Chapter Nine

The Gospels

Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels

The four Gospels collected in and beginning the New Testament are biographies of Jesus. Two of them begin with accounts surrounding his birth (Matthew and Luke), and all four of them conclude with the trial, execution, and resurrection of Jesus. Their purposes are clearly religious. All four were written in Koine Greek, the form of the ancient Greek language written and spoken across the Mediterranean and Near East regions, including Palestine, during the Hellenistic period and into the era of Roman domination.

Something you might notice when reading all four Gospels is that the first three (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are quite similar. They repeat the same stories, sometimes using the same words. Biblical scholars refer to these three as the “Synoptic Gospels.” The word synoptic is from the Latin, and it means seen (optic) as the same or together (syn). One method of examining the Synoptic Gospels has been to compare them side by side to discover the similarities, the subtle differences, as well as the clear departures from each other – all as clues to the purposes, audiences, and meanings of each Gospel.

Perhaps the first important critical observation that can be made by comparing the four Gospels is that John is significantly different – in terms of the stories, teachings, style, portrayal of Jesus, and nuance of the overall religious or spiritual message. We will discuss this in more depth in a separate chapter on John.

A second very important critical observation is that Mark appears to have been written first and served as a documentary source for Matthew and Luke. This textual view or approach is called “Markan Priority.”

Mark is not the earliest still existing piece of Christian writing that we have – the earliest surviving Christian text we have is First Thessalonians. But there is powerful evidence that Mark was the first of the four Gospels. Most of Mark also appears in either Matthew or Luke, which borrow or repeat these stories. Sometimes the wording is nearly identical, but it is also fascinating to see how Matthew and Luke subtly alter some of Mark’s account for their own purposes or audiences. (See more below in the section titled “The Synoptic Gospels: Introduction to Matthew and Luke.”)
Matthew and Luke also seem to borrow from a now lost source of sayings by Jesus, a hypothetical document called “Q” (so-called for the German word *Quelle*, which just means “source”), which Mark does not use. Matthew also seems to have another source unique to his Gospel only, just as Luke has a third source unique to his Gospel only.

**Mark**

We know very little about the author of the Gospel of Mark. Earlier traditions ascribed it to John Mark (also known as Mark the Evangelist), an assistant and interpreter for the Apostle Peter. Scholarly consensus currently suggests that it is unlikely that this Mark authored the Gospel. The author was likely a literate Greek-speaking Christian from the first-century CE who was either Jewish or very familiar with Judaism. He seems to be writing for a Greek-speaking Gentile audience: notice how he explains Jewish traditions and translates Aramaic words. The references in Chapter 13 to the destruction of Jerusalem have suggested to some that Mark was likely written sometime between 66 CE, when a Jewish revolt began, and 70 CE, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple.

The Gospel of Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels. It is tightly focused on the ministry of Jesus Christ from his baptism by John, which opens Chapter 1, to the sudden ending in Chapter 16, a scene at his empty tomb. The style and language of Mark is concrete, vivid, and action-oriented, often lacking the extended teachings or theological meditations of the other three Gospels. This action emphasis is reinforced in the representation of Jesus. He is portrayed as doing: healing the sick, casting out demons, teaching and preaching, etc. And he is portrayed as moving: take a look at a map of first-century Galilee, Samaria, and Judea, and trace the movement of Mark’s Jesus through the various chapters.

In fact, Jesus’s movement and ministry might be the best way to understand the structure of the narrative:

I. **The Inauguration of His Public Ministry:** Baptism of Jesus at the River Jordan and Temptation in the Wilderness (1:1-13)

II. **Jesus’s Ministry in Galilee** (1:14-8:26)

III. **Journey from Caesarea Philippi (north of Galilee) south to Jerusalem (in Judea)**

IV. **Jesus’s Ministry in Jerusalem** (11:1-15:47)

V. **The Enigmatic Conclusion at an Empty Tomb** (16:1-8)
Markan Irony

One of the most interesting literary features of the narrative is the use of irony. One of the simplest definitions of the slippery literary term irony suggests that we should think of irony as the gap between what is said and what is meant. In fact, the author uses this device so often that scholars often refer to it very specifically as “Markan irony.”

