

Dr. Robert C. Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Lecture 8, Gospel Genres

© 2024 Robert Newman and Ted Hildebrandt

Okay, we're here in our Synoptic Gospels course. We've looked at one, the historical Jesus; two, the Jewish background to the New Testament, particularly the Gospels; three, the introduction to exegesis and the narrative genre, and a sample of that in Matthew 2, Visited Wise Men. We've looked at section four, authorship and date of the Synoptics, in which we also looked at the characteristics, some of the characteristics of the Synoptics, and we just finished section five, the genre parables and exegeting them and looked at the Jesus parable in Matthew 22:1 through 14, The Marriage Banquet.

We want to turn now to number six in our course, six out of plan 12 topics, and that's the Gospels as literary works. That is thinking in terms of, okay, what can we learn from the study of literature about how the Gospels function in that way? So, the first thing we want to ask ourselves about is the literary form of the Gospels. What is the literary form or overall genre of the Gospels? And a number of different suggestions have been made in that direction.

We're going to look at four of them here: biography, propaganda, dramatic history, and collections of stories. So that's the direction we want to go. First of all, biography.

Obviously, the Gospels are presenting information about Jesus, a person who actually lived in history, so they are certainly biographical in some sense. A number of commentators have pointed out that they're not biographies in the modern scholarly sense, but they weren't written to be biographies in the modern scholarly sense. So, they weren't written by what is typically now viewed as the ideal, if you like, an uninvolved observer with a detached attitude, okay? However, lots of modern scholarly biographies are not written by people with detached attitudes either.

If you look at them, some are perhaps praise items, but perhaps more frequently, a way to undercut or dump on somebody. They're not trying to give all the important dates and facts, okay? A biographer would usually be expected to try and give all the important information that could be known about the person, so when he was born and what we know about his childhood and all that sort of thing, and it doesn't appear that the Gospel writers are doing that. Some of the biographies done today would be personal reminiscences or character studies or something of that sort, and the Gospels are not primarily that way.

We think they do involve personal reminiscences, but they're not structured that way, so the authors do not bring themselves forward, as we've already seen in that direction. However, the Gospels are really more like a biography in the ancient popular sense. That is, how biographies were written in antiquity and how those were written for a broader audience.

So, for instance, ancient popular biographies were written with practical concerns and often used for the exhortation of some sort, that the author intended that you should imitate this particular person, or if he was doing perhaps a series of biographies where there were good guys and bad guys, that you should avoid imitating this person for one purpose or another. The ancient biographies were intended to acquaint the reader with the historical person, and we can certainly say that's the purpose of the biblical Gospels in the New Testament. Ancient biographies were intended to give some account of this person's deeds and words without perhaps intending to give everything that could be said, and this is what the New Testament, what the Gospels are doing, and in fact, John explicitly tells us at the end of his Gospel that there's a lot more could be said, but this has been said, and this is its purpose.

Its purpose is that you might believe that Jesus is a Messiah and that you might have life through his name. There are some resemblances in the Gospels to ancient biographies about Socrates, the Greek philosopher Epictetus, second century AD, and a religious guru, we might say Apollonius of Tiana, also from the second century AD. But the Gospels, unlike these ancient popular biographies, concentrate on Jesus' death and they concentrate on reactions to Jesus, and in those areas, I think they are either unusual as ancient popular biographies go, but I'm still inclined to say that the genre biography is in fact the closest thing we have in antiquity to these particular Gospels.

Some have suggested that the Gospels are propaganda, which, of course, has a very negative connotation. PR also has negative connotations—sales pitch, hype, etc.

Well, the Gospels are seeking to convince the readers that Jesus is vitally important and to move them to respond properly to him, but they lack lots of features that those other statements, that other kinds of labels, would suggest. Propaganda, as the name implies, seeks to propagate certain ideas or attitudes but is now commonly a dirty word because it's so often playing fast and loose with the truth and giving events a particular spin. It usually also involves working on people's fears or prejudices or trying to excite emotions, and interestingly, the Gospels do none of that.

