

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 6: Genre and Synoptics

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All right, welcome to another Deep Dive. This time we're diving into something I know a lot of you are interested in: the Gospels. Yeah, it's a pretty popular subject.

Definitely. And to make this Deep Dive even better, you guys sent us some really fascinating material to look at. Some good stuff.

It's from a lecture by a New Testament scholar, Dr. Dave Mathewson, and he really digs deep into some thought-provoking questions about these foundational texts of Christianity. Yeah, like, can we really trust what the Gospels say about Jesus? I mean, were they really trying to capture the historical Jesus, or are they just kind of, you know, promoting the beliefs of the early church? That's actually where I wanted to start, too. It's like, how do we even know if we can trust these accounts, you know? Dr. Mathewson brings up this famous idea from C.S. Lewis, you know, the liar, lunatic, or lord thing.

Yeah, the trilemma. But then he has a fourth option, which really caught my attention. Could the Gospels just be legends? Hmm.

Legends. I mean, think about it. We're talking about texts written decades after the events they describe.

Right. So how do we sift through all that and figure out what's, you know, what's historically accurate? Exactly. So how does Dr. Mathewson address that, you know, that skepticism about whether the Gospels are really reliable? Well, he points out that there's a huge emphasis on truth in the New Testament, like, you know, they're constantly refuting false teachings.

OK, but couldn't you argue that a group trying to, like, start a new religion would obviously want to say they're all about truth, even if they're, you know, maybe stretching things a bit? Sure. So how do we know they were really being truthful and not just kind of, you know, pushing their agenda? Well, Dr. Mathewson says, look, there were eyewitnesses around. It wouldn't have been easy to just make up stories about Jesus when there were people who had actually seen him and heard him teach.

That's a good point. I mean, it's like if you tried to spread a ridiculous rumor about a friend when a bunch of other friends were right there and saw what really happened, it wouldn't get very far. Exactly.

So those eyewitnesses would have been like, you know, fact-checkers, making sure things stayed accurate. Exactly. Dr. Mathewson said that's a big argument against the whole, like, telephone game idea where stories get distorted as they're passed along.

Makes sense. So those eyewitnesses would be those checkpoints along the way. Right.

They'd be able to say, "Hold on, that's not how it happened. Okay. That makes a lot of sense.

So it seems like understanding the historical context is really important when we're trying to interpret these texts. Absolutely. Like the culture and social norms back then, that must have played a huge role in how these stories were told and understood.

Oh, for sure. And that leads into, you know, the different literary genres we find in the New Testament. Dr. Mathewson talks about this.

And I think it's really key to interpretation. Okay. So what are we talking about here? Different types of writing? Like what? Well, you've got narrative, like in the Gospels and Acts.

You've got epistolary, which is, you know, letters. And then there's apocalyptic literature, like the Book of Revelation. Wait a second.

The Book of Revelation? That's a letter? That blows my mind. Yeah. Right.

Pretty wild, huh? But it goes to show how important it is to understand the nuances of these different genres. I mean, you wouldn't read a satirical news article and take it literally, right? Exactly. Exactly.

So we need to recognize, you know, the unique conventions of ancient letters, how they functioned back then. Okay. So give me an example.

How could misunderstanding the genre lead to, you know, misinterpretations? Well, take letters, for instance. In the first century, a letter from, let's say, Paul, wasn't just some casual note. It was like, you know, it carried serious weight.

Like he was right there in the room with them? Pretty much. It was meant to, like, shape their beliefs, guide their practices, you know. Wow.

So understanding the genre really changes how we read those letters. Oh, absolutely. It can make all the difference in the world.

Okay. Now, I want to talk about something that's always kind of bugged me. The whole synoptic problem thing.

Ah, yes. The big mystery. Dr. Mathieson talks about how Matthew, Mark, and Luke are so similar, yet all so distinct.

It's like they're telling the same story, but with slightly different spins, you know? Right. He gives this example of the lead-up to Jesus's transfiguration, and it's almost word for word in all three Gospels. Yeah.

So how do we explain that? That's what I want to know. What do scholars say about this? Well, the most common theory, and Dr. Mathieson explains this, is a Markan priority. The idea is that Mark's Gospel was written first, and then Matthew and Luke both used Mark as

a source, but they also drew on another source that we don't have anymore: a hypothetical collection of sayings and teachings.

So, like a lost document. Exactly. It's called Q. We don't have it, but scholars believe it existed based on the similarities between Matthew and Luke that aren't found in Mark.

Wow, that's fascinating. So Matthew and Luke were basically like building on Mark's work. Kind of, yeah.

But they weren't just copying. They were adapting, rearranging, adding their own details, and often smoothing out Mark's, you know, rougher style. Like they were taking his foundation and making it their own.

