

March 24

TWICE-TOLD TALES AND THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

Review:

(1) Finding Biblical passages by book, chapter, and verse.

(2) Important themes in the course:

Contrary to what Fundamentalists believe, the words of the Bible are not always self-apparent; in fact, they are sometimes quite hard to understand. We saw this with Psalm 118:5 “The Lord answered me and set me in a broad place”—what is the meaning of “a broad place”? The notes to the hardcover edition of the NRSV explained that this phrase is commonly used in the Hebrew bible to represent what we would call “a good place” today.

So we also saw that we cannot read the Bible the way that Fundamentalists do, because we have to recognize that the Bible comes from a certain historical time and place that we have to know something about in order to begin to understand it. We saw that point last week when we looked at the Sermon on the Mount’s first blessing—“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3). What does it mean to be poor in spirit? We entertained several possibilities, and someone pointed out that in Christ’s time, Jews believed that if you were rich, it was because you had led a good life, and if you were poor, it was because you had sinned. But here and in the other version of this passage, in Luke 6:20, Christ speaks against that idea, saying that the poor are blessed, whether they are literally poor (as in Luke 6:20) or poor in spirit—which can mean several things, such as maybe thinking like a poor person, and sympathizing with the poor. And if you read elsewhere in the Gospels, you see that Christ is pretty critical of the rich. (further see Pieter van der Horst, “How the Poor Became Blessed,” *Aeon*, 14 March 2019, <<https://aeon.co/essays/the-poor-might-have-always-been-with-us-but-charity-has-not>>)

So we also saw that the Bible speaks to us in sometimes difficult ways. In the first session, I talked about the Bible’s language, its way of talking to us—which is not the way we talk to each other in everyday life, but is deliberately more elevated, even obscure. From the Parable of the Sower and the Seed (Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23, and 10-17, in that order), we saw that Christ speaks to us in parables that need to be interpreted. Even Jesus’s explanation of the Parable of the Sower needed to be explained, and I asked, “so why didn’t He just say it plainly and simply for us?” And one of you said that He wants us to figure it out, because when we have to work to understand something, we retain it, whereas when the answer is handed to us we forget it. That’s why Jesus says, “Let those who have ears hear.” That’s all of us.

So we know now that the Bible addresses us as intelligent beings, and it expects us to work to understand it. But even when we work to understand it, the Bible still presents difficulties. That’s why in the first session, I made a joke by saying that if you want to spend the rest of your life walking a path whose destination you’ll never reach, become a biblical scholar.

This is a good time for me to say, “That’s as it must be.” Language is a human faculty, and for as far back as we can trace languages, we know that languages have always changed. We know that even if we are experts, we cannot understand the languages of the Bible as deeply as the people who spoke those languages in the time of Christ. And we also know that God is beyond any expression in language. Try as we may, the best we can do is to approach God, approximate God, in language. There is always a gap between us and God, a gap that is not closed until we see God face-to-face. As Paul says in 1 Cor. 13:12: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” (Ancient mirrors were polished metal that reflected only a dim image.)

So if God is so far beyond us that there are no words to describe Him, then when we read Scripture we have to be willing to admit to ourselves that there will be times when we don’t fully understand it. But that doesn’t mean we should just give up trying. The next four sessions will give you some tools so that your understanding will be richer and more confident.

Today’s topic: Why there are four Gospels instead of one

We cannot think of the gospels as biographies of Jesus. For one thing, even stories shared by two or more of the gospels do not agree exactly in details or wording. For another, the writers of the gospels did not have the same goals as modern biographers, who seek to provide a factual, objective account. The gospels are faith narratives, confessions of faith in Jesus presented as only quasi-biographical accounts. Their message is not so much what Jesus did but what Jesus taught and what he is as the Son of God, in terms that are meant for the original audience of each Gospel.

Scholars think that before the Gospels were written, there was a collection, originally transmitted orally, of Jesus’s sayings, which they call Q (from German *Quelle* ‘source’) or “the Jesus tradition.” Jesus did not write his words down, and his early followers believed that they were living in the last days before the Second Coming—see 1 Cor. 16:22 for example, which says “O Lord, come” (*Marana tha* in the original Greek). If the world was going to end soon, there was no need for books.

But in time it became clear that the world was not ending soon, because God’s idea of “soon” is not our idea of “soon,” and that it was therefore necessary to record Jesus’s saying, his deeds, and the writings of the earliest Christians who knew him or who learned from his disciples, so that future generations could be taught.