They don't try to give the events a particular spin. They typically let you see what Jesus said and what he did, and they point out that there are different kinds of reactions, etc., and doubtless, if a person's already convinced Christian, they can see

that these are bad reactions to Jesus and these are good reactions, etc., but the writers don't say a whole lot about that. The Gospel writers are trying to invite a reader response, but it's not mainly the response of just getting you interested in him or admiring him, though these are certainly involved.

Primarily, what they're trying to evoke is a response of faith or trust in Jesus, and they aren't really doing that primarily, but what we think of as an altar call or something of that sort, which, of course, we'll see something of that sort in some of, say, Stephen's speech, well maybe not Stephen's best example, Peter's speech in the Acts, and Paul's speech is there, and that sort of thing. The Gospel writers actually are surprising in that, one, they restrain their post-Easter faith in telling the story, so they don't already hint that Jesus has risen from the dead before this, except that Jesus predicts that a couple of places, but he predicts that along with the death and the disciples really aren't ready to hear that whole package. And they let the events of Jesus' ministry tell their own story rather than giving evaluative comments again and again through the Gospels.

Now and then, you do have an evaluative comment, but there are not a lot of them. So yes, the Gospels are trying to propagate trust in Jesus, but they're not doing it in the way that we think of propaganda. The third suggestion for the literary form of the Gospels is dramatic history.

And yeah, the Gospels are telling a dramatic story of the persons and actions and impact of Jesus, who is a real figure in history, and they do in some ways look more like plays, dramatic in dramatic history, than they look like modern narratives. Roland Fry, a literary critic at the University of Pennsylvania, thinks the Gospels should be classed as dramatic histories, and he compares the Gospels to the historical plays of William Shakespeare, who, of course, has a number of dramatic histories, and to George Bernard Shaw's play, particularly that St. Joan. Well, what are the characteristics of dramatic history? Fry says, well, basically a dramatic history is essentially a fair representation of events, so it's not something we've got lots of invention to it. It's telling you what happened.

A dramatic history is directed to a broad general audience, so it's intended to get them involved if you like, but a dramatic history needs to cover a lot of ground in a little bit of space, and so condensation is very important to attract attention, to hold attention, etc. And that, I think, is significant in the Gospels as well, partly, I suspect, for this very reason, and partly perhaps because books were expensive in antiquity, and so although Josephus, you know, uses seven volumes for his History of the Jews, excuse me, of his War of the Jews, Jewish War, and 20 volumes for his Antiquities, and those volumes would be around the size of the standard papyrus roll, he's writing to a well-to-do audience, and Christianity is aimed at a broader audience, which includes people that aren't going to be able to afford those kinds of things, so the average person, I would think, could afford, if they wanted to put up the money

for it, a volume or two, that sort of thing, so typically the Gospels are designed that way. So, condensation is important, and part of it, I think, attracts and holds attendance, and part of it is for these financial reasons.

The key practice in dramatic history is to use representative or sample persons, so this person interacted with all sorts of people, pick a few sample ones of different sorts, okay, so sample followers, sample opponent, that sort of thing, to use a representative or sample incidents, you're covering the person's life, but you can't cover the detail of the life, it's too complicated, but the purpose then of these representative persons, incidents, and actions, actions of the person who you're giving the history of, is to give an accurate picture while keeping the length within bounds, and I think that, again, fits very nicely with what the Gospels are doing. A fourth suggestion is, are they collections, is the genre, if you like, collections of stories, okay, you can find throughout history places where you have collections of stories of one sort or another, you know, stories about Robin Hood, or stories about George Washington, or stories about Abraham Lincoln, etc., and some of these presumably legendary, some of these are actually historical, but they're a collection of things that do that. Well, the Gospels are most striking in contrast to modern biographies in being a collection of stories, that is, incidents, speeches, and sayings of Jesus, and that allows the Gospels to function in a way that a biography, particularly one that tries to kind of uniformly cover the person's life, can't do so well.