Exactly. Tailoring it for their specific audiences and purposes. So why do you think they did that? What was the point of all these subtle changes? Well, that's where it gets really interesting.

Dr. Mathieson's point is that by looking at those differences, we can see the theological emphasis of each writer. Like their own unique perspective on Jesus. Right.

So instead of just looking for what's the same, we should be digging into what's different. Those little changes, they can tell us a lot about what each author was trying to say. It's like those spot-the-difference games.

The fun is in finding those subtle variations. Exactly. And those variations can tell us a whole lot about the author and their understanding of Jesus.

For example, you know, Matthew focuses on the Magi in his nativity story, while Luke highlights the shepherds. Hmm. That is interesting.

Those contrasting elements, you know, they give us a glimpse into their different theological perspectives. And even in the same story, like the transfiguration, there are little differences, right? Like Luke adds in that detail about Jesus going up the mountain to pray beforehand. Oh, yeah.

That's Luke's emphasis on prayer, you know. Right. It seems like such a small detail, but it speaks volumes about how Luke wants us to understand Jesus.

It really does. So yeah, paying attention to these seemingly minor additions and omissions can reveal so much about how each gospel writer wanted their audience to understand Jesus. This is making me want to go back and reread the Gospels with a whole new perspective.

Like not just reading them as one big story, but really paying attention to those four distinct voices. That's exactly the kind of critical thinking Dr. Mathewson is encouraging. It's about moving beyond, you know, a superficial reading and really engaging with these texts on a deeper level, paying attention to the nuances and appreciating that richness, that diversity of perspectives.

Yeah, that's fantastic. This has been really insightful so far. Absolutely.

There's still so much to uncover, though. I know, right? And I can't wait to dive into more of Dr. Mathewson's insights in our next Deep Dive. Should be fun.

For sure. And, well, you know, we'll keep exploring these different perspectives on the Gospels and see what else we can uncover about these fascinating texts. Awesome.

Well, thanks for joining us on this Deep Dive. We'll be back soon to continue the conversation, so stay tuned. It's fascinating to think about how each Gospel writer was trying to reach a specific audience, you know, with their own unique perspective on Jesus.

Right, yeah. And how those individual perspectives might have resonated with those original readers, you know, like way back then. Like, for example, Dr. Mathewson talks about how Matthew's Gospel is often seen as being written for a Jewish Christian audience.

Yeah, makes sense. Right, because he really emphasizes Jesus as the fulfillment of those Old Testament prophecies. Oh, totally.

Like, he's building this case for Jesus as the Messiah, connecting him back to the Hebrew Scriptures, you know? Yeah, like showing how all those ancient prophecies are pointing to Jesus. Exactly. Matthew's very meticulous about, you know, linking Jesus's life and ministry to those prophecies, showing how he's the long-awaited Messiah.

He even structures his whole Gospel around these five major discourses of Jesus, which some scholars say, you know, echo the five books of Moses. Oh, wow. So he's presenting Jesus as a new Moses, bringing a new law for a new covenant.

Kind of, yeah. To have a brilliant way to, like, bridge the gap between the old and the new, showing how Jesus both fulfills and transcends the Jewish tradition. That framing would have been really powerful for a Jewish audience, you know, trying to wrap their heads around who Jesus was and what it all meant.

For sure. It would have resonated deeply with them. Whereas Luke, on the other hand, seems to have a more Gentile audience in mind, right? It's like he's writing for those who might not be so familiar with the Jewish Scriptures, or maybe those who felt excluded from traditional Jewish society.

Right. Those on the margins, maybe? Exactly. Yeah.

Like, Luke traces Jesus' genealogy all the way back to Adam. Instead of just Abraham. Yeah.

Emphasizing his universal significance, you know, like Jesus is for all humanity, not just the Jewish people. A much broader scope. Way broader.

And then you've got Luke's emphasis on, you know, Jesus' compassion for the outcast, the marginalized, the poor. Right. All of that would have resonated with those who felt like they were on the fringes, no matter their background.

It's like Luke is saying, hey, this message is for everyone. It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from. Exactly.

It's such a powerful message of inclusivity, you know, really ahead of its time in some ways. So it seems like each gospel writer is really tailoring their narrative to address the specific needs and questions of their communities. Totally.

And that's why understanding the synoptic problem is so important. It helps us appreciate that the gospels aren't just, you know, dry historical records. They're carefully crafted theological works, each with its own unique flavor.

It's like tasting different wines from the same vineyard. Oh, I love that analogy. Each one has its own distinct aroma and complexity, but they all come from the same source.

Exactly. And it reminds us that we don't have to just pick one gospel and stick with it. We can savor them all, allowing their diverse perspectives to, like, enrich our understanding of Jesus.

That's a beautiful way to put it. It's like a tapestry, you know, woven with different threads. Love it.