For example, the Gospel of Mark opens by telling us about “the good news [or “gospel,” in Greek euangelion or “good news”] of Jesus Christ” (1:1), and the very first act of Jesus’s public ministry is to go to Galilee for the purpose of “proclaiming the good news of God” (1:14). None of this is surprising. It seems clear that the Gospel of Mark was written to spread the good news of Jesus. But, over and over, Jesus tells his followers and others to keep silent about him and his works. Take, for instance, this episode from the end of Chapter 1, in which Jesus heals a leper:

Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter. (Mark 1:41-45)

Not only does Jesus’s injunction here to “be silent” (see 1:25) seem inconsistent with “proclaiming the good news of God” (1:14), but the leper’s disobedience – he immediately begins to tell everyone about Jesus! – is what allows the good news to spread (to Jesus’s dismay, because he can’t go into town anymore?).

This irony about keeping silent/spreading the good news is not limited to the opening. In Chapter 5, Jesus heals a girl and then immediately tells those who saw it happen to keep quiet: “He strictly ordered them that no one should know this” (5:43). Yet, Mark writes it all down to share with others, and Jesus himself, in the previous chapter, has just suggested to a very large crowd that they need to let the gospel light shine and stop keeping things hidden or secret:
He said to them, “Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” (Mark 4:21-23)

Then in Chapter 7, we learn that the more Jesus asked or ordered them to keep quiet about him and his works, “the more zealously they proclaimed it” (7:36).

Jesus’s teachings themselves often seem deeply ironic in Mark, as when he tells his disciples that leaders should be servants (10:41-45), for instance. In fact, his preferred method of teaching, the parable, might be ironic: Does Jesus teach in parables not as examples that clarify difficult spiritual ideas, but as ways to make sure that (some, most, or all of) the crowd does not learn or understand? Are the parables so confusing that Jesus needs to explain them in private to his disciples (see 4:1-34)?

Other ironies also abound in Mark, in the portrayal of the characters, for example. Jesus seems to be denied, forgotten, misunderstood, and rejected by his family and friends, not to mention religious leaders, and even his own disciples. Yet the demons seem to “know” exactly who he is (see 1:34, for example), as does the Roman centurion at the crucifixion, who says, “Truly this man was God’s Son” (15:39). The violent and brutal Pontius Pilate is the one who wants to show mercy to Jesus and release him (15:1-15), and it is this same Pilate, who is supposed to be the in-charge leader and agent of imperial power and control, who is pressured into relinquishing his authority “to satisfy the crowd” (15:15).

Yet perhaps the most important irony in Mark can be found in the portrayal of Jesus himself. On the one hand, Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ, “the Holy One of God,” as the man possessed by an “unclean spirit” recognizes immediately (1:24, 1:23, more irony!). He performs miracles, heals the sick, casts out demons, raises the dead, faces down Satan, teaches with authority, and shows no fear of kings or chief priests or emperors or prefects. Jesus seems to be powerful, but Mark portrays him as a sad, suffering, vulnerable, and apparently helpless victim, who is rejected by almost everyone. He is misunderstood, rejected, betrayed, abandoned by his friends in a moment of great need, denied, spit upon, passed over for a murderer, flogged, tortured, mocked and taunted, stripped naked, and executed. Mark emphasizes in his terse and vivid style all of these painful details, perhaps to highlight that the message of the Son of God is not so much one of power and status (at least as understood in secular or political ways) but one of conflict, struggle, and suffering.
To highlight, then, just one more irony, we might observe that at its core the “good news” in Mark is a story of immense and unjust suffering.

**Mark’s Apocalyptic Style**

Related to the themes of suffering throughout Mark is the Gospel’s use of the features of the apocalypse. (For more on the features that define the apocalypse as a genre, see Chapter Seven.)