For instance, by using a collection of stories to put together a biography with the right choice of stories and such, you can make the biography much more action-packed than it would otherwise be. So, you use numerous brief stories, which allows more action than a single connected narrative where you're trying to follow everything out. There are places in the Gospels where you have a single connected narrative for a day or so, but usually not longer than that.

These collections of stories that represent each Gospel are centered on Jesus, so you look at his person and work, and you explain and celebrate what he's done. There's actually not a whole lot of either explaining or celebrating. That's, again, this more evaluative sort of thing, and that's not a lot of that. You can use narrative rather easily than in a collection of stories to show Jesus' actions, Jesus' words, and the response of others to him, and you can actually see with a number of the anecdotes in the Gospels that some of them concentrate on those actions and some concentrate on those words, and some of them a major theme is a variety of responses to him, that sort of thing.

Using a collection of stories allows you to use varied materials as well. There have been a number of people who think that these stories were used independently before they were compiled. Forum critics say these materials circulated independently, and I think there's probably some sense in which that's true, but I would suggest that rather they were used independently by the apostles and other

eyewitnesses as they went from place to place as separate anecdotes, but they knew how they went together and that information was never lost.

We find various categories of brief narratives, and you remember Riken's list above, where we looked at all the different kinds of narratives: encounter narratives, passion narratives, birth narratives, controversy narratives, and things of that sort. Using a collection of stories allows you to, in some of them, sketch events and other ones to detail a particular event and allows you to have dialogues alternating with discourse where just Jesus is speaking, as well as things of that sort. Likewise, in the way the Gospels are put together, you have the words of Jesus, and some of those are just brief sayings, almost sound bites, the blind leading a blind, paying back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God, and others are extended discourses like the Sermon on the Mount or the Olivet Discourse, and then others take parabolic form, and so that allows you to get a lot of variety and see some different perspectives on what Jesus was like, and what he taught, and what he was doing.

So, that's a little discussion of the genre. Coming down on that and trying to pull things together, I would say the Gospels are basically biographies. They function a little bit differently even, probably, than ancient biographies in having this sort of story feature to it of the individual incident, so you will see some of that in ancient biographies, and that they are seeking to get people to believe in Jesus, but otherwise steer clear of the general sort of things that we see in propaganda, but they do resemble in some ways a dramatic history where you are showing, allowing a person to grasp in a short period of time, the drama of what is going on in Jesus coming and such.

We turn to think a little bit about the techniques used in the Gospels, and I'm going to give you a series of techniques here. Let me see how big it is, just six I guess. First of all, we see one of the Gospel writers' techniques is restraint and objectivity.

The Gospels are unusual and unlike even most ancient biographies in that the authors let Jesus speak. They don't try to persuade or influence the reader by what we have been calling evaluative comments. The only thing they do in this direction, the only technique they use in this direction, is selection of incident.

So, by emphasizing certain incidents and not others, they can draw your attention to what Jesus claimed and how people reacted to it. Secondly, we have concise compressed accounts. In the Synoptic Gospels especially, which is even in contrast to the Gospel of John, most of the incidents are single scenes with a couple of actors, often a group acting as a unit.

Those are characteristics of storytelling if you like, and they're told with very economical use of words. John's Gospel tends to work with fewer accounts but with

longer, more detailed accounts and less of that kind of technique. Thirdly, besides restraint and objectivity and concise compressed accounts, the narration is very concrete.