Each thread contributing to the overall beauty and complexity of the whole. So another thing that really struck me from Dr. Mathewson's lecture was his point about, you know, understanding how writing worked in the first century. He says our modern assumptions about accuracy and historical writing can really get in the way of properly interpreting the gospels.

Yeah. He really challenges that idea that every word in the gospels has to be, you know, a precise verbatim quote. Like a transcript, right? Right.

We tend to think that's the only way to be historically accurate, but back then things were different. Summarizing and paraphrasing were totally normal, especially when it came to recording speeches. Dr. Mathewson compares it to how minutes are taken at a meeting.

You know, they capture the main points, but they don't record every single, um, and, ah. Right. It's about conveying the essence.

Yeah. The overall message, not getting bogged down in every little detail. And that makes me think maybe we shouldn't get too hung up on those little discrepancies we sometimes find between the gospels.

Like those apparent contradictions? Yeah. Instead of seeing them as, you know, contradictions, maybe we should view them as different angles on the same truth, you know? Each one contributing to a more complete picture. Right.

Or like complementary pieces of a larger puzzle. Yeah. You know? Yeah.

Each one essential for revealing the full image. So we're not just looking for what's the same, but also for what's different. Exactly.

Because both the similarities and the differences can tell us something important about Jesus and the impact he had on those who followed him. It makes you wonder if those

variations might also reflect the different ways those early communities were remembering and retelling the stories of Jesus. That's a really interesting thought, you know? Like those seemingly minor details might actually reveal something deeper about how his life and teachings were impacting those early followers.

It's like those details, they weren't just random, you know? They were meaningful. They were. They were shaped by the experiences and beliefs of those who were telling and retelling the stories.

Right. Yeah. It's like, it's like a collective memory, you know? Yeah, exactly.

The collective memory that was shaped by their faith and their encounter with Jesus. That reminds me of something else Dr. Mathewson talked about. How some scholars try to downplay the, you know, the historical kernel of Jesus's life.

Oh, yeah. Focusing only on the most basic facts and stripping away all the miraculous and the divine. It's like they're trying to fit Jesus into this neat little box, you know? Right.

But in doing so, they kind of end up with a pretty bland and uninspiring figure. It's a reductionist approach that ignores the compelling evidence for the historical reliability of the Gospels. Dr. Mathewson makes a really strong case for trusting the Gospels as accounts that are rooted in actual events.

Yes, he does. Even though they're written from particular theological perspectives, you know? He doesn't shy away from the theological elements, but he also argues for their grounding in history. It's that combination of history and theology that makes the Gospels so powerful.

Exactly. They're not just abstract ideas or moral fables. They're accounts of a real person who lived, taught, died, and rose again.

A person who changed the course of human history. Right. That brings to mind something that Dr. Mathewson only briefly touches on: the concept of lost Christianity.

Ah, yes. The idea that in the early centuries of the church, there were all these different, you know, competing versions of Christianity. And that what we know today as Christianity is just one of many possibilities.

Right. But Dr. Mathewson seems to push back on that a bit, doesn't he? Yeah, he does. He argues that the New Testament itself shows this concern for upholding the true faith against false teachings.

Yeah, like all those warnings against heresy we find in Paul's letters and other New Testament writings. It's like they were trying to establish a core set of beliefs, right? Exactly. So while there might have been differences of opinion and theological debates, there was also a core set of beliefs and practices that held the early church together.

A common thread running through all those diverse expressions of faith. Exactly. A thread that's rooted in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels.

Speaking of the Gospels, there's one more fascinating detail I wanted to bring up from Dr. Mathewson's lecture. He mentions the order of the Gospels in the New Testament, you know, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. He says that might actually be connected to a particular view held by an early church father named St. Augustine.

Oh, right. St. Augustine believed that Matthew was written first, then Mark using Matthew as a source, and then finally Luke drawing on both Matthew and Mark. And that's the order we find them in our Bibles.

It is, yeah. It's interesting because even though that order isn't, you know, the dominant scholarly view anymore, it shows us that early Christians were already thinking about these questions like, how do the Gospels relate to each other? Even way back in the 4th and 5th centuries. Right.

It shows that the similarities and differences between these texts have always fascinated people. It's like this ancient puzzle that we're still trying to solve. Exactly.

The synoptic problem is a puzzle that continues to intrigue both scholars and, you know, everyday Bible readers. It reminds us that the Bible is a living document, you know. It's open to multiple interpretations and ongoing exploration.

And it invites us to keep asking questions, to keep digging deeper, to keep searching for understanding. That's what we're doing here, right? Absolutely. And it's a journey that can really enrich our faith and deepen our appreciation for the, you know, the complexities of Scripture.

