

## CHAPTER 7

## The Gospels: One Story, Many Dimensions

As with the Epistles and Acts, the Gospels seem at first glance easy enough to interpret. Since the materials in the Gospels may be divided roughly into sayings and narratives, that is, teachings *of* Jesus and stories *about* Jesus, one should theoretically be able to follow the principles for interpreting the Epistles for the one and the principles for historical narratives for the other.

In a sense this is true. However, it is not quite that easy. The four gospels form a unique literary genre for which there are few real analogies. Their uniqueness, which we will examine momentarily, is what presents most of our exegetical problems. But there are some hermeneutical difficulties as well. Some of these, of course, take the form of those several “hard sayings” in the Gospels. But the major hermeneutical difficulty lies with understanding “the kingdom of God,” a term that is absolutely crucial to the whole of Jesus’ ministry, yet at the same time is presented in the language and concepts of first-century Judaism. The problem is how to translate these ideas into more contemporary cultural settings.

### THE NATURE OF THE GOSPELS

Almost all the difficulties one encounters in interpreting the Gospels stem from two obvious facts: (1) Jesus himself did not write a gospel; they were written by others, and thus do not come directly from him. (2) There are four gospels, three of which have remarkable similarities, while that by John tells the story in a quite different way.

1. The fact that the four gospels do not come from Jesus himself is a very important consideration. Had he written something, of course, it would probably have looked less like our Gospels and more like the Old Testament Prophetic Books, such as Amos for example—a collection of spoken oracles and sayings, plus a few brief personal narratives (Amos 7:10–17). Our Gospels do indeed contain collections of sayings, but these are always woven, as an integral part, into a historical narrative of Jesus’ life and ministry. Thus they are not books *by* Jesus but books *about* Jesus, which at the same time contain a large collection of various sayings and teachings.

The difficulty this presents to us should not be overstated, but it is there and needs to be addressed. The nature of this difficulty might best be seen by noting an analogy from Paul in Acts and his epistles. If we did not have Acts, for example, we could piece together some of the elements of Paul’s life from the epistles, but such a presentation would be meager. Likewise, if we did not have his epistles, our understanding of Paul’s theology based solely on his speeches in Acts would likewise be meager—and somewhat out of balance. For key items in Paul’s life, therefore, we read Acts and feed into this the information found in his epistles. For his teaching we do not first go to Acts but to the epistles, and to Acts as an additional source.

But the Gospels are *not* like Acts, for here we have both a narrative of Jesus’ life and large blocks of his sayings (teachings) as an absolutely basic part of that life. But the sayings were not *written* by him, as the epistles were by Paul. Jesus’ native tongue was Aramaic, which appears only once, in his cry from the cross; his teachings thus come to us only in Greek. Moreover, the same saying frequently occurs in two or three of the gospels, and even when it occurs in the exact chronological sequence or historical setting, it is seldom found with exactly the same wording in each.

To some this reality can be threatening, but it need not be. It is true, of course, that certain kinds of scholarship have distorted this reality in such a way as to suggest that nothing in the four gospels is trustworthy. But this is a historically problematic conclusion. Equally good scholarship has demonstrated the historical reliability of the gospel materials.

Our point here is a simple one: God gave us what we know about Jesus’ earthly ministry in *this* way, not in another way that

might better suit someone's mechanistic, tape-recorder mentality. And in any case the fact that the Gospels were not written by Jesus but about him, including many things said by him, is a part of their genius, we would argue, not their weakness.

2. Then there are four of them. How did this happen, and why? After all, we do not have four Acts of the Apostles. Moreover, the materials in the first three gospels are so often alike we call them the Synoptic ("common-view") Gospels. Indeed, one might wonder why retain Mark at all, since the amount of material found exclusively in his gospel would scarcely fill two pages of print. But again, the fact that there are four, we believe, is a part of their genius.

So what is the nature of the Gospels, and why is their unique nature part of their genius? This can best be answered by first speaking to the question, why four? From our distance we can hardly give an absolutely certain answer to this, but at least one of the reasons is a simple and pragmatic one: different Christian communities each had need for a book about Jesus. For a variety of reasons the gospel written for one community or group of believers did not necessarily meet all the needs in another community. So one was written first (Mark in the most widely accepted view), and that gospel was "rewritten" twice (Matthew and Luke) for considerably different reasons, to meet considerably different needs. Independently of them (again, in the most widely accepted view) John wrote a gospel of a different kind for still another set of reasons. All of this, we believe, was orchestrated by the Holy Spirit.

For the later church, none of the four gospels supersedes the other, but each stands beside the others as equally valuable and equally authoritative. How so? Because in each case *the interest in Jesus is at two levels*. First, there was the purely historical concern that this is who Jesus was and this is what he said and did; and *this* is the Jesus—crucified and raised from the dead—whom we now worship as the risen and exalted Lord. Second, there was the existential concern of retelling this story for the needs of later communities that did not speak Aramaic but Greek, and that did not live in a basically rural, agricultural, and Jewish setting, but in Rome, or Ephesus, or Antioch, where the gospel was encountering an urban, pagan environment.

