Dr. Robert Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Lecture #8
© 2013, Dr. Robert C. Newman

Literary Aspects of the Synoptics

Introduction

We’re here in our Synoptic Gospels course. We’ve looked at 1) historical Jesus; 2) the Jewish background to the New Testament, particularly the Gospels; 3) introduction to exegesis and the narrative genre, and a sample of that in Matthew 2—visit of the Wise Men. We’ve looked at section 4) authorship and date of the Synoptics, which we also looked at the characteristics of the Synoptics; and we just finished section 5) the genre parables and exegeting them, and looked at the Jesus parable in Matthew 22:1-14; the Marriage Banquet.

We want to turn now to number six in our course—six out of planned twelve topics—and that is the Gospels as literary works. That is, thinking in terms of: what can we learn from the study of literature about how the Gospels function in that way? So, 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? A number of different suggestions have been made in that direction. We’re going to look at four of them here, and that is: biography, propaganda, dramatic history, and collections of stories. So that’s the direction we want to go.

Biographical Form

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 biography in the modern, scholarly sense. They weren’t written to be biographies in the modern scholarly sense. They weren’t written by, what is typically now viewed as, the ideal, uninvolved observer with a detached attitude. Though lots of modern scholarly biographies are not
written by detached attitude either, if you look at them; some perhaps praise items, but perhaps more frequently [they are] a way to undercut or dump on somebody. They’re not trying to give all the important dates and facts. A biographer would usually be expected to try and give all the important information that could be known about the person: when he was born, and what we know about his childhood, and all that sort of thing. It does not appear that the Gospel writers are doing that. The biographies, some of them 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 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 exhortation of some sort. The author was intending that you should imitate this particular person; or, if he was doing perhaps a series of biographies, where there was 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 a historical person, and we can certainly say that’s the purpose of the 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.

This is what the New Testament does, and what the Gospels are doing. In fact, John explicitly tells us at the end of his Gospel that there’s a lot more that could be said. But, this has been said, and this is its purpose that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah and that you might have life through his name. There is some resemblance in the Gospels to ancient biographies about Socrates, about the Greek philosopher Epictetus, (second century AD), and about a religious guru we might say Apollonius of Tyana, 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 unusual as ancient popular biographies go.

I’m still inclined to say that the genre—biography—is, in fact, the closest thing we have in antiquity to these particular Gospels.

**Propaganda Form**

Some have suggested that the Gospels are propaganda; which, of course, has a very negative connotation, P.R. (public relations) also has negative connotations of 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 kind of labels would suggest.

Propaganda, as the name implies, seeks to propagate certain ideas or attitudes, but it is now commonly a dirty word because it’s so often involved 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.

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 they are different kinds of reactions, etc. Doubtless, if a person’s already a convinced Christian, they can see that these are bad reactions to Jesus, and these [others] are good reactions. 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 a response of just getting you interested in him [Jesus] or admiring him, though these are certainly involved. Primarily, what they’re trying to evoke is a response of faith or trust in Jesus. They aren’t really doing that primarily, but what we think of as an altar call, or something of that sort, which you, of course, will see something of that sort in some of
Steven’s speech; well, maybe not Steven’s, but [in] Peter’s speech in the Acts, and Paul’s speech [it] is there.

   The Gospel writers actually are surprising in that they restrain their post-Easter faith in telling the story. So they don’t already hint that Jesus is raised from the dead before this, except that Jesus predicts that in a couple places, but He predicts that along with his death in that, and the disciples really kind of aren’t ready to hear that whole package. 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 a trust in Jesus, but they’re not doing it in the way that we think of propaganda doing that.

   **Dramatic History Form**

   A third suggestion for the literary form of the Gospels is dramatic history. The Gospels are telling a dramatic story of the persons, actions and impact of Jesus, who is a real figure in history. They do in some ways look more like plays 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. 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 Saint Joan.”

