

THE LITERARY CHARACTER OF THE GOSPELS

“in remembrance of me”

Key question

How are the four Gospels of the New Testament organized?

Key text

Luke 1:1-3

“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word have handed them down to us, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in order.”

Introduction:

The theological context:

1. “**NEW TESTAMENT**” literally means the “New Covenant” in contrast to the “Old Covenant” or Old Testament.
 2. The covenant theme in the Old Testament provides a rich background for the New Testament.
 - a. **GOD’S COVENANT THROUGH ABRAHAM** promised a blessing to the world through Israel. This **PROMISE** is the backbone for much of the Old & New Testament.
 - b. **GOD’S COVENANT THROUGH MOSES** is spoken of as “the Law” or the “old covenant” and served as a temporary tutor preparing Israel for the New Covenant.
 - c. **GOD’S COVENANT THROUGH JESUS** is called **THE NEW COVENANT** and is pictured as the fulfillment (in part) of the **PROMISE** made to Abraham.
 3. The documents of the New Testament bear directly upon the **instrument** (Jesus) and **recipients** (the church) of the **NEW COVENANT**.
 4. The early church told the story of Jesus out of a context of its significance to the spiritual life of the church. The church “**remembered**” (Lk.22:19; I Cor.11:24-25) the story of Jesus as the Jews had remembered the Exodus. This does not mean that the Gospels are not historically accurate but it does mean that the authors were selective in what they recorded and often shaped the story to support the central significance of God’s purpose in Christ.
- A. **The 4 Gospels are the center of the Bible.**
1. The completion of the Old Testament. Lk.24:27 “*And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures*”

2. The foundation of the New Testament. Eph.2:20 *“having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone,”*
3. They make up 46% of the New Testament.
4. They are thematic portraits (not biographies or histories) of Jesus life. Note that only about 50 days of Jesus' ministry are touched upon in the combined Gospels.
5. Each gospel has its own unique purpose and design.
6. The SYNOPTIC (seeing together) Gospels (Matthew, Mark & Luke) emphasize the human/earthly aspects of Jesus. JOHN on the other hand emphasizes the divine/heavenly aspect of Jesus.

B. The gospels are reliable accounts of the historical Jesus.

1. Ancient writers were not, on the whole, either fools or frauds. Given the turmoil and diversity of the first century of the church's existence, it is remarkable that there is such harmony between the four gospel accounts.
2. The gospels give us an authentic picture of life in Palestine at the time of which they purport to write.
3. Hebrew rabbis took great pains to ensure that their sayings were accurately remembered and passed on to their followers.
4. The gospel documents are dated early enough so that if they were inaccurate there would have been eyewitnesses to dispute their authority.
5. If they were propaganda documents created by the early church they seem to be wholly inadequate.
6. While the Gospels do share some common characteristics of ancient Greco-Roman biographies, they also digress from any known pattern of literature and are therefore best understood as unique biographical accounts of Jesus' life and teaching.

C. The gospels compared and contrasted.

	MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE	JOHN
Portraits of Jesus	The Prophesied King	The Obedient Servant	The Perfect Man	The Divine Son
Prominent words	“fulfilled”	“straightway”	“Son of man”	“believe”
Cultures of the original readers	Jews (Jesus, Son of Abraham)	Romans (Action: no genealogy)	Greeks (Jesus, Son of Adam)	Church (Jesus, Son of God)
Outlook and style of the writers	Teaching	Sermon	Literature	Theology
Outstanding sections	Sermons	Miracles	Parables	Doctrines

Prominent ideas	Law	Power	Grace	Glory
Broad division	“Synoptic Gospels” – stressing the humanity of Christ from the outward, earthly side.		“Fourth Gospel” – stressing the deity of Christ from the inward, heavenly side.	

D. **MATTHEW**

1. Its distinctives indicate that it is written for a **Jewish** audience.
 - a. Fulfillment of Old Testament scriptures emphasized.
 - b. The Law is often mentioned.
 - c. The genealogy of Jesus goes back to Abraham.
 - d. Eschatology is important.
 - e. There is an emphasis upon symbolic numbers like #3,5,7,14 & etc.
 - f. Special inclusion of Gentiles is featured.
 - g. Matthew uses more O.T. quotations and allusions (130) than any other book.
2. The five fold structure of Matthew

"It came to pass that when Jesus had finished these sayings" 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1

1. **THE NEW LAW**
Narrative 3-4
Teaching 5-7
2. **CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP**
Narrative 8:1-9:34
Teaching 9:35-10:42
3. **THE MEANING OF THE KINGDOM**
Narrative 11-12
Teaching 13:1-52
4. **THE CHURCH**
Narrative 13:53-17:27
Teaching 18
5. **JUDGMENT**
Narrative 19-22
Teaching 23-25

E. **MARK**

1. It is written for a **Roman** audience by John Mark (recording Peter's recollections).
 - a. Very few O.T. quotations are used.
 - b. Aramaic words that are used are interpreted. i.e., 3:17
 - c. Jewish customs are explained. i.e., 7:3-4
 - d. There is no mention of Jewish Law.
 - e. Latin words are present. i.e., 5:9
 - f. The word "*immediately*" or "*straightway*" is prominent.
2. **Mk.10:45** can be seen as an outline of the book. *"For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many."*
3. Its emphasis.