In a certain sense, therefore, the four gospels are already functioning as hermeneutical models for us, insisting by their very

nature that we, too, retell the same story in our own twenty-first-century contexts.

Thus these books, which tell us virtually all we know about Jesus, are nonetheless not biographies—although they are partly biographical. Nor are they like the contemporary lives of great men—although they record the life of the greatest man of all time. They are, to use the phrase of the second-century church father Justin Martyr, "the memoirs of the apostles." Four biographies could not stand side by side as of equal value; these books stand side by side because at one and the same time they record the facts *about* Jesus, recall the teaching *of* Jesus, and bear witness *to* Jesus. This is their nature and their genius, and this is important both for exegesis and for hermeneutics.

Exegesis of the four gospels, therefore, requires us to think both in terms of the historical setting of Jesus and the historical setting of the authors.

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

You will recall that the first task of exegesis is to have an awareness of the historical context. This means not only to know the historical context in general but also to form a tentative, but informed, reconstruction of the situation that the author is addressing. This can become complex at times because of the nature of the Gospels as two-level documents. Historical context first of all has to do with Jesus himself. This includes both an awareness of the culture and religion of the first century, Palestinian Judaism, in which he lived and taught, as well as an attempt to understand the particular context of a given saying or parable. But historical context also has to do with the individual authors (the evangelists) and their reasons for writing.

We are aware that trying to think about these various contexts can be an imposing task for the ordinary reader. Furthermore, we are aware that there is probably more speculative scholarship that goes on here than anywhere else in New Testament studies. Nonetheless, the *nature* of the Gospels is a given; they are two-level documents, whether one likes it or not. We do not begin to think that we can make you an expert in these matters. Our hope here is simply to raise your awareness level so that you will have a greater appreciation for what the Gospels are, as well as a good grasp of the kinds of questions you need to ask as you read them.

### *The Historical Context of Jesus — in General*

It is imperative to the understanding of Jesus that a reader becomes immersed in the first-century Judaism of which Jesus was a part. And this means far more than knowing that the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection (and thus they were “sad, you see”). One needs to know *why* they did not believe and *why* Jesus had so little contact with them.

For this kind of background information there is simply no alternative to some good outside reading. Either one or both of the following books would be of great usefulness in this regard: Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2d edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 373–546; Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969).

An important feature of this dimension of the historical context, but often overlooked, has to do with the *form* of Jesus’ teaching. Everyone knows that Jesus frequently taught in parables. What people are less aware of is that he used a whole variety of such forms. For example, he was a master of purposeful overstatement (hyperbole). For instance, at one point Jesus tells his disciples to gouge out an offending eye or cut off an offending arm (Matt 5:29–30 // Mark 9:43–48). Now we all know that Jesus “did not really mean that.” What he meant was that people are to do “surgery” on themselves regarding anything that causes them to sin. But how do we know that he did not really mean what he said? Because we can all recognize overstatement as a most effective teaching technique in which we are to take the teacher for what he means, not for what he says!

Jesus also made effective use of proverbs (e.g., Matt 6:21; Mark 3:24), similes and metaphors (e.g., Matt 10:16; 5:13), poetry (e.g., Matt 7:6–8; Luke 6:27–28), questions (e.g., Matt 17:25), and irony (e.g., Matt 16:2–3), to name a few. For further information on this as well as other matters in this chapter, you would do well to read Robert H. Stein’s *The Method and Message of Jesus’ Teaching* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

### *The Historical Context of Jesus — in Particular*

This is a more difficult aspect in the attempt to reconstruct the historical context of Jesus, mostly because so many of his teachings are presented in the four gospels with very little context.

The reason for this is that Jesus’ words and deeds were handed on orally during a period of perhaps thirty years or more, during which time whole gospels did not yet exist. Rather, the content of the Gospels was being passed on in individual stories and sayings (called “pericopes,” *pe-RI-co-pees*). Many of Jesus’ sayings were also transmitted along with their original contexts. Scholars have come to call such pericopes “pronouncement stories,” because the narrative itself exists only for the sake of the saying that concludes it. In a typical pronouncement story (Mark 12:13–17) the context is a question about paying taxes to the Romans. It concludes with Jesus’ famous pronouncement, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” Can you imagine what we might have done in reconstructing an original context for that saying if it had not been transmitted with its original context?

The real difficulty, of course, comes with the fact that so many of Jesus’ sayings and teachings were transmitted without their contexts. Paul himself bears witness to this reality. Three times he cites sayings of Jesus (1 Cor 7:10; 9:14; Acts 20:35) without alluding to their original historical contexts—nor should we have expected him to. Of these sayings, the two in 1 Corinthians are also found in the Gospels. The divorce saying is found in two different contexts (that of teaching disciples in Matt 5:31–32, and that of controversy in Matt 10:1–19 and Mark 10:1–12). The “right to remuneration” saying is found in Matthew 10:10 and its parallel in Luke 10:7 in the context of sending out the Twelve (Matthew) and the seventy-two (Luke). But the saying in Acts is not found in any of the Gospels, so for us it is totally without an original context.

