



FRESNO PACIFIC
UNIVERSITY

FPUScholarWorks

The Gospels in current study.

Author(s): Wiens, Devon.

Source: *Direction*, vol. 10, no. 2 (April 1981): 3-10.

Published by: Direction.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/642>

FPUScholarWorks is an online repository for creative and scholarly works and other resources created by members of the [Fresno Pacific University](#) community. FPUScholarWorks makes these resources freely available on the web and assures their preservation for the future.

The Gospels in Current Study

Devon Wiens

It is our thesis that recent years have witnessed the study of the New Testament Gospels in ways which are more faithful to the announced and unannounced purposes of the evangelists. This has resulted from greatly refined precision of investigation in two fronts: (1) literary research into the content and shape of the gospels themselves, and (2) historical and sociological study of the communities whose situations both prompted the need for an evangelic response and helped dictate the particular form of the gospels.

A Sketch of Gospels Research

PREVIOUS STUDY OF THE GOSPELS

Before looking at how the gospels are currently being understood, it is necessary to sketch how they have previously been viewed.

Prior to the modern period, it was customary to force the details of the gospels into a single, continuous, harmonized version. This was already a tendency in the second century when Tatian of Edessa compiled his Diatesaron, only fragments of which are extant. Perhaps this harmonistic attempt reached its acme when Osiander (an early Lutheran theologian) posited a recurrence of every event mentioned more than once in the fourfold gospel tradition. For example, Jairus' daughter was raised from the dead three times since three gospels record the episode.

With the development of modern, critical modes of investigation, beginning with the eighteenth century, the exactly opposite tendency often prevailed. Then the divergences among the gospels were not only allowed to stand, they were accentuated. They were termed contradictions which had to be resolved by means of a modern, reasoned explanation of the original situation which lay behind such unacceptably discrepant versions. This point of view was often accompanied by a great deal of optimism that it would be possible to recreate the actual situation (e.g., the merely human, historical Jesus who existed behind the later Matthean, Lukan, and Johannine elevated christologies).

The point is that neither the supernaturalistic harmonistic tendency nor the naturalistic atomistic tendency took the actual text of the gospels seriously. Neither camp allowed Matthew (or Mark or Luke or John) to speak for himself. In both cases, the voice of the individual writer was ignored. On the one hand, there was an exclusive concern with the fourfold chorus of voices

Devon Wiens is Chairman of the Department of Biblical Studies at Fresno Pacific College, Fresno, California.

and, on the other hand, there often seemed to be little appreciation for the music itself. In recent decades, gospel study has seen fit to bend a listening ear to the contribution which each gospel soloist has to make.¹

PRESENT STUDY OF THE GOSPEL

In this century scholars turned from the attempt to recreate the original events to the attempt to trace the way the early church handed down the varied components of the tradition about Jesus (for example, sayings, parables, miracle stories). The interpreter now focused on the isolated pericopes of the gospel record, with their history in the pre-written period, their setting in the life of the church, and, finally, their collection in a written account.

But, as in much current thought, these analytic concerns are now giving way to attempts at synthesis. That is, there is much more concern currently with the gospels as a whole, in their final canonical shapes, and the four evangelists are being given their due as creative fashioners of the gospel story.

The important task now thrust upon us is to determine what motivated them to write. Just as a builder follows an architectural blueprint in erecting a structure and does not merely improvise it, so a writer follows a particular blueprint. Accordingly, we now ask about the forces and influences which helped to determine the final literary structure of the New Testament Gospels.²

It is a working hypothesis of current study of the gospels that the situations of the early Christians in their various communities, whether in Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Asia Minor, or Italy, provided the occasions both for the writing of the gospels and for the particular manner in which they were put together. The fact that it is exceedingly difficult to identify the precise conditions and problems which stimulated these written reactions does not negate this new and significant insight.³

THE ORIGINAL "AUDIENCES" OF THE EVANGELISTS

What can be said about the life-situations of those to whom the Gospels were addressed? This is both a crucial and a timely question, for two reasons: (1) before we can apply the scriptures to our own contexts, we must attempt to understand the meaning which it had, first of all, in its original setting; (2) the more we can understand the questions, needs, joys, and sorrows of our first brothers and sisters, the better we will be able to appreciate our heritage and go on to play our part in this centuries-long churchly succession.