There is a sense of urgency throughout Mark. You might notice this in Mark’s repeated use of his favorite adverb, “immediately.” The world seems wicked and disordered. An evil empire ruled by foolish but vicious, violent, and self-serving elites seems to control the known world. Religious leaders – the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes, who are usually in conflict with each other as well as the Romans and the Herodians (the Jewish group who support the rule of Herod Antipas) – all seem united in their opposition to Jesus and his message of “love your neighbor” (12:31). Things are bad and weird and full of crisis.

Yet John, as we know from the opening of the Gospel, is “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (1:4). Is something about to change? In Chapter 13, Jesus seems to say so. He prophesies the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (13:1-2) and then describes a time of wars, earthquakes, and famines (13:6-18), before urging his disciples to resist and remain faithful in a time of oppression and persecution (13:9-23). Here the suffering that the Son of God or Son of Man endures becomes also the fate of his disciples, who “will be hated by all because of my name” (13:13).

Nevertheless, as in Daniel and Revelation, it is predestined that the oppression, the reign of the wicked, and the suffering that comes with it will not last forever. History will come to a spectacular end, and “Heaven and earth will pass away” (13:31). Yet before that culmination of time, the Son of Man will “gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (12:27).

As in Daniel before it and Revelation after it, Mark portrays a corrupt, chaotic, and violent world of the present in which the wicked and powerful oppress the faithful. Yet that present will eventually yield to a future of peace (for the elect) and justice. In the meantime, during the crisis, Jesus urges his followers, with apocalyptic urgency, to stay alert and not be led astray: “what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake” (13: 37).
The Synoptic Gospels: Matthew and Luke

Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.” (Matt. 13:34-35)

Scholar Kyle Keefer offers this focus for our continued exploration of the Synoptic Gospels: “For a literary reading, however, the interrelationship of the Synoptics has only one primary interest, and it relates to Matthew and Luke. If Matthew and Luke use Mark as a guide, when they differ from Mark, they have made an interpretive choice” (22).

Beyond such literary criticism, the study of these interpretive choices also fuels theological, historical, socio-historical, and political discussions as scholars and lay readers alike seek to deepen their understanding of the significance of Jesus. Theological discussions revolve around the situation of Jesus’s birth, life, death, and resurrection – the Passion – including key moments such as his baptism and later transfiguration; historical, socio-historical, and political discussions center on tracking the accuracy of ancient records in order to paint holistic portraits of the societies that influenced the life and death of Jesus, both contemporaneously and in the following decades that witnessed the development of the Jesus movement into the new religion of Christianity. As we have been learning, this development was codified in the creation and canonization of the New Testament (see Chapter Two)

The theological perspective of the Synoptic Gospels seems especially interested in the fundamental nature of Jesus’s being, his humanity and divinity. While much care is taken to document the humanness of Jesus, from descriptions of his birth to his temptations in the wilderness, in literary terms, there is perhaps no greater focus than that of Jesus’s own repetitive self-descriptor, “Son of Man.” Consider this exchange between Jesus and the high priest, Caiaphas, upon Jesus’s arrest in the book of Matthew: “But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, ‘I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven’” (Matthew 26:62-64).

Such readers can also explore this example as evidence of eschatological concerns along with tracking the motif of staying “awake” and “alert:”
• “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. . . Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” (Matthew 24:36, 42)

• “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that is desolation has come near. Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written; Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” (Luke 21: 20-22; 36)

Matthew

The book of Matthew opens the New Testament and, thus positioned, functions as a bridge to the Hebrew Bible (or, Old Testament). We see evidence of that function through the text’s literary structure: five narrative sections interspersed with what are known as the five discourses of Jesus. These five discourses are meant to parallel the five books of the Torah, thus providing space for Jesus’s laws and teachings. (Some of the early verses of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, 5:3-12, are known as the beatitudes, or explanations of Jesus’s blessings; some of these can also be found in Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain,” in chapter 6).