It should not surprise us, therefore, to learn that many such sayings (without contexts) were available to the evangelists, and that it was the evangelists themselves, under their own guidance of the Spirit, who put the sayings in their present contexts. This is one of the reasons we often find the same saying or teaching in different contexts in the four gospels—and also why sayings with similar themes or the same subject matter are often grouped in a topical way.

Matthew, for example, has five large topical collections (each concludes with something like, “When Jesus had finished saying these things . . .” 7:28): life in the kingdom (the so-called Sermon on the Mount, chs. 5–7); instructions for the ministers of the

kingdom (10:5–42); parables of the kingdom at work in the world (13:1–52); teaching on relationships and discipline in the kingdom (18:1–35); and eschatology, or the consummation of the kingdom (chs. 23–25).

That these are Matthean collections can be illustrated in two ways from the collection in chapter 10. (1) The context is the historical mission of the Twelve and Jesus' instructions to them as he sent them out (vv. 5–12). The instructions that follow a bit later (vv. 16–20), however, are for a much later time, since earlier they had been told to go only to the lost sheep of Israel (vv. 5–6), while later Jesus speaks of their being brought before "governors and kings" and "the Gentiles," and none of these were included in the original mission of the Twelve. (2) These nicely arranged sayings in Matthew are found scattered all over Luke's gospel in this order: 9:2–5; 10:3; 21:12–17; 12:11–12; 6:40; 12:2–9; 12:51–53; 14:25–27; 17:33; 10:16. This suggests that Luke also had access to most of these sayings as separate units, which he then put in different contexts, as he was also being led by the Spirit.

Thus as you read the four gospels, one of the questions you will want to ask, even if it cannot be answered for certain, is whether Jesus' audience for a given teaching was his close disciples, the larger crowds, or his opponents. Discovering the historical context of Jesus, or who his audience was, will not necessarily affect the basic meaning of a given saying, but it will broaden your perspective and often help you understand *the point* of what Jesus said.

### *The Historical Context of the Evangelist*

At this point we are not talking about the literary context in which each evangelist has placed his Jesus materials but about the historical context of each author that prompted him to write a gospel in the first place. Again we are involved in a certain amount of scholarly guesswork since the Gospels themselves are anonymous (in the sense that their authors are not identified by name) and we cannot be sure of their places of origin. But we can be fairly sure of each evangelist's interest and concerns by the way he selected, shaped, and arranged his materials.

Mark's gospel, for example, is especially interested in explaining the nature of Jesus' messiahship in light of Isaiah's "second exodus" motif (see *How to 2*, pp. 299–80). Although Mark knows that the Messiah is the strong Son of God (1:1), who moves

through Galilee with power and compassion (1:1–8:26), he also knows that Jesus repeatedly kept his messiahship hidden (e.g., 1:34; 1:43; 3:12; 4:11; 5:43; 7:24; 7:36; 8:26; 8:30). The reason for this silence is that only Jesus understands the true nature of his messianic destiny—that of Isaiah's "Suffering Servant" who conquers through death. Although this is explained three times to the disciples, they too fail to understand (8:27–33; 9:30–32; 10:32–45). Like the twice-touched man (8:22–26), they need a second touch—the resurrection—for them to see clearly.

That Mark's concern is the suffering-servant nature of Jesus' messiahship is even more evident from the fact that he does not include any of Jesus' teaching on discipleship until after the first explanation of his own suffering (8:31–33). The implication, as well as the explicit teaching, is clear: the cross and servant-hood that Jesus experienced are also the marks of genuine discipleship. As the hymn by Horatius Bonar put it: "It is the way the Master went; should not the servant tread it still?"

All of this can be seen by a careful reading of Mark's gospel. This is his historical context in general. To place it specifically is more conjectural, but we see no reason not to follow the very ancient tradition that says that Mark's gospel reflects the "memoirs" of Peter and that it appeared in Rome shortly after the latter's martyrdom, at a time of great suffering among the Christians in Rome. In any case, such contextual reading and studying is as important for the Gospels as it is for the Epistles.

### THE LITERARY CONTEXT

We have already touched on the literary context somewhat in the section "The Historical Context of Jesus—in Particular." The literary context has to do with the place of a given pericope in the context of any one of the gospels, that is, where the evangelists chose to put the deeds and teaching. To some extent this context was probably already fixed by its original historical context, which may have been known to the evangelist. But as we have already seen, many of the materials in the four gospels owe their present context to the evangelists themselves, according to their own inspiration by the Spirit.

Our concern here is twofold: (1) to help you read (or exegete) with understanding a given saying or narrative in its present con-

text, and (2) to help you understand the nature of the composition of the gospels as wholes, and thus to interpret any one of the Gospels itself (as in *How to 2*), not just isolated facts about the life of Jesus.