- a. Jesus' actions (miracles) rather than His words are emphasized.
 - b. Jesus' humanity is emphasized - anger, inability to perform miracles when faith is not present, physical suffering. This was to correct the tendency in the early church to downplay His humanity.
4. The book probably ends at 16:8. What follows does not have good manuscript support.

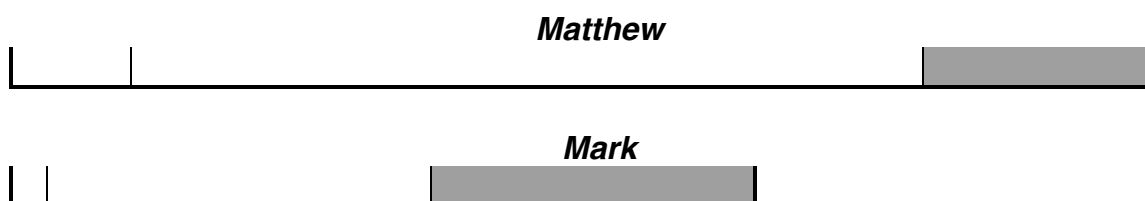
F. LUKE

1. It is the first of a two volume history of early Christianity written for a **Greek** audience by Luke the physician (Paul's companion)
 - a. It contains the most refined Greek in the N.T.
 - b. It shows little interest in fulfilled prophecy.
 - c. Jesus' genealogy goes back to Adam.
 - d. It is careful to date Jesus' career by secular events. *"In the days of Herod"*
 - e. This is the longest book in the N.T.
2. Its emphasis:
 - a. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is a major theme.
 - b. Parables about people are prominent.
 - c. The outcasts of society (Gentiles, women, & Samaritans) are featured.
 - d. Prayer is emphasized.
 - e. It features the compassion of Jesus.

G. JOHN

1. It is written to encourage the **church** to trust Christ (20:30-31 *"Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."*)
2. Its emphasis:
 - a. It has the simplest Greek.
 - b. It tends to paraphrase Jesus' teaching.
 - c. It often emphasizes signs and symbols like "foot washing".
 - d. It gives a theological explanation to Jesus' words and works.
 - e. It contains many long discourses by Jesus.
 - f. It presents Jesus as the Son of God.
3. Key words in John - *word, truth, witness, light, darkness, world, love, belief, knowledge, eternal life.*

H. The gospels place an inordinate amount of attention on the crucifixion and resurrection.



Luke

John

I. Hints for interpreting the Gospels.

1. Compare parallel passages.

Matt.28:19-20 “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Mk.16:15-18 “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it shall not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

Lk.24:46-49 “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that **repentance for forgiveness of sins** should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth **the promise of My Father** upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are **clothed with power from on high**.”

Jn.20:21-23 “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you. And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive **the Holy Spirit**. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.’”

Acts 1:8 “but you shall receive **power** when **the Holy Spirit** has come upon you; and you shall be My **witnesses** both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

2. Respect each author’s style and viewpoint in dealing with apparent discrepancies.

a. The triumphal entry - an example of styles.

Matt.21:4 “Now this took place **that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled**, saying, ‘Say to the daughter of Zion, behold your king is coming to you, gentle, and mounted upon a donkey, even upon a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’”

Lk.19:37 “And as He was now approaching, near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began **to praise God joyfully** with a loud voice for all the miracles which they had seen,”

Jn.12:16 “These things His disciples **did not understand at the first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered** that these things were written of Him, and that they had done these things to Him.”

b. The Genealogies of Christ in Matthew & Luke.

1) Matthew gives **Joseph’s** real parentage.

Note: This would be expected as Matthew would be concerned with the LEGAL descent of Jesus, which would be through Joseph. Matthew is concerned with linking Jesus to the promise of Abraham, the Kingdom of David, and the plight of Israel. He divides the genealogy into units of 14 names between Abraham, David, the Babylonian captivity, and Jesus.

2) Luke gives **Mary's** real parentage.

Note: Joseph's name appears without the article "*being supposedly son of Joseph,*" vs. 23, unlike all the other names in the list.

3. Respect the relationship of "Jesus' teaching" as it relates to the Old and New Covenants.

a. **Matt.6:14-15** "*For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.*"

(compare **Eph.4:32** "*And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.*")

b. **Matt.5:17** "*Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.*" (What does "fulfill" mean in this text?)

(compare **II Cor.3:6** "... *who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*")

The synoptic problem

A. **Stated:** How do we explain the differences and similarities between Matthew, Mark, and Luke? Were they in any way dependent upon one another or common sources? If so, how?

