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# INTERPRETING THE GOSPELS

Devon H. Wiens\*

## WHAT ARE THE GOSPELS?

A meaningful study of the NT Gospels entails a consideration of the question of definition. Essentially, what are the Gospels? Are they biographies? Are they historical documents of the Life of Christ designed to recapitulate the story of Jesus' life and teachings to ensure the preservation of the record for generations removed from the period in which Jesus lived? After all, Justin Martyr, writing in the second century, refers to them as the "memoirs of the apostles."

The question of definition is bound up with the question of their distinctiveness as a literary genre. It has become a commonplace, since K. L. Schmidt's reply to Clyde Votaw,<sup>1</sup> to maintain that the Gospels were unique productions, not precisely matched by any other literature from the Hellenistic world. This may, in the main, still be adhered to, though the intervening years have witnessed the rediscovery of Gnostic Gospels which approximate, in some respects, the NT Gospels. That is to say, the writings of the evangelists differ, for example, from the histories of Josephus, Tacitus, Livy, and Suetonius in that there is scarcely any concern with the political context in which Jesus lived and taught. Again, they differ from Plutarch's *Lives of Famous Men* in that there is little intention to explore personal traits and development of character.

The preceding implies that the evangelists would have found no ready literary container into which to pour the new wine of the message about Jesus and thus were inspired to compose a new medium to accommodate this message. Our question remains, What is the nature of that medium?

## ARE THE GOSPELS BIOGRAPHIES?

It can be readily seen, to begin with, that the Gospels are biographies in only a highly qualified sense. There is some interest in recounting the life and times of Jesus the Messiah (Luke perhaps approaches this most closely). But, this is all very limited; we must have

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recourse to other contemporary sources to ascertain the nature of the times, culturally and politically. In contrast with a modern biography such as Robert Payne's *The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler*, there is relatively little concern with an analysis of mental and psychological development, environmental and childhood factors which bore upon Jesus' personality, and certainly not with an evaluation of the subject's strengths and weaknesses.

Furthermore, from the standpoint of chronology, we have both a comparative unconcern with exact time-sequence (particularly in Mark's pioneering record) and a greatly compressed and selective coverage of events. Martin Kähler's description of Mark as a "passion narrative with an extended introduction" has by now become proverbial. Mark, of course, fills forty percent of his Gospel in reporting the events of Passion Week, though he may have compressed various events to fit into one week's time.

The principle of selectivity is clearly alluded to in the conclusion of the Fourth Gospel: "Jesus did many other things, so many that, if a detailed account of them were written down, I do not think that the world itself would be able to hold the books that would have to be written" (21:25 Barclay). Accordingly, what one has is a concentration upon a few sample incidents and teachings from the life of Jesus with large sections of that life omitted. For instance, the Synoptics only hint at the early Judean ministry or the extended Upper Room Discourse, which John reports. Again, Mark, at the outset, cuts right into the middle period of Jesus' ministry; he provides little detail on the possibly lengthy stay in the Syro-Phoenician area and compacts the events of the journey to Jerusalem in a way that the other Synoptics (particularly Luke) do not. Finally, none of the evangelists display much interest in transmitting information about the late infancy, childhood, and early manhood (the so-called "silent years") of Jesus' life. This was unacceptable for some early Christians who produced a host of apocryphal gospels in the second and third centuries. All three categories of these (Infancy, Passion, Sayings) purport to provide information not to be found in the canonical accounts (or to set the record straight!).

Clearly, since huge "lacunae" (as we who come much later understand this) exist in the material, one can hardly tag these writings biographies in the modern sense of the term. This does not mean that the evangelists have lamentably failed. It means rather that their intentions were not strictly biographical in nature. To this we turn next.

## THE GOSPELS AS HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS AND / OR THEOLOGICAL PROCLAMATIONS

We can get light on the intention of the Gospel-writers from a look at the internal evidence. Let us present a few examples in parallel columns:

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### *Luke's Preface (1:1-4)*

“There have been many who attempted the task of drawing up an account of the events on which our faith is based. They have transmitted the story in the form in which it was handed down to us by those who were the original eye-witnesses of the events, and who were given the task of spreading the Christian message. I, too, therefore, have made up my mind to carry out a careful investigation of the history of all these events, and to write to you, Theophilus, your Excellency, an orderly account of them, because I want you to have in your mind a full and reliable knowledge of the things about which you may well have been misinformed” (Barclay).