### *Interpreting the Individual Pericopes*

In discussing how to interpret the Epistles, we noted that one must learn to “think paragraphs.” This is not quite so important with the Gospels, although it will still hold true from time to time, especially with the large blocks of teachings. As we noted at the outset, these teaching sections will indeed have some similarities to our approach with the Epistles. Because of the unique nature of the Gospels, however, you must do two things here: think horizontally, and think vertically.

This is simply our way of saying that, when interpreting or reading one of the gospels, one needs to keep in mind the two realities noted above: that there are four of them, and that they are “two-level” documents.

### Think Horizontally

To think horizontally means that when studying a pericope in any one gospel, it is usually helpful to be aware of the parallels in the other gospels. To be sure, this point must not be overdrawn, since none of the evangelists intended his gospel to be read in parallel with the others. Nonetheless, the fact that God has provided four gospels in the canon means that they cannot be read totally in isolation from one another.

Our first word here is one of caution. The purpose of studying the Gospels in parallel is not to fill out the story in one gospel with details from the others. Usually such a reading of the Gospels tends to harmonize all the details and thus blur the very distinctives in each gospel that the Holy Spirit inspired. Such “filling out” may interest us at the level of the historical Jesus, but that is *not* the canonical level, which should be our first concern. Again, our interest lies at two levels: that of Jesus himself in his own context, and that of the author of the gospel, written with his original readers in view.

The basic reasons for thinking horizontally are two. First, the parallels will often give us an appreciation for the distinctives of any

one of the gospels. After all, it is precisely their distinctives that are the reason for having four gospels in the first place. Second, the parallels will help us to be aware of the different kinds of contexts in which the same or similar materials lived in the ongoing church. We will illustrate each of these, but first consider this important word about presuppositions.

It is impossible to read the four gospels without having some kind of presupposition about their relationships to one another—even if you have never thought about it. The most common presupposition, but the one least likely to be true, is that each gospel was written independently of the others. There is simply too much clear evidence against this for it to be a live option for you as you read.

Take, for example, the fact that there is such a high degree of verbal similarity among Matthew, Mark, and Luke in their *narratives*, as well as in their recording of the sayings of Jesus. Remarkable verbal similarities should not surprise us about the *sayings* of the one who spoke as no one ever did (John 7:46). But for this to carry over to the narratives is something else again—especially so when one considers (1) that these stories were first told in Aramaic, yet we are talking about the use of Greek words; (2) that Greek word order is extremely free, yet often the similarities extend even to precise word order; and (3) that it is highly unlikely that three people in three different parts of the Roman Empire would tell the same story with the same words—even to such minor points of individual style as prepositions and conjunctions. Yet this is what happens over and over again in the first three gospels.

This can easily be illustrated from the narrative of the feeding of the five thousand, which is one of the few stories found in all four gospels. Note the following statistics:

1. Number of words used to tell the story

Matthew	157
Mark	194
Luke	153
John	199

2. Number of words common to *all* of the first three gospels: 53

3. Number of words John has in common with all the others: 8 (five, two, five thousand, took loaves, twelve baskets of pieces)

## 4. Percentages of agreement

Matthew with Mark	59.0 percent
Matthew with Luke	44.0 percent
Luke with Mark	40.0 percent
John with Matthew	8.5 percent
John with Mark	8.5 percent
John with Luke	6.5 percent

The following conclusions seem inevitable: John represents a clearly *independent* telling of the story. He uses only those words absolutely necessary in order to tell the same story, and even uses a different Greek word for “fish”! The other three are just as clearly *interdependent*. Those who know Greek recognize how improbable it is for two people independently to tell the same story in narrative form and have a 60 percent agreement in the words used, let alone in the exact word order.

Take as a further example the words from Mark 13:14 and the parallel in Matthew 24:15. (“Let the reader understand”). These words can hardly have been a part of the *oral* tradition (it says “reader,” not “hearer,” and since in its earliest form [which is Mark’s account] there is no mention of Daniel, it is unlikely that Jesus himself mentioned Daniel). The words were therefore inserted into the saying of Jesus by one of the evangelists (Matthew) for the sake of his readers. It seems highly improbable that exactly the same parenthesis would have been inserted independently at exactly the same point by two authors writing independently.

The best explanation of all the data is the one we suggested earlier—that Mark wrote his gospel first, probably in part at least from his recollection of Peter’s preaching and teaching. Luke and Matthew had access to Mark’s gospel and independently used it as the basic source for their own. But they also had access to all kinds of other material about Jesus, some of which they had in common. This common material, however, is scarcely ever presented in the same order in the two gospels, a fact suggesting that neither one had access to the other’s writing. Finally, John wrote independently of the other three, and thus his gospel has little material in common with them. This, we would note, is *how* the Holy Spirit inspired the writing of the Gospels.

