

New Testament History and Literature - Genre and the Synoptics

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. Dave Mathewson examines the diverse literary genres present in the New Testament, including Greco-Roman biography/narrative, epistles, and apocalyptic literature. It explores the nature of the Gospels as selective theological biographies grounded in historical reliability and eyewitness testimony rather than exhaustive chronological records. Additionally, the lecture addresses the Synoptic Problem, evaluating theories of literary dependence, specifically Markan Priority and the Q source, to explain the extensive verbal and structural overlap among Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Ultimately, it emphasizes understanding each Gospel's unique theological distinctives while affirming their overall historical and spiritual integrity.

Outline

I. Introduction and Overview of New Testament Literary Genres

A. Purpose of Studying First-Century Literary Types

1. Contextual interpretation within historical, cultural, and linguistic settings
2. Recognition that first-century genres differ from modern literary conventions

B. Major Literary Types in the New Testament

1. Narrative (Gospels and Acts)
 - a. Accounts of characters, speeches, and historical events
 - b. Distinct from modern exhaustive biographies
2. Epistolary (Letters / Epistles)
 - a. Standard vehicle for communicating business, philosophy, and personal instruction
 - b. Functioned as a surrogate for the author's personal presence and apostolic authority
 - c. Examples: Pauline epistles, Hebrews, General Epistles, and Revelation
3. Apocalypse (Book of Revelation)
 - a. First-person autobiographical account of a visionary experience
 - b. Standard apocalyptic literature format (common 200 BC – 200 AD)
 - c. Characterized by highly symbolic imagery and visions of heavenly realities
4. Embedded sub-genres (e.g., Parables as Jesus' primary teaching method)

II. The Nature and Historical Reliability of the Gospels

A. Gospels as Greco-Roman Theological Biographies

1. High selectivity vs. exhaustive chronological detail
2. Specific theological perspective and purpose of each Gospel writer
3. Differences in recorded details (e.g., Nativity narratives in Matthew vs. Luke)
4. Speech reporting conventions: accurate and adequate summaries of core meaning rather than verbatim transcriptions

B. Addressing Skepticism and Reconstructing Church History

1. Evaluation of Dan Brown / Da Vinci Code and academic skepticism
2. Refutation of the 'Lost Christianities' pluralistic model (Bart Ehrman)
3. The false dichotomy between history and theology

C. Evidence for the Trustworthiness of the Gospels

1. Reliance on and presence of eyewitness testimonies (e.g., Luke 1:1–4)
2. Breakdown of the 'Telephone Game' analogy; controlled oral transmission
3. Widespread agreement across Gospel accounts
4. Historical confirmation and theological guidance of the Holy Spirit

III. The Synoptic Problem and Literary Dependence

A. Defining the Synoptic Problem

1. Synoptic ('to see together'): Matthew, Mark, and Luke
2. Striking similarities in content, narrative order, and precise Greek wording
3. Shared non-speech narrative bridges (e.g., Transfiguration introduction)

B. Proposed Solutions to the Synoptic Problem

1. Independence Theories
 - a. Appeal strictly to divine inspiration (fails to account for differences)
 - b. Common reliance on oral tradition alone
2. Literary Dependence Theories
 - a. Augustinian Proposal: Matthew written first, Mark summarized Matthew, Luke used both
 - b. Two-Source Hypothesis / Markan Priority (Dominant modern view)
 - i. Mark written first (reflecting Peter's eyewitness preaching)
 - ii. Matthew and Luke independently utilized Mark as their primary structural source
 - iii. Q Source ('Quelle'): hypothetical collection of Jesus' sayings shared by Matthew and Luke but absent in Mark (e.g., Sermon on the Mount)

C. Arguments Supporting Markan Priority

1. Matthew and Luke smooth out Mark's awkward phrasing and potential misunderstandings
2. High percentage of Mark reproduced in Matthew (~97%) and Luke (~88%)
3. Sequential and verbal agreement patterns among the three Synoptics

D. Methodological Conclusion

1. Value of comparing Gospel differences to highlight each writer's unique theological emphasis
2. Focus on individual theological distinctives and portrayal of Jesus Christ