In a general way one can point to circumstances which would have dictated the need for written accounts of the good news: the death of the generation of eye-witnesses, possibly threatening the preservation of an accurate record; conflicts with the synagogue; docetic and gnostic tendencies; depictions of Jesus and/or the apostles as merely additional examples of pagan "god-men"; legal proceedings and persecutions at the hands of

Roman and Jewish authorities; the delay of the Parousia, contrasted with an earlier fervent stress on its proximity; theological and ideological disputes; and the consequences for the church of the fall of Jerusalem and its temple in A.D. 70.

However, we could not get very far on the basis of this sort of generalized hypothesizing alone. What is needed is a careful scrutiny of each of the four gospels to discern what may have been the specific occasions which called its composition into being and to discover the specific intention of each writer. It should be pointed out that the following discussion is meant only to be suggestive. It is designed to show something of how current gospel study goes about its task; conclusions other than those which are offered here could be and are, as a matter of fact, arrived at.

The Gospel

ACCORDING TO MARK

The date and place of origin of this gospel is an open question today. Basically, the choice of sites narrows down to Rome or Palestine. If it is the former, as seems likely to the present writer, Mark was addressing a Christian community in the 60's which was either on the verge of or already enduring a time of opposition. This would clearly help explain the centrality which the passion and the death of Jesus occupy in the Markan story as well as the early reference to conspiracies against his life (3:6), the almost casual and uniquely Markan references to persecution (10:30), and the motifs centering on the theme of the "wilderness" (with its roots in ideas of conflict which would meet with a ready response on the part of readers who would also be engaged in battle, perhaps with wild beasts as well as humans).⁴

Alternatively, Mark is addressing a community of Palestinian (Galilean?) Christians and is assuring them that the preservation of the faith is not dependent upon the existence of the Jerusalem temple, which may be either in danger of imminent collapse (assuming a late 60's date) or may have recently fallen.⁵ Perhaps these believers would also be in need of hearing that the church could survive without the original disciples, who were reaching old age by this time.

In any case, it is certain that Mark's portrait of the Twelve is anything but complimentary. They habitually fail to understand what Jesus wants them to grasp (e.g., 4:13; 6:52, 7:18; 8:17; 9:32). This is all the more paradoxical in that Jesus takes them aside on several occasions for private instruction (e.g., 4:10, 34; 7:17; 9:28; 10:10). In the end all of them (with the exception of Peter who, of course, denies him) abandon Jesus in his hour of tribulation. In addition, Judas, "one of the twelve" (as Mark consistently adds), betrayed him.

The reason for such unflattering portrayals of the Twelve may be to throw into relief the impossibility of understanding who Jesus is and what his mission is apart from the passion, death, and resurrection. Just as the Twelve are reminded after each of Jesus' three passion predictions that they will have

to experience hardship and learn some crucial lessons of discipleship before they can hope to be faithful and comprehending followers, so the readers of Mark are informed of the necessity of trials and tribulations as a crucible in which the stuff of real discipleship is fashioned.⁶ Meanwhile, Jesus has already personally and definitively undergone the eschatological woes which the Markan community is warned about in Chapter 13 in his suffering and death at the hands of sinners.

ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

Matthew is ostensibly writing to a community of saints whose roots go deep into Judaism, for he distinctively and constantly (some 40 times) employs the fulfillment formula: "X took place, 'that it might be fulfilled.'" Whether the community was situated at Antioch, as tradition may rightly have it, or elsewhere is immaterial for our purpose.⁷ Our concern is with the sociological and theological contours of the Matthean community, as reflected in the distinctive ways in which Matthew draws upon the primitive Christian fund of tradition and interprets it to (or out of) that community.

That the Christians in the Matthean community had concerns about the nature of authority seems evident. Assuming their Jewish provenience,⁸ a peculiar dialectical tension was involved: on the one hand, confirmation was necessary that the new age had really begun; on the other hand, that the new had not annulled the Jewish tradition, but was in continuity with it, required equal emphasis.

Accordingly, Matthew portrays Jesus as the authoritative presence of the divine in the church. In fact, his gospel is bracketed between a beginning reference to Jesus as Emmanuel ("God with us") in 1:23 and a final, "Behold, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (28:20). Indeed, Jesus as the Son of God is the one in whom God's end-time rule is already present in this age (4:17; 12:28; 14:33; 16:16; 26:63).⁹ In this sense, it is permissible to speak of Jesus as the inaugurator of the true Israel, that is, the people (the church) through whom God's purpose both is being achieved and is still to be achieved. Hence the propriety of Matthew's incessant appeal to the Christ event as the fulfillment of scripture.