B. The Traditional view:

1. The Gospels appear in the order in which they were probably written, though this is insignificant.
2. The gospels are basically parallel accounts representing the work of the authors under the influence of the Holy Spirit, their own personal witness and any literary or oral fragments that may have been at their disposal. Lk.1:1-4; Acts 20:35; Jn.16:13; 14:26.
3. The differing details in the gospel accounts are seen not as contradictions. They are to be explained as distinctive in style, viewpoint, or commentary on the part of the individual writers.

C. Traditional presuppositions:

1. The record is legitimate and authentic as it claims to be.
2. Ancient traditions surrounding the origin of these records agree with the internal evidence of the gospels themselves and are probably valid.
3. The New Testament Church recognized that these records were authoritative and inspired soon after their circulation.
4. Reason must be subject to revelation at some point. Deut.29:29; Prov.25:2

D. The presuppositions of radical higher critical study:

1. There has got to be a historical, sociological, literary or scientific explanation for everything.
2. Supernatural inspiration is not an alternative.

3. Mark is short and simple, therefore it must be prior to and expanded by Matthew and Luke.
4. Gospels are the products of human creativity and or ancient culture.

E. **Different schools of higher critical study (tradition criticism) compared.** Note: These methods are not without value but are problematic for evangelical Christians only in their radical forms.

	Source Criticism	Form Criticism	Redaction Criticism	Deconstructive Criticism
Emphasis	Literary sources behind the four gospels – Q, Mark, L, M.	Oral tradition prior to written gospels	Creative work of the individual human authors in putting material together.	Creative impression of the reader is the key to relevance.
Distinctives	The similarities and differences in the Synoptics are to be explained by source references.	The setting in life is most important in understanding the meaning of the text.	Each author has a point to make and modifies his sources to do so.	Historical data is insignificant, only the impression of the reader counts.

1. **Source Criticism** – literary documents (sources) were used by the Synoptic gospels explaining why they contain similarities and differences.
 - a. Most source critics identify Mark and an unknown document containing the sayings of Jesus -“Q”(from the German word *Quelle* meaning “source”) composed between 30-65 C.E. as sources for Matthew and Luke.
 1. It should be noted that the mysterious document “Q” being prior to the canonical gospels is (in the minds of the critics) the more authoritative source of the historical Jesus.
 2. Because “Q” does not emphasize the passion of Christ it is assumed that the passion emphasis was the creative addition of the early church.
 3. It is suggested that the people of “Q” were Jesus people but not Christians. They did not believe that Jesus was God or that he rose from the dead.
 4. Historical evidence for the existence of “Q” does not exist and more conservative scholars understandably question its existence.
 - b. It is assumed that Mark was the first gospel written for the following reasons:
 1. The brevity of Mark – it is more likely that the other gospels expanded Mark’s material.
 2. The verbal agreement and order of events (of Matthew and Luke) with Mark does not exist between Matthew and Luke.
 3. Mark’s style (grammar) and theology is more primitive.
 4. “Q” appears in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark.
 5. Doublets in Matthew and Luke could have come from quoting Mark and “Q”.
- Note:** It should be observed that the data and reasoning for the priority of Mark is not as clear as one would like and the rational seems quite subjective.

2. **Form Criticism** – literary elements describing Jesus’ acts and words were orally circulated and shaped into distinct forms by theological and social needs in the early church. The following characteristics can be seen in most form critical work.
 - a. The stories and sayings of Jesus circulated in small independent units.
 - b. These stories followed the pattern of other folk and religious tales.
 - c. Standardization of forms was tied to certain life situations in the early church.
 - d. There was little distinction between the teaching of the historical Jesus and the Jesus who spoke prophetically through the early church.
 - e. Stories tended to be embellished and lengthened with time. (Priority of Mark).
 - f. Information that could not be accounted for through the Jewish culture of the time or the theology of the early church was most authentically from Jesus.
3. **Redaction Criticism** -
 - a. Redaction critics see the redactor (author) using tradition (oral or written) as a basis for his shaping and modifying into the form of the gospels that we have today.
 - b. This can be seen in several areas.
 1. They are selective in what material they choose to include or exclude.
 2. They are creative in the way they arrange the material.
 3. They provide transitions between blocks of material that give us insight into their purpose.
 4. They often alter the wording and content to fit their purpose.
4. **New Literary (Redaction) Criticism** -
 - a. This approach sees little value in the intent of the author or the historical basis of the text.
 - b. What matters is the impression or impact the text has on the present reader. The text is like an inkblot Rorschach test where the meaning is totally subjective.
 - c. It is assumed that there are common “deep structures” in all literature that communicate across culture and time to the soul of the readers.

The Point

Our understanding of the Gospels is aided by a respect for the literary nature of each Gospel.

Response

Head

I am to understand that:

The Gospels are written by inspired men using language and styles that are common to all literature.

Heart

I am to believe that:

I expect to encounter the Jesus of history as I allow each Gospel's message to impact my life.

Hands

I am to behave by:

I must be a diligent student of the literary structure of each Gospel if I am to fully appreciate its message.