   Well, one of the characteristics of dramatic history, Fry says, is 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, and it’s intended to get them involved. But a dramatic history needs to cover a lot of ground in a little bit of space, so condensation is very important to attract attention, to hold attention, etc. That, I think, is significant in the Gospels as well; partly, I suspect, for this very reason, and partly because books were expensive in antiquity.
Although Josephus uses seven volumes for his *War of the Jews* (Jewish War), and 20 volumes for his *Antiquities*, and those volumes would be around the size of a Gospel, the size of a standard papyrus roll, he’s writing to a well-to-do audience. 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, to attract and maintain attention, and part of it for these financial reasons.

**Representative People**

The key practice in dramatic history is to use representative, or sample persons. So this person interacted with all sorts of people: [so] pick a few sample ones of different sorts, with sample followers, sample opponents, and that sort of thing, to use a representative for sample incidences. You’re covering the person’s life, but you can’t cover the detail of a life; it’s too complicated, but the purpose then of these representative person’s incidence 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.

**Collections of Stories Genre**

A fourth suggestion is that the collections are the genre, if you like, collections of stories. You can find throughout history places where you have collections of stories of one sort or another. Stories about Robin Hood, or stories about George Washington, or stories about Abraham Lincoln, etc. And some of these are 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, speeches and sayings of Jesus allow the Gospels to function in a way that a biography, particularly one that tries to uniformly cover the person’s life, can’t do so well. For instance, by using a collection of stories in putting 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 allow 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 in work, [and] you explain and celebrate what he’s done; and there’s actually not a whole lot of either explaining or celebrating; that’s again a more evaluative sort of thing, and there’s not a lot of that.

You can use narrative rather easily than a collection of stories to show Jesus’ actions, Jesus words, the response of others to him, and you can actually see [this] 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, and 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 being compiled. Form 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 eye witnesses as they went from place to place as separate anecdotes, but they knew how they went together, and that information was never lost.

**Narrative Collections**

We find various categories of brief narratives, and you remember Ryken’s list above where we looked at all the different kinds of narratives: encounter narratives, and passion narratives, and birth narratives, and controversy narratives, and things of that sort [of thing]. Using a collection of stories allows you, in some of them, to sketch events, and in other ones to detail a particular event [that] allows you to have dialogues, alternating with discourse where just Jesus is speaking and 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 the blind,” “Pay back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

Others are extended discourses, like the Sermon on the Mount or the Olivet Discourse. 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.

**Concluding Statements on Different Form Interpretations**

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 biography. They function a little bit differently, even probably, than ancient biographies in having this sort of story feature to them of the individual incidents. So you will see some of that in ancient biographies, and the Gospels are seeking to get people to believe in Jesus, but otherwise steer clear of the general sort of things that we see in propaganda. They do resemble in some ways dramatic histories where you are showing and allowing a person to grasp in a short period of time the drama of what is going on in Jesus’ coming and such.

**Gospel Techniques**

We turn to think a little 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 writer’s techniques is restraint and objectivity. The Gospels are unusual and unlike even most ancient biographies in this: and that is 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 technique they use in this direction is the selection of an incident. So by emphasizing certain incidents and not others, they can draw your attention to what Jesus claimed and how people reacted to it, and things of that sort.
Secondly, we have concise, compressed accounts in the Synoptic Gospels especially. That is, even in contrast to the Gospel of John, mostly incidents are a single scene 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 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 appearance of a person with only twenty lines or so.

Whereas, if you were trying to make—which shall we say—a graphic of it, you might need a thousand pixels or something. So the Gospel writers use specific incidents: short vivid descriptions and direct discourses. The person speaks [whether it be] the opponent or the person seeking healing; or someone speaks instead of the writer spending some time trying to characterize who it is; [, but] occasionally he does do that. So there is 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 selection of materials. The authors apparently have a broad range of incidents they could have selected from. 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 particular item in that incident: whether he chooses
to use dialogue or some kind of summary statement, and what expectations he raises in
the readers mind. So there is a selection of materials. You remember again: John tells us,
you know, “Jesus did all sorts of things but these have been chosen, selected, etc., that
you may know….”

A fifth technique is 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, it
helps keep the attention of the listeners.

A sixth technique is sampling. The Gospel writers apparently give 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 over various
occasions. So some of the techniques here—and a lot of this goes back to Leyland
Ryken—restraint and objectivity, concise compressed accounts, very concrete narration,
selection of materials, and variety sampling.