Moral responsibility was another prime concern of the Matthean community. Now that the locus of God's end-time rule had become the church (21:43) in which the Son of God was present (18:18-20), did this imply a complete independence from the old Torah with its regulations for behavior?

Matthew's answer is a resounding "No." The Jewish tradition and Torah are of continuing importance (5:17-20), though in principle they have been fulfilled. The righteousness of the new community is to surpass that of the old community in accordance with the standards of the New Torah of Jesus (5:20). The six pairs of antitheses (5:21-48), which would have endeared themselves to anti-Jewish Christians like the later Marcionites, are here used

to illustrate the higher ethic expected of the citizens of the New Age.¹⁰

All of this has led numerous interpreters to regard Matthew's Gospel as a catechesis, a manual of instruction for the new community which is based on a five-fold, Pentateuchal-type, arrangement of teaching material (chs. 5-7; 10; 13; 16- 18; 24-25).¹¹

ACCORDING TO LUKE

It is notoriously difficult to pinpoint a date (and also a place) for the composition of Luke's historical and theological two-part work.¹² Generally, it may be said that here we are dealing with a community of believers (perhaps consisting of both Jews and Gentiles) which finds itself much more outward-facing and much more sedentarily located in the milieu of the larger Greco-Roman culture than was true of the Markan and Matthean communities.

Fittingly, therefore, Luke sketched his "story" of Jesus and the primitive church in consonance with the forms and conventions in use among secular historians of the first century. For instance, he is the only one of the four evangelists who prefaces his work with an explicit announcement of intention (Luke 1:1-4).¹³ This preface, which makes it clear that Luke's purpose is as much theological (or, kerygmatic) as historical is addressed to Theophilus, whose exact identity has been a matter of unresolved debate. It may well be a code-term, suggestive of the larger, non-Christian world which Luke is also addressing.

Apparently the community was faced with the prospect of on-going life in the world, since the expectation of the imminent Parousia no longer burned as brightly as it once did.¹⁴ But "Luke was . . . able to assure the Christian community that God's plan of salvation had an extended time dimension and thereby dispel their anxiety regarding Christ's return."¹⁵ Luke's specific chronological scheme, reflective of this temporal setting, is a three-fold one. Salvation history comprises (a) the period from creation up to and including John the Baptizer; (b) the earthly, public ministry of Jesus as the central, redemptive epoch; (c) the period from the ascension to the parousia — the period in which the readers find themselves.¹⁶

Finally, as is commonly realized, Luke proclaims Jesus as the bearer of God's end-time salvation and its benefits for the neglected and rejected people in Israel as well as for the Gentiles. It is the "lost" in Israel whom he has come to save and by whom he is received (19:10). Among the lowly and ostracized groups who receive special attention in Luke are the shepherds, women and children, soldiers, tax-gatherers, criminals, the poor, the suffering, the sick and oppressed.¹⁷ Certainly included in this roster are the Gentiles (as represented by Luke's readers?). Luke's "universalism" emphasizes Jesus as the "light to the nations" (3:6, 38; 2:32).¹⁸ This is paralleled by the special Lukan interest in the Gentile mission (24:47),¹⁹ an interest which is reinforced and amply developed throughout the Acts. Indeed, this opportunity for the salvation of the Gentiles is introduced early in Luke; the Jews of

Nazareth reject Jesus when he announces that he is fulfilling the mission of the Servant of the Lord (Luke 4).

ACCORDING TO JOHN

In the Fourth Gospel, we enter the kind of terrain in which it is difficult to get temporal and spatial bearings. In the Synoptics we receive the distinct impression that there is a connection with a specific, historical, first century Palestinian environment, but John seems perched in a meta-historical sphere which has slipped the bonds of space and time.²⁰

And yet, the fact remains that in the case of no other gospel have the “vectors” of research pointed so much toward the importance of community origins.²¹ Although the Johannine community is generally dated in the late first century (80’s or 90’s), its specific location is in dispute. Nevertheless, it seems evident that this community is facing challenges on two fronts: (1) an interfamilial struggle with the non-Christian Jews of the synagogue and (2) an external dialogue (clash?) with hellenistic ideologies.²²

Consequently, it may well be that the dualistic structure of Johannine thought is to be explained sociologically, at least in part. To understand this contention one has to understand that the lines which separated synagogue and church apparently had hardened by the end of the first century. The result may have been an increased “fortress mentality” on the part of the Johannine community, issuing in an adversarial “we-they” relationship with non-Christian Jews.