That this will help you interpret the Gospels can be seen from the following brief sample from the NRSV. Notice how the saying

of Jesus on the “desolating sacrilege” appears when read in parallel columns:

Matthew 24:15–16	Mark 13:14	Luke 21:20–21
So when you see	But when you see	When you see
		Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that
the desolating	the desolating	its desolation has come near.
sacrilege standing in the holy place, as was spoken by the prophet Daniel	sacrilege set up where it ought not to be	
(let the reader understand),	(let the reader understand),	
then	then	Then
those in Judea must flee	those in Judea must flee	those in Judea must flee
to the mountains;	to the mountains;	to the mountains, and

It should be noted first of all that this saying is in the Olivet Discourse in exactly the same sequence in all three gospels. When Mark recorded these words, he was calling his readers to a thoughtful reflection as to what Jesus meant by “the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be.” Matthew, also inspired by the Spirit, helped his readers by making the saying a little more explicit. The “desolating sacrilege,” he reminds them, was spoken about by Daniel, and what Jesus meant by “where it ought not to be” was “the holy place” (the temple in Jerusalem). Luke, equally inspired of the Spirit, simply interpreted the whole saying for the sake of his Gentile readers. He really lets them understand! What Jesus meant by all this was, “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near.”

Thus one can see how thinking horizontally and knowing that Matthew and Luke used Mark can help you to interpret any one of the gospels as you read it. Similarly, awareness of gospel parallels also helps you to see how the same materials sometimes came to be used in new contexts in the ongoing church.

Take, for another example, Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem, which is one of those sayings Matthew and Luke have in common that

is not found in Mark. The saying appears nearly word for word in both gospels, but in quite different settings in each. In Luke it appears (13:34–35) in a long collection of narratives and teaching as Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem (9:51–19:44; see *How to 2*, pp. 292–94). It immediately follows the warning about Herod, which Jesus has concluded with his reply, “for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!” The rejection of God’s messenger leads to judgment on Israel.

In Matthew it appears as a lament (23:37–39) that concludes a collection of seven woes Jesus pronounced on the Pharisees (23:13–39), the final one of which reflects the theme of the prophets being killed in Jerusalem. You should note that the saying has the same point in both gospels, even though it is placed in different settings.

The same is true of many other sayings as well. The Lord’s Prayer is set in both gospels (Matt 6:7–13; Luke 11:2–4) in contexts of teaching on prayer, although the main thrust of each section is considerably different. Note also that in Matthew it serves as a model, “This, then, is how you should pray”; in Luke repetition is encouraged, “When you pray, say . . .” Likewise note the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3–11; Luke 6:20–23). In Matthew “the poor” are “the poor in spirit”; in Luke they are simply “you who are poor” (6:20) in contrast to “you who are rich” (6:24). On such points most people tend to have only half a canon. Traditional evangelicals tend to read only “the poor in spirit”; social activists tend to read only “you who are poor.” We insist that *both* are canonical and serve as God’s word to us. In a truly profound sense the real poor are those who recognize themselves as impoverished before God. But the God of the Bible, who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, is a God who pleads the cause of the oppressed and the disenfranchised. One can scarcely read Luke’s gospel without recognizing his interest in this aspect of the divine revelation (see 14:12–14; cf. 12:33–34 with the Matthean parallel, 6:19–21; on this point also see *How to 2*, p. 292).

Finally, if you are interested in the serious study of the Gospels, you will need to refer to a synopsis (a presentation of the gospels in parallel columns). The very best of these is edited by Kurt Aland, titled *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975).

### Think Vertically

To think vertically means that when reading or studying a narrative or teaching in the Gospels, one should try to be aware of both historical contexts—that of Jesus and that of the evangelist.

Again, our first word here is one of caution. The purpose of thinking vertically is not primarily to study the life of the historical Jesus. That indeed should always be of interest to us. But the *Gospels in their present form* are the word of God to us; our own *reconstructions* of Jesus’ life are not. And again, one should not overdo this kind of thinking. It is only a call for the awareness that many of the gospel materials owe their present context to the evangelists, and that good interpretation may require appreciating a given saying first in its original historical context as a proper prelude to understanding that same word in its present canonical context.

We may illustrate this from a passage like Matthew 20:1–16, Jesus’ parable of the workers in the vineyard. Our concern is what does this mean in its present context in Matthew? If we first think horizontally, we will note that on either side of the parable Matthew has long sections of material in which he follows Mark very closely (Matt 19:1–30; 20:17–34 parallels Mark 10:1–52). At 10:31, Mark had the saying, “Many who are first will be last, and the last first,” which Matthew kept intact at 19:30. But right at that point he then inserted this parable, which concluded with a repetition of this particular saying (20:16), only now in reverse order. Thus in Matthew’s gospel the immediate context for the parable is the saying about the reversal of order between the first and the last.

When you look at the parable proper (20:1–15), you will note that it concludes with the landowner’s justification of his generosity. Pay in the kingdom, Jesus says, is not predicated on what’s fair, but on God’s grace! In its original context this parable probably served to justify Jesus’ own accepting of sinners in light of the Pharisees’ finding fault with him. They think of themselves as having “borne the burden of the work” and hence worthy of more pay. But God is generous and gracious, and he freely accepts sinners just as he does the “righteous.”