So, we can already determine a main thematic concern for Matthew: the law. Scholar Robert Banks explains that

In his [Jesus’s] day, contemporary interpretations of the Jewish Law provided the main context within which his teaching was formulated and he was frequently constrained to define his position in relation to them. The gospels contain ample evidence of the struggle that ensued throughout his ministry, ultimately resulting in its termination. (1-2)

One example of this evidentiary struggle occurs in chapter 15 when Jesus responds to a question from the Pharisees regarding a Jewish dietary practice: “He answered them, ‘And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?’” (15:3). As
you read, keep a lookout for such moments where Matthew records modifications to Jewish law that do, indeed, reveal an emphasis on the law and what is “right.”

Further, as you read, you will note another thematic worry over the nature of authority – who has it? Rabbinic leaders? Political leaders? Jesus, who calls himself “Son of Man”? “Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (7:28-29).

![Fig. 14. Man of Matthew. Inset image is The Man of Matthew, from folio 21v, Book of Durrow, illuminated medieval manuscript.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Durrow)

Lastly, though scholars have been reluctant to reach conclusions regarding both the author, or Evangelist’s, identity and location, they generally point to his “familiarity with Judaism and ... with the geography of Palestine” as well as with the first Jewish Revolt (66-70 CE) as grounds to support the theory that Matthew comes to us from an urban area.
close to Palestine around 80 CE, according to J.R.C. Cousland in the introduction to Matthew in the fourth edition of The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV.

**Genealogical Records and Dream Messages**

Matthew demonstrates keen attention to audience when he begins his gospel with a genealogical record of Jesus that first establishes him as both the son of a king and the son of an Israelite patriarch (see 1:1). He follows with a detailed lineage that leads to the story of Jesus’s birth that focuses more on Joseph than on Jesus’s mother, Mary:

… an angel of the Lord appeared to him [Joseph] in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.’ … When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until after she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.” (1:20, 24)

This focus is part of the bridge Matthew seeks to provide between established Jewish traditions and the new Jesus movement. The power of Joseph’s family heritage gets conferred to Jesus by way of naming rights and formal adoption. There’s an ontological consideration here, too, as Jesus’s status as both human and God is established.

We see another part of that bridge with the appearance of an “angel of the Lord” who delivers a key message to Joseph via his dreams. Another example of angels and dreams involves the wise men from the East who were sent by King Herod to investigate the news of Jesus’s birth in chapter 2, “And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road” (v. 12).

**Messianic Fulfillment**

Another key aspect to Matthew’s bridge is linking the Hebrew messianic prophecies of figures such as Moses, Elijah, and Isaiah with the person of Jesus:

- “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’” (1:23)

- “This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, ‘He took our infirmities and bore our diseases’.” (8:17)
• “And the disciples asked him, ‘Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’ He replied, ‘Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.’” (17:10-12)

The Narrative Account of Jesus’s Ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem

As Matthew offers his own account of Jesus’s ministry, through his version of the miracles, healings, exorcisms, and teachings, he creates a distinctive binary lens with which to view it:

Stylistically, therefore, Matthew has composed a gospel that creates a taxonomy of good and evil. In Jesus’ words, ‘Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters’ (12:30). Because of this structure, the tone of his gospel is surprisingly different from Mark’s, even though the two share much of the same content. While Mark’s authorial voice is muted and enigmatic, Matthew writes with earnestness and absolute surety. (Keefer 33)

This earnestness is perhaps most benignly recognizable in the popular verse, “‘Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you’” (7:7). There is no reflection here of the complexity we see in the Hebrew Bible’s wisdom literature, for example, or even in that Bible’s prophetic oracles. Less benignly, Matthew’s narrative surety “need[s] enemies in order to draw the protagonist and his disciples more sharply. Most often, the characters that play the role of builders on sand are Jewish authority figures”; thus, “It is important to recognize that Matthew’s gospel in particular has been used for anti-Semitic purposes” (Keefer 35, 36).