One may speak, as Kysar does, of positive and negative poles in this dualism: light/darkness (e.g., 1:5); above/below (8:23); spirit/flesh (3:6); life/death (3:36); truth/falsehood (8:44f); heaven/earth (3:31); God/Satan (13:27); Israel/the Jews (or the world) (1:19, 47; 17:14).²³ In contrast, the dualism of the Synoptic gospels is temporal (this age/the age to come), rather than spatial or cosmological, as in John.

The effect of this dualism in John’s portrayal of Jesus is to emphasize Jesus’ glory as the pre-existent Son of God, the divine Logos (1:1, 14, 18; 20:31). The cross is not the locus of alienation and humiliation, as it certainly tends to be in the Synoptics; instead, it represents a glorious “lifting up” of Jesus (3:14f; 8:28; 12:32f; 17:1). Furthermore, Jesus is the savior who descends from the world above and who ascends back to it (1:18; 3:17; 4:42; 14:28; 16:5, 28; 20:17). Jesus is also pictured as the revealer *par excellence*, disclosing the true nature of his glory and his person (e.g., 4:26).²⁴ The revelatory function is central to the great discourses of this gospel in which one finds the magisterial “I Am” sayings, climaxing in 8:58: “Before Abraham was, I am.”²⁵

Finally, there is a shift in eschatology from the Synoptics to John which corresponds to his revised dualism. “Eternal life” (a concept which seems to be roughly equivalent to the “kingdom of God” in the Synoptics) is a present reality. Thus the Johannine community is encouraged to view its present ex-

istence as a partial realization of the blessedness of eternal life (3:36; 5:24), though the future dimension is not overlooked (e.g., 12:25).²⁶ So John may have been writing to a group of disillusioned believers caught in the crossfire of Jewish-pagan dislike. If so, the emphasis on the present reality of “eternal life” would be a corrective — they ought not to preoccupy themselves with the future redress of their grievances.

Endnotes

¹ According to Robert Morgan, in a truly perceptive article, “The Hermeneutical Significance of Four Gospels,” *Interpretation* 33 (October 1979): 376-388, “This critical reduction to a single norm, like Tatian’s solution to the plurality of Gospels, would be in danger of making *the* Gospels into a new law. The variety of witnesses . . . is one way of ensuring that this Lord transcends not only these witnesses but also all subsequent Christian theological and ethical positions and decisions” (388, 389) (italics his).

² See this writer’s earlier essay, “Interpreting the Gospel,” *Direction* 6 (July 1977): 50-57. Since then, this direction for study has become even more pronounced.

³ The situation we are dealing with might be compared to a telephone conversation in which we are privy to only one half of the conversation. We can, of course, reconstruct the perspective of the other party with a degree of certainty, though absolute knowledge about this would necessitate the simultaneous observation of the second party. But historical study deals in probabilities; it does not always allow for absolute certitude with respect to questions of cause and effect. Nevertheless, attempts to discover what was being said on the “other telephone” tend to cast light on the meaning of the side of the conversation we possess in the quadruple gospel tradition.

⁴ Note the prevalence of the term *wilderness* in the first chapter. William Lane states the case for the importance of this concept in *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 39ff. A uniquely Markan touch to the temptations of Jesus is the comment that “he was with the wild beasts” (1:13).

⁵ There is a kind of anti-temple polemic in Mark. He brings this out, for example, in the way he inserts the “temple-cleansing” between the cursing of the fig tree and the observation of the tree’s demise (11:12-21), so that what is true of the fig tree is true of the temple.

⁶ As a matter of fact, Mark stereotypically shows them botching things up after each of the predictions: Mark 8:31 (8:34-35); 9:31 (9:42-49); 10:33-34 (10:38-45).

⁷ Acts clearly shows the composite nature of the Antiochene community, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles (11:19-30). Of late, scholars have tried to describe more accurately the social make-up of this locale. See Wayne A. Meeks, Robert L. Wilken, *Jews and Christians in Antioch* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978).

⁸ However, Matthew’s christological focus transcends a narrow Jewish compass. There is interest in the Gentile mission (10:18).

⁹ Matthew uses the Jewish emphasis on *This Age/The Age to Come* to press home the truth that the eschatological age to come was now in some sense present. It is usually thought that he used “Kingdom of Heaven” instead of “Kingdom of God” in deference to his Jewish readers for whom the direct use of God’s name was problematic (but see 12:28).