Given this as its most likely original setting, how does the parable now function in Matthew’s gospel? The point of the parable, God’s gracious generosity to the undeserving, certainly remains

the same. But that point is no longer a concern to justify Jesus' own actions. Matthew's gospel does that elsewhere in other ways. Here the parable functions in a context of discipleship, where those who have forsaken all to follow Jesus are the last who have become first (perhaps indeed in contrast to the Jewish leaders, a point Matthew makes repeatedly).

Many times, of course, thinking vertically will reveal that the same point is being made at both levels. But the illustration just given shows how fruitful such thinking can be for exegesis.

### *Interpreting the Gospels as Wholes*

An important part of the literary context is to learn to see the kinds of concerns that have gone into the composition of the Gospels that makes each one of them unique.

We have noted throughout this chapter that in reading and studying the Gospels one must take seriously not only the evangelists' interest in Jesus per se—what he did and said—but also their reasons for retelling the one story for their own readers. The evangelists, we have noted, were authors, not merely compilers. But being authors does not mean they were creators of the material; quite the opposite is true. Several factors prohibit greater creativity, including the fact that these were *the words of Jesus*, for whom they had given up everything to follow, and the somewhat fixed nature of the material in the transmission process. Thus they were authors in the sense that, with the Spirit's help, they creatively structured and rewrote the material to meet the needs of their readers. What concerns us here is to help you to be aware of each of the evangelist's compositional concerns and techniques as you read or study.

There were three principles at work in the composition of the Gospels: selectivity, arrangement, and adaptation. On the one hand, the evangelists *selected* those narratives and teachings that suited their purposes. It is true, of course, that simple concern for the preservation of what was available to them may have been one of those purposes. Nonetheless, John, who has fewer but considerably more expanded narratives and discourses, specifically tells us he has been very selective (20:30–31; 21:25). This last word, the final word in his gospel and spoken in hyperbole (“I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written”), probably expresses the case for the others as

well. Luke, for example, chose not to include a considerable section of Mark (6:45–8:26).

At the same time the evangelists and their churches had special interests that also caused them to *arrange* and *adapt* what was selected. John, for example, distinctly tells us that his purpose was patently theological: “that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God” (20:31). This interest in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah is probably the chief reason that the vast majority of his material has to do with Jesus' ministry in Judea and Jerusalem, over against the almost totally Galilean ministry in the Synoptics. For Jews, the Messiah's true home was Jerusalem. Thus John knows of Jesus having said that a prophet has no honor in his own home or country. This was originally said at the time of Jesus' rejection at Nazareth (Matt 13:57; Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24). In John's gospel this saying is referred to as an explanation for the Messiah's rejection in Jerusalem (4:44)—a profound theological insight into Jesus' ministry.

The principle of adaptation is also what explains most of the so-called discrepancies among the Gospels. One of the most noted of these, for example, is the cursing of the fig tree (Mark 11:12–14, 20–25; Matt 21:18–22). In Mark's gospel the story is told for its symbolic theological significance. Note that between the cursing and the withering, Jesus pronounces a similar judgment on Judaism by his cleansing of the temple. However, the story of the fig tree had great meaning for the early church also because of the lesson on faith that concludes it. In Matthew's gospel the lesson on faith is the sole interest of the story, so he relates the cursing and the withering together in order to emphasize this point. Remember, in each case this telling of the story is the work of the Holy Spirit, who inspired *both* evangelists.

To illustrate this process of composition on a somewhat larger scale, let us look at the opening chapters of Mark (1:14–3:6). These chapters are an artistic masterpiece, so well-constructed that many readers will probably get Mark's point even though not recognizing how he has done it.

There are three strands to Jesus' public ministry that are of special interest to Mark: popularity with the crowds, discipleship for the few, and opposition from the authorities. Notice how skillfully, by selecting and arranging narratives, Mark sets these before us. After the announcement of Jesus' public ministry (1:14–15), the



first narrative records the call of the first disciples. This motif will be elaborated in the next sections (3:13–19; 4:10–12; 4:34–41; et al.); his greater concern in these first two chapters is with the other two items. Beginning with verse 21, Mark has just four periscopes: a day in Capernaum (1:21–28 and 29–34), a short preaching tour the next day (1:35–39), and the story of the healing of the leper (1:40–45). The common motif throughout is the rapid spread of Jesus' fame and popularity (see vv. 27–28, 32–33, 37, 45), which culminates with Jesus not being able to “enter a town openly. . . . Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.” It all seems breathtaking; yet Mark has painted this picture with only four narratives, plus his repeated phrase “and immediately” (or variations [1:21, 23, 28, 29, 30, 42 NASB]) and his starting almost every sentence with “and” (note that for the purposes of good English both of these features are obscured in contemporary translations, including the NKJV!).