Order of the Gospels’ composition:

- Mark: probably written ca. 65-70, probably written in Rome and probably influenced by memories of Jesus related by Peter. Its emphasis on “the necessity of suffering and the cross... may reflect persecution undergone by the Christians addressed by Mark,” who

seems himself to have been an evangelist like Peter (Brown, pp. 7, 8).

- Matthew and Luke: probably written in the 80's. Both include more of Jesus' sayings than Mark does, implying that they drew directly from Q as well as from Mark. Matthew was written for Jewish Christians. It aims to show Jews that Jesus fulfills their hopes for a Messiah foretold in the OT. Luke was written for Gentile Christians, emphasizing that Jesus is the savior of all people. The author of Luke also wrote Acts. Luke and Acts were written as a continuous narrative, as you can see by going from the end of Luke to the beginning of Acts.

80% of Mark is in Matthew, and 65% of Mark is in Luke. The Marcan material found in Matthew and Luke is called the Triple Tradition (Brown, p. 111). There are 225 verses of non-Markan material in Matthew and Luke that are called the Double Tradition.

Why is Matthew first in order? Possibly because it contains more of Jesus' teachings than the other three, because of its concern with the nature and function of the church (Matt. 10, 18), and because its opening genealogy makes a strong transition from the OT.

- John: probably written in 90-100. Emphasizes the divinity of Jesus and the importance of faith in him. In John, Jesus does not speak in parables, but rather in "long, difficult monologues about himself, his relationship to God, and the need to believe in him" (Attridge et al., p. 1814).

In none of the Gospels does the author name himself, so it is possible that the names of the authors were attached years later, based on traditions such as Matthew being the disciple who was a tax collector (see Matt. 9:9-13 and Luke 5:27-32). Each Gospel "gives us a different portrait of Jesus," even to the point where "words and deeds of Jesus' life vary from one gospel to another, and the events of his life are written in a different order in each gospel" (Binz, p. 73). The Church allowed three very similar Gospels, called Synoptic Gospels because they "see together," and it added to the Synoptic Gospels the rather different account of Christ's life found in John.¹

But the Church resisted attempts to make the Synoptics + John into one story. Why?

The writers of the gospels were not interested in giving us a chronological biography of Jesus, but instead they represented "who Jesus is and the meaning of his life. This explanation varied according to the questions and situations of the various audiences for which the gospels were written" (Binz, p. 73).

¹ There are lists of corresponding passages in the Synoptics called "canon tables" that are available in many Bibles as well as online.

Another reason that three synoptic Gospels plus John became canonical in the NT was because they satisfied the criteria of authenticity that early Christians used:

- Apostolic origin, whether actual or believed to be actual. The Gospels, for example: Matthew and John were believed to be apostles; Mark was believed to be a companion of Peter, and Luke was believed to be a companion of Paul. But even apostolic origin does not guarantee that all such writings survive: letters of Paul referred to in 2 Cor. 2:4 and Col. 4:16 do not exist any longer (Brown, 10).
- The importance of the Christian communities to whom the writings were addressed. For example, scholars think that Antioch in Asia Minor, a major church, and the recipient of the Gospel of Matthew, which it preserved, played a major role in determining the acceptance of Matthew. Other churches in Asia Minor such as Ephesus preserved the epistles of Paul, the Gospel of John, and Luke-Acts. These churches had the best claim to a valid apostolic connection.
- Conformity with the rule of faith. For example, the pseudepigraphical *Gospel of Peter* was used by the church of Rhossus, in Asia Minor near Ephesus, to support the belief that Jesus was not truly human, a belief called Docetism, and so the church of Ephesus considered it to be erroneous, which contributed to its exclusion from the NT canon (Brown, 11-12).

Mark's claim to authenticity is that it is the earliest of the Gospels. Luke's is that the writer of Luke also wrote Acts, which recorded the Ascension of Christ, the first Pentecost, the conversion of Saul/Paul, and other important stories about the spread of the Church from a small corner of Israel to the entire Mediterranean world. Matthew's and John's Gospels were believed to have been written by original disciples—Matthew being the tax collector summoned by Jesus (Matt. 9:9-13, Luke 5:27-32), and John being the “beloved disciple”/“the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23, 19:26-27, 20:2, 21:7, 21:20, 21:24, NRSV) to whom Jesus commended his mother Mary when he was dying on the cross.