Brief accounts can very easily become bland if they're general summaries, and if you say, well, Jesus spoke for a while on the end of the age or something like that, you know, you're kind of, you don't, you're saying something, but you're not telling a whole lot. This danger can be avoided by the presentation of specific incidents using short, vivid descriptions, kind of like an artist's sketch, where an artist can give the, what you would say, the appearance of a person with, you know, only 20 lines or so, whereas, you know, if you were trying to do a, what you would say, a graphic of it, you might need a thousand pixels or something, but a technique that allows you to get that. So, the Gospel writers use specific incidents, short, vivid descriptions, and direct discourse.

Okay, the person speaks, the opponent or the person seeking healing or something speaks, etc., instead of the writer spending some time trying to characterize who it is. Occasionally, he does do that, so we get a little characterization of the demoniac who has been living in the caves, etc., and that sort of thing, but not a lot of that. A characterization is often provided by the actor's words and actions in that particular incident rather than by the Gospel writer's specific statements.

A fourth technique is the selection of materials. The authors apparently have a broad range of incidents they could have selected from, and they pick out the ones that they're going to recount, and then they think in terms of how they'll use it. So, without actually using evaluative words, the author can communicate his emphasis by the amount of space he devotes to a particular incident or a particular item in that incident, whether he chooses to use dialogue or some kind of summary statement, and what expectations he raises in the reader's mind.

So, selection of materials. You remember, again, John tells us Jesus did all sorts of these things, but these have been chosen, selected, etc., that you may know. A fifth technique is a variety.

The author groups his materials in various ways, sometimes alternating Jesus' actions with his words, miracles with controversy, followers with opponents, and this helps keep the attention of the reader, or if it's read aloud, helps keep the attention of the listeners. A sixth technique is sampling. The Gospel writers apparently give us samples of Jesus' speech and actions rather than trying to give a full report.

These are typically samples of the types of miracles Jesus did, the various kinds of people he interacted with, the sorts of opposition he faced, and the kinds of speeches he gave on various occasions. So some of the techniques here, and a lot of this goes back to Leland Ryken, restraint and objectivity, concise compressed

accounts, very concrete narration, selection of materials, variety, and sampling. We see a few words about Jesus' speeches.

Some of the typical features of Jesus' speaking as it shows up in the Gospels. Ryken, I think, again here says Jesus' speeches are characterized by being aphoristic, poetic, patterned, subversive, a fusion of genres and structured. Let's walk through those rather quickly and think a little bit about them.

Aphoristic, okay, I may not be familiar with that term but it means short if you like. Jesus' words are typically brief, almost like modern soundbites. That struck me, I gave a talk once on soundbite theology, how Jesus was able to convey important theological things in single sentences, etc.

Jesus' words are typically brief, almost like modern soundbites, but Jesus' words are made memorable by structure and wordplay. You get a lot of soundbites today in watching TV news or something of that sort, but a lot of them you've forgotten about a day after they were said, but Jesus' technique of using structure, so you've got parallelism and various things like that, hyperbole and such, and also wordplay of some sort, allows us to remember some of Jesus' things. Jesus' words are often proverb-like: do not judge, or you too will be judged.

If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into the ditch. Jesus' speech is poetic. Remember that Hebrew poetry is not rhyming, and if it were metric, we wouldn't have gotten a good hand on what the metric is, but Jesus often uses Hebrew parallelism.

He uses concrete images, and that kind of imagery, something very specific rather than something very abstract, is a characteristic of poetry. He uses metaphor, simile, paradox, and hyperbole. It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven.

Sticks in your mind if you like. Jesus' speech is patterned, with lots of repetition. You've heard that it was said, but I say unto you, he uses that about five times in setting out what constitutes real righteousness as opposed to what we might call fake righteousness or cheap grace or something of that sort.

He balances between the lines, and that again comes back to a parallelism of some sort. Example here of repetition and balance. Ask and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you.

A fifth characteristic, again, that Wright can hear of Jesus' speech is subversive and some people have used that in rather unsatisfactory ways, but Jesus attacks our everyday way of thinking.