We see further evidence in support of that uncomfortable claim by noting Matthew’s most notable contributions to the Passion story: the presence of Roman guards at the entrance of Jesus’s tomb (see 27:65-66) and the apparent bribery by Jewish officials of them, “After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, telling them, ‘You must say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while you were asleep’” (28:12-13). Christians throughout history would take this literary embellishment and blame Jews for the death of Jesus, and then turn that interpretation into hate-filled oppression against their contemporary Jewish brethren. Notably, the pogroms in eastern Europe and Russia in the 1880s reflected this
shallow understanding as does the Holocaust. That the literary need for drama could hold sway over so much human history is testament to the power of stories in general.

Luke

The Gospel of Luke functions as a cohesive narrative with the book of Acts and is commonly referred to as Luke-Acts. While we will learn more about that connection in Chapter Ten, for now we should know that the book serves as the last of the synoptic gospels and has traditionally been attributed to a physician who travelled with the apostle Paul in Rome and Antioch. Many scholars now doubt the historicity of this identity, however, citing the lack of references to Paul’s work within the text; indeed, some claim that the Lukan writer might be the only non-Jewish writer included in the Bible (Harris 367).

Scholars generally do agree that the text could have been written in “any major urban center in the Greek-speaking areas of the Roman empire” sometime around 85 CE, as noted by scholar Marion Soards in the introduction to the book of Luke in the fourth edition of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV*. Thus, the original language was Greek.

Modern readers will likely appreciate the literary cohesiveness of this gospel. As scholar Kyle Keefer notes, “The net literary effect of Luke’s aesthetic choices is a gospel characterized by completeness. Not only is Luke’s Jesus more congenial than Matthew’s or Mark’s, he is also more fully formed” (39).

Keefer also points out the text perhaps resembles the kind of biography of Jesus that modern readers might most recognize as such. Much of this is due to Luke’s attention to filling in details regarding Jesus’s early life, especially, as well as his expansion on Jesus’s appearance to the disciples following his death and before his ascension. There are other unique features of Luke among the Gospels, among which the following stand out:

- The angel Gabriel’s appearance to Mary (the *Annunciation*), 1:26-38;
- Jesus’s birth announcement to the shepherds, 2:8-20;
- Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son parables, 10:29-37 & 15:11-32;
- Zacchaeus the tax collector’s visit with Jesus, 19:1-10.

As you read these passages, consider the impact they have on the narrative as a whole as well as what they add to the Synoptic vision of Jesus.
The Prologue

The opening prologue distinguishes Luke as a learned writer: “Very succinctly, Luke presents a prehistory of his own work, his vision of the distinctive contributions of his own account, and the impetus for writing it. Alone among the gospel writers, he readily acknowledges his debt to other authors, and Mark is clearly one of the ‘many’ who have set out to ‘arrange a narrative’” (Keefer 37). Notice how this framework offers a different approach to the story of Jesus than the other synoptic gospels – it’s about the author himself, calling attention to his careful investigation regarding “the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed” (1:4). The “you” here is named as “Theophilus,” meant as a symbolic stand-in for any burgeoning Christian.

The Infancy/Childhood/John the Baptist Sequences

Luke presents a fascinatingly complex portrait of Jesus’s birth and childhood by interweaving its narrative with the story of John the Baptist. In this portrait, John’s elderly parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, “both of them [were] righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord,” and serve as a genealogical connection all the way back to Adam (by way of Aaron) as well as recipients of fertility promises delivered by an “angel of the Lord” (1:6, 11). The clear parallels to the story of Jesus’s own birth, by way of the virgin Mary, who learned of her own fate by way of the angel Gabriel, fulfill a similar objective – in a stunningly sophisticated way – as the opening chapter of the books of Matthew and Mark.