Thus, there were four Gospels that each had a claim to apostolic origin, were important to major Christian communities, and showed conformity with the rule of faith.

Now, there is evidence that at first, in the very early Church, Christian communities preferred to follow only one of the Gospels over the others. For example, Paul warns against “a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you” (Gal. 1:8-9, NRSV), whatever that may have been. The Johannine Epistles never refer to the Synoptic Gospels. The Gospel of Mark claims to be “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1, NRSV) not one of several accounts. Luke begins by saying that many others have tried to tell the story of Jesus, so after looking into it carefully, he decided to write his own account (Luke 1:1-4, NRSV), implying that the others aren't adequate. Jewish Christians favored Matthew because of its insistence on Jewish law (Matt. 5:18), whereas Gentile Christians might favor John because of its many challenges to Jewish law. Thus, “concentration on one Gospel could sometimes be used to support a

theology rejected by a larger number of Christians” (Brown, 13). In reaction against such exclusivity, accepting more than one Gospel became a practice of the larger Church—an important way to embrace the various churches that arose after the death of Christ and the missionary work of his disciples, and bring them together as one Church.

Another reason there are four Gospels instead of one is that having different versions of the same story made the NT more like the OT, and thus more authoritative, more true as Scripture, and more worthy of faith.

In a broad sense, the NT echoes the organization of the OT by recapitulating the tripartite organization of the Hebrew Bible (explained on the handout “Books of the Bible in Various Versions,” which is available on the St. Catherine’s website at: <https://stcathofsiena.org/scripture-study>)

- 4 Gospels parallel the Torah, traditionally ascribed to Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy).
- Acts parallels the Former Prophets (Joshua through 2 Kings), and 13 Epistles commonly attributed to Paul parallel the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, etc.)—in the Hebrew bible the Prophets are one section subdivided into two.
- 9 remaining epistles + Apocalypse parallel the Writings.

The first Christians were Jews, like Jesus himself, and like Jesus, they were steeped in the Bible. They were familiar with how the Bible communicated with them. And the way it communicated with them was mostly via literature: stories and poems. (Scholars consider the laws a form of literature, too, but we’re not going to deal with them here.) The Bible did not communicate to them in philosophical treatises, or in scientific arguments, or in any of the ways that we in the modern world convey knowledge to each other. The ancient Jews and Christians did not use our modern forms of discovering and communicating knowledge. Ancient Jews and Christians relied on the Bible.

So this means we’re going to have to get used to the idea that in the ancient culture of our Jewish and Christian forerunners, knowledge, particularly the knowledge of God and of ourselves, was conveyed through the Bible in the form of literature. Not many of us today would consider literature to be a form of knowledge. We probably consider it entertainment, if we even like to read literature at all. But if we are going to appreciate the Bible, we have to accept the idea that it contains various forms of literature, and that although it can indeed be entertaining, its main purpose is to bring us knowledge of God and of ourselves as God’s creation.

In today’s session, I’m going to talk about one feature of the Bible that its original readers were very familiar with and comfortable with, but which we modern readers have to develop an

appreciation for. That feature is **repetition**. This means that words, ideas, and stories can be repeated in the same or similar form.

Thus, another reason why the early Church did not revise the Gospels into one story about Jesus was because the Bible as they knew used the same kinds of repetition as the Hebrew Bible. It was thus an extension of the Hebrew Bible.

Each of the Gospels was perceived to embody truths about Jesus. Whereas we modern people want a single, unambiguous truth about history and historical personages, ancient people were comfortable with complementary truths from different accounts. Another way to say this is that we live in a culture that values analysis, whereas Biblical culture values synthesis. We assume that the Gospels are four different stories, whereas they assumed that the Gospels were four different ways of telling the same story. For them, getting to know Jesus via the four Gospels was like looking at a sculpture in three dimensions in contrast to looking at an engraving in two dimensions. No matter the angle from which we look at the sculpture, we see an aspect of the subject; but we can only look at the engraving from the front, and we can only see the aspect of the subject that the artist has selected for us to see.

Franz Ignaz
Günther,
“Christ at the
Column,”
1754



Albrecht
Dürer,
“Flagellation
of Christ,”
1497

Scripture has two major kinds of repetition:

- Repeated words, phrases, ideas: a feature of Biblical poetry and sometimes narrative called **verbal parallelism**.
- Repeated stories or parts of stories: a feature of biblical narrative called **narrative parallelism**.