With this picture before us Mark next selects five different kinds of narratives that, all together, paint the picture of opposition and give the reasons for it. Notice that the common denominator of the first four periscopes is the question *why?* (2:7, 16, 18, 24). Opposition comes because Jesus forgives sin, eats with sinners, neglects the tradition of fasting, and “breaks” the Sabbath. That this last item was considered by Jesus' contemporaries to be the ultimate insult to their tradition is made clear by Mark's appending a second narrative of this kind (3:1–6).

We do not mean to suggest that in all the sections of the four gospels one will be able to trace the evangelist's compositional concerns so easily. But we do suggest that this is the kind of looking at the Gospels that is needed for a more comprehensive understanding.

### SOME HERMENEUTICAL OBSERVATIONS

For the most part the hermeneutical principles for the Gospels are a combination of what has been said in previous chapters about the Epistles and historical narratives.

#### *The Teachings and Imperatives*

Given that one's exegesis has been done with care, the teachings and imperatives of Jesus in the Gospels should be brought into the

twenty-first century in the same way as we do with Paul—or Peter or James—in the Epistles. Even the questions of cultural relativity need to be raised in the same way. Divorce is scarcely a valid option for couples, both of whom would be followers of Jesus—a point repeated by Paul (1 Cor 7:10–11). But in a culture such as post-modern, English-speaking North America, where one out of two adult converts will have been divorced, the question of remarriage should probably not be decided mindlessly and without redemptive concern for new converts. One's early assumptions about the meaning of the words of Jesus spoken in an entirely different cultural setting must be carefully examined. Likewise, we will scarcely have a Roman soldier forcing us to go a mile (Matt 5:41). But in this case Jesus' point, what one might call the “Christian extra,” is surely applicable in any number of comparable situations.

A further important word needs to be said here. Because many of Jesus' imperatives are set in the context of expounding the Old Testament law and because to many people they seem to present an impossible ideal, a variety of hermeneutical ploys have been offered to “get around” them as normative authority for the church. We cannot take the time here to outline and refute these various attempts, but a few words are in order. (An excellent overview is given in chapter 6 of Stein's *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*.)

Most of these hermeneutical ploys arose because the imperatives seem like law—and such an impossible law at that! And Christian life according to the New Testament is based on God's grace, not on obedience to law. But to see the imperatives as law is to misunderstand them. They are *not* law in the sense that one must obey them *in order to* become or remain a Christian; our salvation does not depend on perfect obedience to them. Rather, they are descriptions, by way of imperative, of what Christian life should be like *because of* God's prior acceptance of us. A no-retaliation ethic (Matt 5:38–42) is, in fact, the ethic of the kingdom—for this present age. But it is predicated on God's nonretaliatory love for us; and in the kingdom it is to be “like Father, like child” (see Matt 5:48). It is our experience of God's unconditional, unlimited forgiveness that comes first, but it is to be followed by an unconditional, unlimited forgiveness of others. Someone has said that, in Christianity, religion is grace; ethics is gratitude. Hence Jesus' imperatives are a word for us, but they are not like the Old

Testament law. They describe the lived-out love of our new life as God's loved and redeemed children—a love that is not optional, of course!

### The Narratives

The narratives tend to function in more than one way in the Gospels. The miracle stories, for example, are not recorded to offer morals or to serve as precedents. Rather, they function as vital illustrations of the power of the kingdom breaking in through Jesus' own ministry. In a circuitous way they may illustrate faith, fear, or failure, but this is not their primary function. However, stories such as the wealthy man (Matt 19:16–22 // Mark 10:17–22 // Luke 18:18–23) and the request to sit at Jesus' right hand (Matt 20:20–28 // Mark 10:35–45 // Luke 22:24–27) are placed in a context of teaching, where the story itself serves as an illustration of what is being taught. It seems to us to be the proper hermeneutical practice to use these narratives in precisely the same way.

Thus the point of the wealthy man's narrative is not that all Jesus' disciples must sell all their possessions to follow him. There are clear examples in the Gospels where that was not the case (cf. Luke 5:27–30; 8:3; Mark 14:3–9). The story instead illustrates the point of how difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom precisely because they have prior commitments to wealth as such and are trying to secure their lives thereby. But God's gracious love can perform miracles on the wealthy too, Jesus goes on to say. The Zacchaeus story (Luke 19:1–10) is an illustration of such.

Again, one can see the importance of good exegesis so that the point we make of such narratives is, in fact, the point being made in each gospel itself.

### A Final, Very Important Word

Our final concern also applies to the prior discussion of the historical context of Jesus, but it is included here because it is so crucial to the hermeneutical question. The word is this: *One dare not think they can properly interpret the Gospels without a clear understanding of the concept of the kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus.* For a brief, but good, introduction to this matter look at chapter 4 in Stein's *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*. Here we will give only a brief sketch, along with some words about how this affects hermeneutics.

First of all, you should know that the basic theological framework of the entire New Testament is eschatological. Eschatology has to do with the end, when God brings this age to its close. Most Jews in Jesus' day were eschatological in their thinking. That is, they thought they lived at the very brink of time, when God would step into history and bring an end to this age and usher in the age to come. The Greek word for the "end" they were looking for is *eschatos*. Thus to be eschatological in one's thinking meant to be looking for the end.