**Jesus’ Speeches**

We’ll say a few words about Jesus’ speeches; [that is], some of the typical
features of Jesus speaking as they show up in the Gospels. Ryken, I think again, says
Jesus speeches are characterized by being aphoristic, poetic, patterned, subversive, a
fusion of genres, and structured. Let’s kind of walk through those kind of quickly, and
think a little bit about that.

*Aphoristic: you may not be familiar with that term; it means “short,” if you like.
Jesus’ words are typically brief, almost like modern sound bites. That struck me. I gave a
talk once on sound-bite theology: how Jesus was able to convey important theological
concepts in single sentence. Jesus’ words are typically, brief almost like modern sound
bites, but Jesus’ words are made memorable by structure and word play. You get a lot of
sound bites today watching TV news, or something of that sort, but a lot of it you have
forgotten about a day after they were said. Jesus’ technique is to use structure; so you’ve
got parallelism and various things like that, hyperbole and things like that. So word play
of some sort allows us to remember some of Jesus’ sayings. Jesus’ words are often
proverb-like: “Do not judge, or you too will be judged”; or “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
was metric, we haven’t gotten a good handle on what the meter is. Jesus often uses
Hebrew parallelism. He uses concrete images, and that kind of imagery [is] of something
very specific rather than something very abstract, which 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.” It kind of 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 may call fake righteousness, or cheap grace, or
something of that sort. He balances the lines, and that again comes back to parallelism of
some sort. Here is an example 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 Ryken here, of Jesus’ speeches is they are often
subversive. 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? It is 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,” In the age of self-assertion, meekness generally does not go very far. And yet Jesus says, “It is 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 were gentle will inherit the earth.” It is not the powerful and the assertive [who] are the ones who will inherit the earth. So the way that society in general thinks of getting ahead, whether it be in modern societies or ancient societies, are 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—which characterize some of the Psalms. There are nine of those at the beginning. They give some character sketches; remember that of 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 by the guy with the log in his eye. He uses lyric type things: “You are the light of the world.” Parable: wise and foolish builders; and prayer: 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 is no society like this on earth, although, I think Jesus’ hint is: this is what my followers should seek to produce—a society like this. It’s an inaugural speech, 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. 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. They are 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 in a couple of things, one of which was about Jesus. You got the 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 [sayings] are too organized—there’s a genius in their organization; there’s a genius in their content, etc. and so, are we going to replace Jesus; who is the most likely candidate by some unknown geniuses in history of the early church in the first century for that matter? I think not.

Highly artistic, single themes, or threefold example, often are part of the structure, if you like, of Jesus’ speeches. Here’s what Ryken says in *Words of Life*, pg. 120: “The artistry of the design is apparent. There’s no reason the sermon as it stands could not be exactly the form of Jesus’ longer sermons took.” So, I think he has something of the same 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*, and then that was expanded to the whole Bible in *Words of Delight*. So it’s got an Old Testament section, and then this *Words of Life* was incorporated in it. Also Ryken was one of the major editors of the Inter-Varsity Press reference work called the *Dictionary [of] Biblical Imagery*, and that has got some very helpful material in it as well.

**Conclusion and Preview**

Well, I think that finishes up what we want to try and cover for today. So we now have worked our way through six of our twelve sections of our Synoptic Gospel course, and we have six more to go. Let me just sketch those for you here, and then we’ll quit. We’ve already looked at historical Jesus, Jewish background, introduction [to] exegesis, and the narrative genre, authorship, and the date of the Synoptics, including their characterizations, exegesis of parables, and the Gospels as literary works.

Here in the future, Lord willing, we’ll look at the Synoptic Problem. What’s the relationship between Matthew, Mark, and Luke; the geography of Palestine and of
Jerusalem; the genre of miracle accounts and how to exegete them, and the theology of the Synoptics. We will think of the biblical theology of the Synoptics, thinking how the Synoptics structure their theology; what kind of terminology do you use; what’s their emphasis, if you like. Then how to interpret controversy accounts. Then finally, we will wind up with form criticism, and redaction criticism. Thank you very much.