We can see the subtle beauty of what Keefer refers to as the “completeness” of the Lukan gospel in the closing verse of this first literary cycle: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” (2:52). With one sentence, Luke provides context to the missing childhood years of Jesus in such a seamless manner that it’s easy to overlook the theological weight of the claim as well.

The Narrative Account of Jesus’s Ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem

Much of what happens in chapters 3-21 regarding details of Jesus’s ministry is similar to the sequence reported in Mark and Matthew, though you will note the continued pattern of “filling in the blanks” as Luke demonstrates his literary skills. You might pay particular attention to the various prophecies Jesus delivers amidst the various parables.

You should also pay attention to the transfiguration:
And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they [Peter, John, and James] saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. (9:29-31)

While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” (9:34-35)

Fig. 15. Icon of the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ. 1405, Novgorod Museum, Russia. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Transfiguration_of_Jesus_Christ(15th_c.,_Novgorod_museum).jpg

The Passion Story

Readers who are comparing the details of the story of Jesus’s last days, death, and resurrection – the Passion – might notice a significant difference in the Lukan portrayal of Judas Iscariot. At the beginning of chapter 22, we read, “Then Satan entered into Judas
called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve; he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them” (22:3-4). Among the gospels, this is the only version that attributes Judas’s betrayal to something specific, indeed, something out of his control.

Another key distinction to the Lukan passion story is the extended narrative of Jesus’s appearance to the disciples following his death, and as a prelude to his ascension. For example, at the beginning of the final chapter, we see Jesus first appearing to a larger group of women than is described in other texts: “Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles” (24:10). Close readings of this verse suggest a more diverse following for Jesus than in other gospels, including a perhaps greater role for female followers.

Another part of the extended narrative relates to the amount of time spent and the type of conversations had with the resurrected Jesus. Luke returns to the messianic theme most directly in the last chapter:

> Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (24:44-47)

**The Synoptic Gospels and John’s Difference**

The Synoptic Gospels share a common narrative thread regarding the life and death of Jesus, starting with the virgin birth, including key figures such as John the Baptist, the twelve disciples, King Herod and Pontius Pilate, and the high priest Caiaphas, and moving along a similar timeline that puts Jesus’s entire ministry at about one year. You have read similar parables and felt the rhetorical power that even slightly different perspectives evoke amongst the books of Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

As we move onto the fourth and final Gospel, the book of John, you will want to attune your heightened literary skills to its distinctive portrait of the man called Jesus. Continue thinking about the relationship between the author’s contemporary audience and his rhetorical choices.
Introduction to the Gospel of John

Readers looking for similarities between the gospel of John and those of the Synoptics often land on the word *testimony* as their sole resting place, for it is written in the closing chapter of John: “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true” (21:24).

That this book shares in the gospel requirements of testifying to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is really its only shared feature as the writer does not follow the plot structure of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Indeed, the Gospel of John offers very little in the way of narrative - there are no parables, no characters that grow in their relationship with Jesus, or even much discernible action. Scholar Kyle Keefer offers this analogy to help readers prepare for the reading experience:

> Around the year 600 CE, Pope Gregory the Great was discussing the varieties of biblical interpretation. He vividly described the Bible as ‘almost like a river, both shallow and deep, in which a lamb may walk and an elephant swim.’
Commentators on the New Testament have often used Gregory’s imagery to describe the Gospel of John in particular. (Keefe 43)

Written later than the other gospels, John reflects a highly abstract meditation on the divine nature of Jesus. The writer displays little interest in exploring the human aspect of Jesus; you will find few mentions of the “Son of Man” here. What you will find, through a series of “I am” statements, is an extraordinarily complex exploration on the nature of God as it relates to the developing Christian religion. Thought to be “a product of the ‘Johannine school,’ which ancient tradition perhaps correctly locates at Ephesus in western Asia Minor at a time when persecution by Roman authorities was becoming more frequent, and conflicts between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians as well between Christians in general and Jews were becoming more intense,” the book seems to serve a purpose greater than biography (Neyrey 1879).

