comprehensive biography might achieve. This approach enables the inclusion of numerous brief stories and varied materials.
6. Gospel writers show restraint and objectivity by letting Jesus speak for Himself and avoiding excessive evaluative comments. The technique they use in this regard is the careful selection of incidents to emphasize Jesus' claims and people's reactions to them, allowing the story to convey its own message.
7. Concise compressed accounts, especially in the Synoptic Gospels, involve presenting incidents as single scenes with a few actors, using economical language to tell the story efficiently. This technique contrasts with John's Gospel, which tends to have fewer but longer, more detailed accounts.
8. Concrete narration enhances storytelling by using specific incidents, short vivid descriptions, and direct discourse. This approach avoids blandness by presenting the events in a vivid and relatable manner, allowing the characters' words and actions to provide their characterization.
9. Gospel writers can communicate emphasis by the amount of space devoted to a particular incident, the use of dialogue versus summary statements, and the expectations raised in the reader's mind. They choose incidents to highlight certain aspects of Jesus' ministry and teachings, influencing the reader's understanding.
10. The Gospels feature aphoristic sayings, poetic language with parallelism and imagery, structured patterns with repetition and balance, and subversive statements that challenge conventional thinking. They also blend different genres

like beatitudes, character sketches, proverbs, satire, and parables to create variety.

II. Essay Questions

1. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of classifying the Gospels as ancient biographies. What specific characteristics support this classification, and where do the Gospels deviate from typical ancient biographical conventions?
2. Analyze the techniques employed by the Gospel writers to maintain "restraint and objectivity" while still conveying their theological perspectives. How do these techniques differ from those used in more overt forms of persuasion or propaganda?
3. Examine the role of "dramatic history" in shaping the narrative structure and content of the Gospels. How does this genre influence the selection of events, the portrayal of characters, and the overall message conveyed?
4. Explore the significance of the Gospels as "collections of stories." How does this literary form contribute to the Gospels' accessibility, impact, and theological depth?
5. Evaluate the influence of Leland Ryken's literary approach on the understanding of the Gospels. How do his concepts, such as aphoristic speech, poetic language, and patterned structure, enhance our appreciation of Jesus' teachings and the Gospel narratives?

III. Glossary of Key Terms

- **Genre:** A category of artistic composition, as in music or literature, characterized by similarities in form, style, or subject matter.
- **Biography (Ancient):** A narrative account of a person's life, often written with practical concerns and intended for exhortation.
- **Propaganda:** Information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view. The lecture argues the Gospels are not propaganda.
- **Dramatic History:** A genre that fairly represents historical events to a broad audience, often condensing information and using representative figures.

- **Form Criticism:** A method of biblical criticism that analyzes the Bible by tracing the history of its content of individual units (pericopes), determining the original form and setting of the pericope.
- **Redaction Criticism:** A scholarly approach to the study of scripture that attempts to identify how the author or editor has modified or adapted the traditional material.
- **Synoptic Gospels:** The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which share a similar structure, content, and perspective on the life and teachings of Jesus.
- **Exegesis:** The critical interpretation or explanation of a text, especially of scripture.
- **Aphoristic:** Concise and pithy statements expressing a general truth or opinion.
- **Parallelism (Hebrew):** A literary device common in Hebrew poetry, where adjacent lines or phrases echo or contrast with each other in meaning or structure.
- **Evaluative Comments:** Statements or judgments made by the author that express an opinion or assessment of the events or characters in the narrative.
- **Restraint and Objectivity:** A literary technique where the author avoids excessive evaluative comments and allows the characters and events to speak for themselves.
- **Concise Compressed Accounts:** Short, economical narratives that focus on single scenes with a limited number of actors.
- **Concrete Narration:** The use of specific incidents, vivid descriptions, and direct discourse to create a tangible and engaging narrative.
- **Sampling:** The technique of providing representative examples of Jesus' speech and actions rather than a comprehensive account.

5. FAQs on Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Session 8, Literary Approach to the Gospels -- Genres, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Here is an 8-question FAQ based on the provided lecture excerpts:

FAQ on the Gospels as Literary Works

- **What is the overall literary genre of the Gospels, and what are some proposed classifications?**
- The Gospels are difficult to classify neatly into a single genre. Several suggestions have been made, including biography (in the ancient popular sense), propaganda, dramatic history, and collections of stories. While each has elements that apply, "biography" seems closest.
- **In what ways do the Gospels resemble ancient biographies, and where do they diverge?**
- The Gospels resemble ancient biographies in that they seek to acquaint the reader with a historical person (Jesus), give an account of his deeds and words, and were written with practical concerns for the reader. However, unlike many ancient biographies, the Gospels focus intensely on Jesus' death and reactions to him, and do not always adhere to a modern idea of complete biography (like mentioning Jesus' birth, etc.).
- **Why is the term "propaganda" considered an inadequate or problematic description of the Gospels?**
- While the Gospels aim to convince readers of Jesus' importance and inspire a response, they differ from typical propaganda in several ways. They generally avoid manipulative tactics like playing on fears or prejudices and rarely give events a biased "spin." Instead, they present Jesus' words and actions, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions. The Gospels restrain from directly influencing or telling the reader which reactions are good or bad.
- **What is "dramatic history," and how does it relate to the Gospels?**
- Dramatic history is a genre that aims for a fair representation of historical events, directed toward a broad audience. It relies on condensation and uses representative figures and incidents to cover a wide scope while remaining

concise. Some scholars, like Roland Fry, argue the Gospels fit this genre, comparing them to historical plays by Shakespeare or Shaw.

- **How can the Gospels be considered "collections of stories," and what are the advantages of this structure?**
- The Gospels present Jesus' life through a series of individual incidents, speeches, and sayings, rather than a uniformly connected narrative. This approach allows for a more action-packed biography, showcases a variety of materials (encounter narratives, controversy narratives, parables, etc.), and makes the message more accessible and memorable.
- **What are some of the literary techniques employed by the Gospel writers?**
- The Gospel writers use various techniques, including:
 - **Restraint and Objectivity:** letting Jesus' words and actions speak for themselves without excessive evaluative comments.
 - **Concise, Compressed Accounts:** presenting incidents as single scenes with economical use of words.
 - **Concrete Narration:** using specific incidents, vivid descriptions, and direct discourse.
 - **Selection of Materials:** emphasizing certain incidents to communicate emphasis without using explicit evaluative language.
 - **Variety:** alternating actions with words, miracles with controversy, and followers with opponents.
 - **Sampling:** providing representative examples of Jesus' speech, actions, and interactions.
- **What are some characteristics of Jesus' speeches as presented in the Gospels?**
- Jesus' speeches are often described as:
 - **Aphoristic:** short and memorable, like soundbites.
 - **Poetic:** using Hebrew parallelism, concrete imagery, metaphor, simile, paradox, and hyperbole.
 - **Patterned:** using repetition and balance between lines.
 - **Subversive:** challenging conventional thinking and values.

- **A Fusion of Genres:** bringing together blessed statements, character sketches, proverbs, satire, and lyric elements.
- **Structured:** exhibiting careful organization and artistry.
- **Who is Leland Ryken, and what is his significance in the study of the Gospels as literature?**
- Leland Ryken is an evangelical scholar who has made significant contributions to the study of the New Testament, particularly the Gospels, from a literary perspective. He emphasizes the artistic and literary qualities of the text, offering insights into their structure, style, and rhetorical strategies. Ryken's works, such as "Words of Life" and the "Dictionary of Biblical Imagery," are valuable resources for understanding the Gospels as literary works.