Techniques of repetition used in the OT and NT

Verbal repetition, OT:

(1) Approximate repetition. Example: God’s speeches about the covenant in ch’s 12-15. Each time the covenant is repeated, we can compare it with other iterations of the covenant:

- ch. 12:1-3. God promises Abraham land, doesn't say where.
- ch. 12:7. God promises Abraham this land, Canaan.
- ch. 13:14-17. God promises land in all directions, will make A's descendants as numberless as the dust of the earth.
- ch. 15:13-16 and 15:18. God promises that Abraham's descendants shall be as numberless as the stars, puts boundaries around the promised land.

(2) Verbatim repetition. Example: In Gen. 1, the phrases "Then God said," "God called the X so-and-so," "Evening came and morning followed," and so on, are repeated word-for-word with each day of creation.

(3) Parallel verbal statements and ideas. Most common in Biblical poetry such as the Psalms. Example: Ps. 100:1-2: "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. / Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing." (See Alter, *Poetry, passim*). The parallelism of these two verses can be expressed this way, with parallel ideas and words in the same colors:

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.

(4) Envelope structure: repeated verbal formulas/motifs and themes enclose a passage, like an envelope, making it a unit (can be small or large). Example:

- Gen. 13:1-4: "From Egypt Abram went up to the Negeb with his wife and all that belonged to him, and Lot accompanied him.... From the Negeb he traveled by stages toward Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had formerly stood, the site where he had first built the altar..."
- Gen. 13:18: "Abram moved his tents and went on to settle near the terebinth of Mamre, which is at Hebron. There he built an altar to the Lord."

Verbal repetition, NT:

(1) Approximate repetition. Example:

- Romans 1:1-8, 1 Cor. 1:1-4, 2 Cor. 1:1-4, etc. (similar salutation/opening epistolary formulas)

(2) Verbatim repetition. Example: The formula "in those days" as a way of placing something in the past (very common in the OT):

- Matt. 3:1, 24:19, 24:38
- Mark 1:9, 8:1, 13:17, 13:19, 13:24, 15:29
- Luke 1:24, 1:39, 2:1, 5:35, 6:12, 9:36, 13:14, 21:23
- Acts 1:15, 2:18, 6:1
- Heb. 8:10, 10:16
- Rev. 9:6

(3) Parallel verbal statements/ideas. Example:

- Matt. 5:1-12 and Luke 6:20-26 (same formula used to list each Beatitude/Woe).

(4) Envelope structure: repeated verbal formulas/motifs and themes enclose a passage, like an envelope, making it a unit (can be small or large). Examples:

- Matt. 5:21-48, called the Six Antitheses because in this passage Christ replaces 6 moral principles with 6 other moral principles that call us to a higher standard. Each one begins with “You have heard it said...”, after which Christ says, “But I say to you...” and then concludes with a specific precept—a “do X” commandment. And so each “You have heard it said introduces a new section, then tells us that the previous one is over with, until ch. 6 introduces another set of envelope structures.
- In Matt. 6:1-18, the idea of being seen by others and by God is repeated in verses 1, 4, 5-6, 16, 18; and the theme of reward is repeated in verses 1, 2, 4, 5-6, 16, 18. These verbal motifs and themes begin and end Christ’s discourse about three of the most important practices in ancient Judaism: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Thus, the passage is enclosed by an envelope that focuses on two verbal motifs: (1) being seen by others vs. being seen by God, and on (2) the reward that God gives to those who give alms, pray, and fast so as to be seen by others, vs. the reward that He gives to those who give alms, pray, and fast secretly, silently and humbly, according to His will, without being seen by others. There is a clear contrast between rewards: those who behave ostentatiously receive their reward in the form of public attention; those who do the right thing quietly receive their reward from God.
- Also in Matt., every one of Jesus’ major discourses ends with a warning to put his teachings into practice (5:2-27; 13:36-43, 47-50; 18:23-35; 24:37-25:46).

An example of a large envelope structure:

- In the Gospel of John ch. 9, the story of the man born blind, begins with an implicit time reference + a reference to Jesus traveling, as many stories in John do: “As he passed by”. In the previous chapter, Jesus has just been driven from the temple area by people throwing stones at him because he has identified himself using the sacred name of God “I am”, the name used by God in the burning bush, Ex. 3. The story continues into ch. 10, which ends with the Jews disputing amongst themselves because of statements made by Jesus about his divinity, but we know that the story is over when we come to 10:22, another time reference: “The feast of the Dedication was then taking place in Jerusalem. It was winter. And Jesus walked about in the temple area...”