It's not about finding all the answers. It's about the process of searching, right? Right. It's about wrestling with these texts, engaging with them, allowing them to challenge us and shape us.

I think that's a great point to end on. We've covered so much ground in this deep dive, exploring not only the content of the Gospels, but also the historical and literary context that shaped them. It's been quite the journey so far.

Yeah. Yeah. And I'm excited to see where it takes us in our final part of this deep dive.

Me too. There's still so much to discuss, so many more insights to uncover. We'll be back soon to wrap up this exploration of the Gospels.

So stay tuned. Can't wait. It's amazing.

Even after all this discussion, you know, I'm still struck by how much depth there is to these texts. Yeah. Yeah.

For sure. There's always more to uncover. It's easy to forget that we're actually dealing with four different voices here, you know? Absolutely.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John- they each bring something unique to the story. Right. Yeah.

Like four different witnesses to the same event. Exactly. Each one might notice something different, you know, or have their own take on what happened.

Yeah. Yeah. But when you put all those accounts together, you get this much richer, fuller picture.

Like a puzzle, you know? Right. And that reminds me of what Dr. Mathewson said about looking beyond just the similarities, you know, and really appreciating those unique theological emphases. Yeah.

Yeah. He wants us to ask, what is each writer trying to highlight about Jesus? Right. Exactly.

Like, what message are they trying to get across to their audience? Yeah. For instance, Matthew presents Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, while Luke emphasizes his compassion for the marginalized. And Mark portrays Jesus as this powerful wonder worker, right? Right.

John really dives into the depths of his divine nature. Exactly. So many different facets, you know? It's like we're looking at four different portraits of the same person.

Oh, I love that. Each artist might emphasize different features or capture a different mood, but they all contribute to our understanding of the subject. Right.

Yeah. And it reminds us that there's not just one right way to understand Jesus. Right.

We can appreciate that multifaceted portrait that emerges when we consider all four gospels together. It's like a beautifully arranged bouquet, you know? Each flower adding its own color and fragrance to the whole arrangement. I love that analogy.

And just as we wouldn't want a bouquet with only one type of flower, you know? We shouldn't limit ourselves to just one perspective on Jesus. Exactly. The beauty is in the diversity.

It makes you wonder if those diverse perspectives were intentional, you know? Interesting. Like, did the early church actually see the value in having these different accounts, each with its own focus? I think that's very possible. Yeah.

Maybe they realized that a single narrative couldn't possibly capture the fullness of Jesus, you know? Right. Right. No matter how well written it was.

They might have understood that different communities would connect with different parts of his story. Yeah, for sure. And by having these diverse accounts, they could reach a wider audience, you know? Exactly.

They could provide something for everyone. It's a fascinating thought. And it reminds us that the Bible, you know, it didn't just appear out of thin air.

Right. But it came from a community of faith that wrestled with these texts, you know? Debated them. Yeah.

Debated their meaning, and ultimately decided that they were valuable, that they were a guide for their lives. And for understanding God. That brings us to one of Dr. Mathewson's final points.

He encourages us to see the Gospels as transformative texts. Yeah. Not just historical records or theological treatises, but something that can really shape our lives.

Right. Something that can draw us closer to God. It's not just about reading and analyzing, but encountering Jesus in a personal way.

Right. To grapple with his teachings, you know, be challenged by his example. And be transformed by his love.

It makes me think about those who first met Jesus, you know? Yeah. Those who walked with him. Witnessed his miracles, heard his parables.

Their lives were changed by their interactions with him. Right. They weren't just passive observers.

They were transformed by the experience. And the Gospels give us a way to share in that. To step into their shoes.

To see through their eyes. Yeah. And to be touched and changed by the same Jesus who changed their lives.

It's a reminder that the Gospels are more than just ancient texts. They're living words. They can still speak to us today.

In profound ways. Absolutely. They invite us to engage with the story, to wrestle with it, you know? Yeah.

And to discover that power, that enduring power. The power of love, hope, and redemption. I think we've come full circle here.

We started with these questions about historical reliability, you know? And the challenges of interpreting these ancient texts. And now! But we've ended up recognizing the power they have to shape us and our understanding of Jesus. We really dug deep, you know? Explored the synoptic problem, the historical context, and those unique perspectives.

But it's not just about the intellectual stuff, right? Right. It's about letting these texts touch our hearts. Challenge our assumptions.

Open our minds. And deepen our connection with God. That's what it's all about.

Well said. I think that's a perfect way to wrap up this deep dive into the Gospels. We hope you've enjoyed exploring these texts with us.

Yeah, we hope it's sparked your curiosity to keep digging deeper. Remember, this journey of faith is an ongoing exploration. Keep asking those questions.

Keep seeking. And keep letting those words of Scripture speak to you in new ways. Thanks for joining us.

We'll see you next time.