### *John 20:30, 31*

“Jesus did many other things in the presence of his disciples in which the power of God was demonstrated in action, but they are not written in this book. *This book was written to make you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that your belief may bring you life through his name.*”

Cf. John 21:24: “It is this disciple who guarantees the truth of these facts, and who has written the story of them, and we know that his evidence is true” (Barclay).

On the basis of these two discrete statements of intention, it becomes clear that the stated purpose for writing the Gospels (at least two of them) comprised both historical and theological facets.

It is apparent, first of all, that there is a concern with historical truth. Inasmuch as there were those throughout the Empire who wished to know something of the facts of the case and who might never gaze upon one of the apostles or prophets, a written synopsis of the vital data would enhance awareness, especially since numerous copies of such a writing would soon be made.

On another level, however, it is equally clear that the evangelists are hardly court stenographers attempting to report verbatim everything that was said and done. This would tend to make of them detached observers, which they hardly were! For the fact is that they direct faith not primarily to a person of the past in the way that Arrian directed attention to the details of Epictetus' teachings or that Xenophon reminded his contemporaries of the happenings surrounding Socrates, but instead they witness to a *living* contemporary, Jesus Christ. As James Denny put it long ago, “No apostle, no NT writer, ever remembered Christ.”

Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John are primarily interested in theological truth. The facts of history, firmly imbedded in the past though they be, are not allowed to remain brute facts but are interpreted theologically.

This duality of intention has at least two important implications:

The historical basis for the theological assertions which the evangelists make is crucial in itself, in principle, in view of a primitive de-historicizing tendency on the part of assorted mystics, Gnostics (or proto-Gnostics) and super-spiritual types in general. It may be especially true of John that he seeks to counter this docetic tendency by insisting on the "flesh-and-blood" character of the Christ-event. It may also explain the long, detailed, and realistic manner in which the Passion is described. Though this solicitude for the historical does not extend to a desire to recount precise chronological and geographical detail, it does involve more than the mere "thatness" (Bultmann's *Dass*), the mere historicity, of the Christ-event. It involves also a substantial correctness of the history of that event (content, if you will).<sup>2</sup>

Historical reminiscence in itself, however, would be inadequate to change the reader's angle of vision and, consequently, his life. Therefore, the complementary consideration was, What is the theological significance of the works and words of Jesus? This certainly comes to the fore in John's usage of the term *sign*, which he utilizes for Jesus' mighty acts and wonders. John's purpose is not only to relate what actually occurred in the restoration of the blind man (ch. 9), for instance, but to relate what the significance of this was for the "blind" Jewish leaders who observed this and for his readers who were awakening to the realization of Jesus' true identity and what he expected of them.

In the same way Mark arranges his material around the incident of the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-26) to point to the disciples' dawning spiritual sight as to who Jesus really is. This is climaxed by Peter's affirmation at Caesarea Philippi (8:29). In this way, the blind man also becomes every reader, who is being asked to consider the claim of Jesus: "Who do you say that I am?"

Thus, a distinction must be drawn between the Gospels as historical (*Historie*) and as historic (*Geschichte*). They do report the historical, the factual, but only insofar as this illustrates the *historic* importance, the potentialities of meaning which can be released from the historical actualities of Jesus' life. Käsemann<sup>3</sup> helps us here by distinguishing between the "once" / "once upon a time" (*einmal*) quality of the Christ-event and the "once-for-all" (*ein für alle*) significance of that event, given the present reality of the Christ of faith.

I hope that this discussion has aided in sharpening our definition of the term "Gospel". It may now be seen that the Gospels are best thought of as kerygmatic pieces, sermons, designed to convey the cruciality of Jesus' life and teachings for the reader. To come at this in a different way we point out that Kerygma in the NT encompasses both *content* and *act*. The evangelists are engaged in the act of proclaiming

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the existential meaning of Christ for faith, but they assume a body of historical truth, a content, which is that being proclaimed.