He undermines our conventional values. Jesus doesn't undermine the real values of the Bible, but he does often undermine the way they have been dumbed down or watered down or something of that sort among people who are merely conventionally religious. Take the Beatitudes, for instance, as a way that undermines our everyday way of thinking.

Blessed are the poor. Who generally thinks the poor are blessed? Certainly not a standard way of thinking. Blessed are those who mourn.

We generally try to stay away from people who mourn if we can. Blessed are the gentle, etc., and the King James Version, meek, etc., and in an age of self-assertion, meekness generally does not go very far. And yet Jesus says it's the poor in spirit to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs if you like, that the ones who mourn will one day be comforted.

The ones who are gentle will inherit the earth, not the powerful, and the assertive and such are the ones who are going to inherit the earth. So the way that society in general thinks of getting ahead, whether it be modern societies or ancient societies, is, if you like, undermined by these particular things. Jesus often in his speeches brings together a number of different genres.

Ryken suggests, for instance, that the Sermon on the Mount starts out with Beatitudes, blessed statements, and okay, which characterize some of the Psalms. There are nine of those at the beginning. Then, he gives some character sketches.

Remember that the hypocrites fasting, if you like, is a nice example of a little character sketch. He uses a proverb: judge not, or you too will be judged. He uses satire, the idea of doing eye surgery with bad vision, the guy with the log in his eye, etc.

He uses lyric-type things: you are the light of the world, parable, wise and foolish builders, prayer, and the Lord's prayer. So, we see 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. Ryken says the Sermon as a whole is utopian literature.

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. It's an inaugural address, so to speak. Jesus is sketching what he wants his kingdom to be like and what he, as king, is going to do to move in that direction.

And the Sermon on the Mount is wisdom literature. It has many structures that fall along that direction. Lastly, Ryken suggests that Jesus' speeches are structured, and he says that they're simple; they're very artistic.

That was something that struck me personally very much, taking courses at Duke, Old and New Testament History, and then at Penn, and a couple of things, one of which was about Jesus, that you got the idea, well, a liberal position often is that Matthew or whoever was the compiler of Matthew's gospel had a bunch of sayings of Jesus and he kind of crammed them together, etc. But it struck me, no, they're too organized. There's a genius in their organization, there's a genius in their content, etc.

And so, we're going to replace Jesus, who is the most likely candidate, with some unknown geniuses in the history of the early church in the first century, for that matter. Highly artistic, single themes or threefold examples often are part of the structure, if you like, of Jesus' speeches. And here's what Ryken says in *Words of Life*, page 120.

The artistry of the design is apparent. There's no reason why the sermon as it stands could not be exactly the form Jesus' longer sermons took. So, I think he has something similar to that reaction there.

Well, one reference here as we close this section, and again, more could be said on the gospels as literary works, but Leland Ryken has done much of this work that has been done from an evangelical perspective. See his *Words of Life*, a literary introduction to the New Testament, which was expanded to the whole Bible in *Words of Delight*. So it's got an Old Testament section, and then this *Word of Life* was incorporated into it.

Ryken was also one of the major editors of the InterVarsity Press reference work called the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, which has some very helpful material as well. Okay, well, I think that finishes up what we want to try and cover for today. So we've now worked our way through six of the 12 sections of our Synoptic Gospels course, and we have six more to go.

Let me just sketch those for you here, and then we will quit. We've already looked at the historical Jesus, Jewish background, introduction to exegesis and the narrative genre, authorship, the date, the Synoptics, including the characterizations, exegesis of parables, and the gospels as literary works. Here in the future, Lord willing, we want to look at the synoptic problem, what's the relationship between Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the geography of Palestine and Jerusalem, the genre of miracle accounts and how to exegete them, the theology of the synoptics, thinking of the biblical theology of the synoptics, how the Synoptics structure their theology, what kind of terminology to use, what their emphasis, if you like, and then how to interpret controversy accounts, and then finally, we will wind up with form criticism and redaction criticism.

Okay, thank you very much.