Narrative repetition, OT

Doublet: The “exact, or almost exact, repetition of [a] biblical story in a different place. A doublet is quite often told about the exact same character in exactly the same way, even with almost exactly the same words” (Segal, 23).

Examples of doublets, OT:

- Gen. 12 and 20: Both involve Abraham and Sarah, a foreign king, Abraham’s declaration that his wife is his sister, the king’s realization that divine punishment will occur if he has sex with Sarah, the king’s question to Abraham, “Why did you tell me she was your sister?” and the king sending Abraham away with wealth of some kind.
- Gen. 16 and 21: About the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham’s settlement.
- 1 Sam. 24 and 26: David has a chance to kill Saul and is urged to do so, but does not; instead he takes a token of Saul’s and then from a distance loudly proclaims his loyalty to Saul, whose response both times is, “Is that [or this] your voice, my son David?”

Examples of doublets, NT (and sometimes triplets—these are Synoptic Gospels, after all!):

- The Triple Tradition: stories/events in all three Synoptics, such as Healing the Leper (Matt. 8:2-3, Mark 1:40-42, and Luke 5:12-13).
- The Double Tradition: stories/events in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark, such as the Sermon on the Mount/Plain (Matt. 5:1-12 and Luke 6:17-26).

Type-scenes: Narrative events that occur at different times and places but which follow the same pattern; here, types of action are repeated (hence the name) in the same pattern across several stories. (See Alter, *Narrative*, 50-51). Some of these are carried over from the OT; others are unique to the NT.

Examples of type-scenes, OT:

- Testament of the dying patriarch: Gen. 27, Gen. 48-49.

Examples of type-scenes, OT and NT:

- Annunciation of birth to a barren/unmarried woman: Gen. 18:9-15, Judges 13:2-25, and Luke 1:26-38.
- Seeing God/Jesus transfigured on a mountain-top: Ex. 24:9-18 and Matt. 17:1-8.
- Meeting a woman at the well; theme of marriage: Genesis 24, 29, and John 4.

Examples of type-scenes, NT:

- The healing stories in Matthew 8 are type-scenes following the same pattern:
 - Description of the setting.
 - Sick person approaches Jesus, asking for healing.
 - Seriousness of illness is emphasized.
 - Jesus speaks words of healing, often touches the sick person.
 - Cure is demonstrated in behavior of the sick person.
 - Onlookers express amazement.

Summing up

Why four Gospels instead of one?

Because they are confessions of faith in Jesus, meant for each Gospel's original audience; hence they emphasize different ideas about who Jesus is. These emphases addressed different original audiences of believers.

- Mark: Addresses persecuted Christians. Emphasizes Jesus' suffering on the Cross.
- Matthew: Addresses Jewish Christians. Aims to show Jews that Jesus fulfills their hopes for a Messiah foretold in the OT
- Luke: Addresses Gentile Christians. Emphasizes that Jesus is the savior of all people.
- John: Addresses all Christians. Emphasizes the divinity of Jesus and the importance of faith in him

Because the Synoptic Gospels + John satisfied the criteria of authenticity used by early Christians:

- Apostolic origin, whether actual or believed to be actual.
- The importance of the Christian communities to whom the writings were addressed.
- Conformity with the rule of faith.

Because in a broad sense, the NT echoes the organization of the OT by recapitulating the tripartite organization of the Hebrew Bible:

- 4 Gospels parallel the Torah, traditionally ascribed to Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy).

Because repetition—a feature of the Hebrew Bible that its original readers and early Christians were very familiar and comfortable with, but which we modern readers have to develop an appreciation for—characterized the NT, signaling to them that it was an extension of the OT.

- This means that words, ideas, stories can be repeated in the same form or in another form that may be recognizably similar to the first version.
- Thus, another reason why the early Church did not revise the Gospels into one story about Jesus was because the Bible as they knew it featured narrative repetition in the form of doublets.

Scripture has two major kinds of repetition:

- Repeated words, phrases, ideas: a feature of Biblical poetry and sometimes narrative called **verbal parallelism**.
- Repeated stories or parts of stories: a feature of biblical narrative called **narrative parallelism**.

Kinds of verbal repetition:

- Approximate repetition.
- Verbatim repetition.
- Parallel verbal statements/ideas.
- Envelope structures.

Kinds of narrative repetition:

- Doublets.
- Type-scenes.

Thus, the NT extends the OT by employing its literary style.

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