Perhaps a reference to the world of art would help in describing these "witness documents." One might refer to them as paintings, in which the purpose is to portray the real essence of the subject by stressing certain features and by ignoring or minimizing others, rather than as photographs, which tend to capture the exact likeness of the subject as it is, but without any necessary involvement on the part of the photographer in the subject being portrayed.

Nonetheless, these portraits of Jesus are not abstractions, the result pure and simple of the evangelists' (or the early church's) impressions of Jesus. They embody a realistic quality, telling the story as it happened, but going on to answer the questions as to why it happened.

A look at the individual pericopes within the Gospels further confirms this intention of the writings as a whole. For the Gospels comprise individual passages which proclaim the kerygma *in nuce*. These numerous, discrete "vignettes" present the Jesus of history as one whose word and action confront the reader. Thus, the story of the Stilling of the Storm (Mk. 4:35-41 and parallels) is intended to reveal something of Jesus' person and purpose. He subdues the powers of chaos, as in the primeval accounts of creation, and thus participates in the Divine work. He is portrayed as the Shalom-bringer, in both an inward and an outward sense, as he calms both the lake and the disciples. The twelve typify the Church,<sup>4</sup> which in its sufferings for Jesus' sake (as was most certainly the case for Mark's Roman readers) desperately needs to hear the word of serenity.

Thus the Gospels as a whole consist of reports of "disclosure situations," to use Ian Ramsey's term. "They (the Gospels) declare that in this segment of human history God came especially close to men and erected certain 'disclosure situations' in which his saving purpose and loving design for the world were revealed to men."<sup>5</sup>

In concluding this discussion of the Gospels as historical documents and as theological proclamations, it would be well to point out a fallacy that seems to pervade the thinking of many. Because the evangelists were theologically motivated is no grounds for arguing that the kerygma has so beclouded the facts of the historical life of Jesus that these are irrecoverable or even that they have been so dramatically altered as to distort the *Sitz im Leben Jesu*. To imply, as some do, that the evangelists were unable to transmit an objective and reliable account of Jesus' life because they wrote from a subjective stance of faith is to misunderstand the nature of any history-writing enterprise. In general, it may be asked whether there is any writing of history which is not "subjective." In this specific case, non-believers would not have been any less subjective, if accounts had been composed by them. The truth of the matter is that no

such accounts exist; only very sketchy bits of testimony are extant. This means that no one, besides the canonical Gospel-writers, had become *subjectively* interested in the life of Jesus to the extent of producing such a report. So, the alternatives obviously were either subjective accounts or no accounts. The real question is whether the evangelists' subjectivity has so obscured the historical data that the resulting accounts cannot be taken as reliable. That this happened we have no reason to suspect, in the case of the Gospels.

## GOSPELS CRITICISM

It will be apparent that much of what has been said so far is dependent upon the modern critical study of the Gospels. It seems to this writer that various methodologies, such as Source-, Form-, and Redaction-Criticism have paved the way to a more accurate understanding of the nature and intention of the Gospels.

In a general way, is it permissible to say that the use of critical methodology *can* be a companion to that attitude of faith which sees in the Gospels the very Word of God? I should like to submit, by way of a general conviction, that biblical criticism, engaged in with an attitude of humility before the text and the Lord of the text, may be understood as the investigation of the ways of the Holy Spirit in providing and preserving a written account of Jesus' life and teachings just as "natural" science traces the workings of the Spirit in the creation and preservation of the physical universe.

For one particular application of this view I turn to the "two-source theory of Gospel origins (or any other wrinkle of this which is currently in vogue) and suggest that it *can* represent the attempt to show how the Holy Spirit inspired Mark to write the first in a series of a new literary genre. Subsequently, He led Matthew and Luke to modify, to complement, expand upon, and / or delete from Mark's account in such a way that the questions and needs of still other communities of faith would be met. After all, Luke implies in his preface that he is dependent upon previous collections of material. Perhaps two of these were Mark and the so-called "Q," the sayings of Jesus source.

One ramification of this theory is that the stamp of authenticity was being placed upon the earlier elements of the Gospel tradition. This common fund of material was what the evangelists drew upon in their own proclamations of Jesus. God would hardly have had them make use of material which was unreliable or inauthentic. Thus we get an unexpected dividend from this critical theory: the approbation of Mark by Matthew and Luke. The fact that both of them have no hesitation whatsoever in taking over vast parts of Mark means that we have an external confirmation of the value and integrity of Mark.