¹⁰ The very title of Marcion’s second century work, a virulent piece of anti-Jewish polemic, was the *Antitheses*. In I Timothy 6:20, Timothy is warned against the “antitheses of so-called knowledge,” which is perhaps an indication of the existence of a kind of proto-Marcionite tendency.

¹¹ This scheme was developed by B. W. Bacon, *Studies in Matthew* (London: Constable, 1930). It has recently been called into question. See Jack Dean Kingsbury, “Form and Message of Matthew,” *Interpretation* 29 (January 1975): 17.

¹² It is usual, nowadays, to speak of Luke-Acts, since the two are successive parts of the same work, with similar patterns and themes. See Charles H. Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes, and the Genre of Luke-Acts* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), pp. 15-65.

¹³ For a similar, though considerably more extended, example of this convention, see the preface in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. A more contemporary example was Livy, *History of Rome*, Book XXI, Chapter 1.

¹⁴ Of course, its presence is still registered in Luke. This needs to be asserted as a corrective of an earlier, one-sided tendency in Hans Conzelmann's work, *The Theology of St. Luke* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960). Among the "correctors": R. H. Hiers, "The Problem of the Delay of the Parousia in Luke-Acts," *New Testament Studies* 20 (1974): 145-154; Eric Franklin, *Christ the Lord: A Study in the Purpose and Theology of Luke-Acts* (London: SPCK, 1975).

¹⁵ Richard J. Cassidy, *Jesus, Politics, and Society: A Study of Luke's Gospel* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), p. 8. He is paraphrasing Conzelmann here.

¹⁶ This periodization is the centerpiece of Conzelmann's important study. The scheme is still widely accepted in current studies on Luke, though not without minor or major modifications. See Charles H. Talbert, "Shifting Sands: The Recent Study of the Gospel of Luke," *Interpretation* 30 (October 1976): 386: "Research since Conzelmann has generally supported his recognition of Lukan salvation history, though not his claim that it is unique to Luke-Acts."

¹⁷ A recent analysis of this is Cassidy's work, cited above.

¹⁸ The citation from Isaiah is significant. One of the major themes of Second Isaiah is that the Servant (Israel?) is to be a light to the nations, the *goyim* (e.g., 42:6; 49:6).

¹⁹ It has often been pointed out that chapters 9 and 10 reflect a two-stage understanding of the churchly mission: 9:10-17 has the 12, symbolic of the tribes of Israel, sent out; 19:1-20 has the 70, the number of Gentile nations in Jewish tradition, sent out. Thus, the Jewish and Gentile missions are placed on an equal footing.

²⁰ George E. Ladd has lucidly sketched the distinctive lines of Synoptic, Johannine, and Pauline thought in *The Pattern of New Testament Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

²¹ To use Robert Kysar's judicious term (in "Community and Gospel: Vectors in Fourth Gospel Criticism," *Interpretation* 31 (October 1977): 355-366). Especially prominent examples of such research are three recent studies: Oscar Cullmann, *The Johannine Circle* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976); R. Alan Culpepper, *The Johannine School* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975); and Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

²² Of course, it could be that such openness to the pagan world of ideas already characterized the Judaism with which the Johannine community was in contact. See Robert Kysar, *John, the Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976), p. 19. Brown, in *Community*, greatly complicates the picture by conjecturing the existence of various groups in terms of whether they were hostile to, relatively sympathetic with, or completely in harmony with its theology and ethics, either before, during, or after the time of the final redaction of the gospel.

²³ *John, the Maverick Gospel*, p. 49.

²⁴ John typically and exclusively labels the miracles as "signs." Whether or not chapters 2-12 stem from a separate 'signs' source, the important feature is that each of the seven spectacular signs are revelatory devices, pointers to the personal identity of Jesus as the Light, the Living Water, the Bread of Life, etc.

²⁵ D. George Vanderlip, *Christianity According to John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), has an excellent discussion of the two groups of these sayings: (1) the absolute uses (4:26, 6:20; 8:24; 8:58; 13:19; 18:5,6,8) and (2) the predicate uses (6:35, 41, 48, 51; 8:12, 18; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1,5).

²⁶ One may add that the categories of judgment and resurrection also undergo a similar refraction in John, so that they become present realities (3:18; 5:21, 24, 26; 9:39), though the future consummation of those realities is by no means ignored (6:39, 40, 54; 12:48).