### The Jewish Eschatological Hope The Eschaton

This Age (Satan's Time)	The Age to Come (The Time of God's Rule)
characterized by:	characterized by:
sin	the presence of the Spirit
sickness	righteousness
demon-possession	health
evil people triumph	peace

The earliest Christians, of course, well understood this eschatological way of looking at life. For them the events of Jesus' coming, his death and resurrection, and his giving of the Spirit were all related to their expectations about the coming of the end. It happened like this.

The coming of the end also meant for them a new beginning—the beginning of God's new age, the messianic age. The new age was also referred to as the kingdom of God, which meant "the time of God's rule." This new age would be a time of righteousness (e.g., Isa 11:4–5), and people would live in peace (e.g., Isa 2:2–4). It would be a time of the fullness of the Spirit (Joel 2:28–30) when the new covenant spoken of by Jeremiah would be realized (Jer 31:31–34; 32:38–40). Sin and sickness would be done away with (e.g., Zech 13:1; Isa 53:5). Even the material creation would feel the joyful effects of this new age (e.g., Isa 11:6–9).

Thus when John the Baptist announced the coming of the end to be very near and baptized God's Messiah, eschatological fervor reached fever pitch. The Messiah was at hand, the one who would usher in the new age of the Spirit (Luke 3:7–17).

Jesus came and announced with his ministry that the coming kingdom was at hand (e.g., Mark 1:14–15; Luke 17:20–21). He drove out demons, worked miracles, and freely accepted the outcasts and sinners—all signs that the end had begun (e.g., Matt 11:2–6; Luke 11:20; 14:21; 15:1–2). Everyone kept watching him to see if he really *was* the Coming One. Would he really bring in the messianic age with all of its splendor? Then suddenly he was crucified—and the lights went out.

But no! There was a glorious sequel. On the third day he was raised from the dead, and he appeared to many of his followers. Surely *now* he would “restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6). But instead he returned to the Father and poured out the promised Spirit. Here is where problems show up for the early church and for us. Jesus announced the coming kingdom as having arrived with his own coming. The Spirit’s coming in fullness and power with signs and wonders and the coming of the new covenant were signs that the new age had arrived. Yet the end of *this* age apparently had not yet taken place. How were they to understand this?

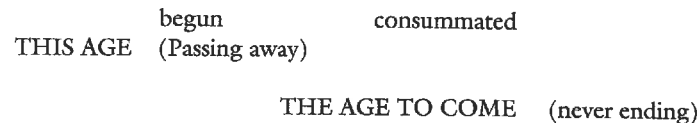
Very early, beginning with Peter’s speech to the astonished onlookers in Acts 3, the early Christians came to realize that Jesus had not come to usher in the “final” end but the “beginning” of the end, as it were. Thus they came to see that with Jesus’ death and resurrection, and with the coming of the Spirit, the blessings and benefits of the future had already come. In a sense, therefore, the end had already come. But in another sense the end had not yet fully come. Thus it was *already* but *not yet*.

The early believers, therefore, learned to be a truly eschatological people. They lived between the times—that is, between the *beginning* of the end and the *consummation* of the end. At the Lord’s Table they celebrated their eschatological existence by proclaiming “the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). *Already* they knew God’s free and full forgiveness, but they had *not yet* been perfected (Phil 3:10–14). *Already* victory over death was theirs (1 Cor 3:22), *yet* they would still die (Phil 3:20–21). *Already* they lived in the Spirit, *yet* they still lived in the world where Satan could attack (e.g., Eph 6:10–17). *Already* they had been justified and faced no condemnation (Rom 8:1), *yet* there was still to be a future judgment (2 Cor 5:10). They were God’s future people. They had been conditioned by the future. They knew its benefits and lived in light of its values, but they, as we,

still had to live out these benefits and values in the present world. Thus the essential theological framework for understanding the New Testament looks like this:

The New Testament Eschatological View

The Eschaton



The Cross and Resurrection

The Second Coming

*Already*

*Not Yet*

righteousness . . . . .	completed righteousness
peace . . . . .	full peace
health . . . . .	no sickness or death
Spirit . . . . .	in complete fullness

The hermeneutical key to much in the New Testament, and especially to the ministry and teaching of Jesus, is to be found in this kind of “tension.” Precisely because the kingdom, the time of God’s rule, has been inaugurated with Jesus’ own coming, we are called to *life* in the kingdom, which means life under his lordship, freely accepted and forgiven but committed to the ethics of the new era and to seeing them worked out in our own lives and world in this present age.

Thus when we pray, “Your kingdom come,” we pray first of all for the consummation. But because the kingdom—the time of God’s rule—that we long to see consummated has already begun, the same prayer is full of implications for the present. And, of course, by implication this means that by the Spirit we are now to live out the life and values of the “age to come” that has already been set in motion through the resurrection.