Furthermore, when one remembers that one of the lasting con-

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tributions of form-critical study was the demonstration that the earliest portions of the Markan material (and, indeed, the oral sources which Mark ostensibly utilized) already reflect a supernatural Jesus and not a purely human Jesus (as the liberals were wont to say), one clearly has reason to be grateful for this research. For the picture which constantly emerges is that of faith in Jesus as the divine Christ, a picture which is consistently and sharply in focus from the earliest reaches to the finished touches of the four-fold Gospel tradition.

Finally, we may point to the gains which have accrued to us as a result of the labors of the redaction critics. Redaction criticism as a method must be distinguished from some of the unwarranted inferences drawn from it by some of the pioneers in the field, such as Willi Marxsen and Hans Conzelmann. In fact, a scholar such as William Lane, whose evangelical credentials are impeccable, makes free use of the method; and his monumental commentary on Mark is essentially based on the redaction-critical approach.

This approach, to say the least, bids us take seriously the purposes of the evangelists in interpreting the Jesus-tradition in such a way that their readers could be directly responsive. Indeed, to come at this theologically, we may say that the Holy Spirit was communicating the truth of Jesus Christ through each evangelist, but in such a way that the particularity of the various audiences was respected. To accomplish that tailoring of the material which was necessary to meet the reader where he was, the evangelists, consciously aware of their theological task, were led to structure, arrange, and shape the material.

Among the benefits which have been reaped from the use of this method<sup>6</sup> is the fact that we know more about the life-situations in the early church which stimulated and partly shaped the writing of the Gospels. Also, we have been taught to take seriously the kerygmatic intention of the individual Gospel-writer, and we have learned not to rush into a frenzied effort to harmonize away all the variations of detail. For, these very variations become significant in elaborating the theological thrust of the writer. This need to allow the individual evangelists to speak for themselves should strike a responsive chord in the case of those who have always affirmed that divine inspiration did not nullify the human personality of the writers of Scripture but, rather, served to heighten the powers of that personality in such a way that the full-orbed, rich diversity of the Gospel of Christ might stand forth in bold relief.

## NOTES

1. See Votaw, Clyde Weber, *The Gospels and Contemporary Biographies in the Greco-Roman World* (Fortress Facet Books, 1970). For Schmidt, see his "Die Stellung der Evangelien in der allgemeinen Literaturgeschichte," in Hans Schmidt (ed.), *EUCHARISTION* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1923).
2. Heinz Zahrnt disputes the possibility that there can be discussion of historical fact without content (*The Historical Jesus* (London: Collins), 1963, p. 93).
3. Ernst Käsemann, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus" in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM, 1964), pp. 30-31.
4. This impression is bolstered by the fact that a ship was used as a symbol for the Church in early Christian art. It should be added that merely because the twelve 'typify' the Church, this does not detract from their original historicity as twelve actual persons who really witnessed the supernatural activity on the lake.
5. Ralph Martin. *New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students* (Eerdmans, 1975), Vol. I, p. 44. See also Alan Richardson, *History Sacred and Profane* (London: SCM, 1964), pp. 223-227, for a treatment of this concept.
6. Lane suggests several "positive contributions" of the method (*The Gospel According to Mark* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 6. He further avers: "There is no necessary reason why redaction criticism should lead to the de-historicizing of the New Testament Gospel. . . While the theological significance of the historical facts must not be denied, it must also be maintained that their theological meaning is dependent upon their historical occurrence. Ultimately it is the creative life of Jesus Christ, not the evangelists or the Church, that originates, controls and gives essential unity to the documents through which witness is borne to his achievement as the Messiah, the Son of God" (p. 7).

## Response

Jacob Thielmann\*

Responding positively to this paper, I concur that the "purpose for writing the Gospels comprised both historical and theological facets." The Gospels are concerned with historical truth. The fruitfulness of historical research for Christian thought has been demonstrated. It is no longer necessary for theologians to apologize for the "subjective" results of historical research in biblical material.

A number of statements in Devon's paper need further elucidation. Since this paper was presented at a hermeneutical conference, I am at a loss to find hermeneutical principles which were employed in establishing that "the blind man also becomes every reader, who is being

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