You will read more about the “Johannine school” in upcoming chapters; for now, you will want to know that the influence of contemporary events on this gospel’s writer often leads him to stark characterizations (and little nuance), for the historical record is of less concern than the metaphysical preoccupations of the mind, body, and spirit.

**Narrative Features**

There are some key motifs and literary practices within the book of John, however, that contemporary readers would have been especially keen to note, as scholar Jerome H. Neyrey articulates in his introduction to the book of John in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Here are some of them:

- **Light/darkness.** Jesus becomes metaphorically synonymous with “light” in John’s gospel: “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of the people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (1:3b-5). Such a distinction separates the holy nature of Jesus from the darkness of Earth. This motif is also used to distinguish Jesus from those prophets who came before him, namely John the Baptist (see 1:6-9).

- **Miracle narrative.** While the Gospel of John does not spend as much time focusing on the specifics of Jesus’ miracles, relative to the other gospels, it does rely on a recognizable framework for those he does recount. As you read, look for the pattern that starts with a description of the disease before moving to the account of the cure;
this account should be followed with proof of the cure and then an appeal to the healer’s honor.

- “Farewell address.” There are eight stages to mark the literary style of a “farewell address.” This style was common to both Jewish and Greek literature and serves as an underlying foundation for chapters 14-17 in the book of John. As you read, note the eight stages of the farewell address:

1. Announcing the death or departure.
2. Providing an overview of the departing person’s life.
3. Describing how to maintain relationship with the departed.
4. Identifying the knowledge left behind.
5. Predicting events to come.
6. Inciting to virtue.
7. Naming of the successor.
8. Defining the departed’s legacy.

**The Structure**

Neyrey and other scholars have illuminated the organizational approach to John’s gospel and so we will take advantage of their light to guide our own reading of the text.

**Chapter 1:1-18: The Prologue**

That you are entering into a highly abstract realm with the book of John is immediately apparent: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (1:1-3a). Whereas the Synoptic writers took care in their openings to link the Jesus movement to existing traditions, John sees no such need; instead, he taps into the mystical nature of spiritual thought itself and links Jesus to the plane of uncreated existence. That Jesus has always existed – outside of measurable time in the same way of God – is further explained a few verses later: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (1:14). This metaphysical connection between body and the Word (or spiritual thought or mind) is fundamental to our understanding of John’s Gospel.
There is one small, but powerful, bridge between the John’s gospel and Jewish tradition, and that occurs through the figure of John the Baptist similar to other gospels. The key distinction lies in the act of baptism – in John, there is no need for Jesus to be baptized because he has always been holy: “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17).

Theologically, this prologue, and the physical and spiritual separation described between Jesus and John the Baptist, work to shine a spotlight on the divinity of Jesus.

Chapters 1:19-12: The Book of Signs

You will find the whole of Jesus’ healing ministry represented by just seven key miracles, widely referred to as the “Seven Signs of John” (see Fig. 16).

*Fig. 17. The Seven Signs, According to the Gospel of John.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter(s)</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2:1-11</td>
<td>Jesus changes water into wine at a wedding in Cana, Galilee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:46-54</td>
<td>Jesus heals a royal official’s son in Capernaum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:1-15</td>
<td>Jesus heals a paralyzed man in Bethesda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:5-14</td>
<td>Jesus feeds the crowd of 5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:16-24</td>
<td>Jesus walks on water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:1-7</td>
<td>Jesus gives sight to a blind man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:1-45</td>
<td>Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two more notable interactions further underscore the singularity of John’s account: Jesus’s encounters with the Pharisee Nicodemus, and with the Samaritan woman at the well (see chapters 3:1-21 and 4:7-42). The dense nature of exchanges between them and Jesus should remind you faintly of Mark, for Jesus speaks in deliberately obfuscatings terms. John, though, questions the surface meaning of words and gestures to their symbolic or metaphoric significance; as Keefer reminds us, John’s focus is on “the Word”:

In both these episodes [Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman], Jesus emphasizes words. After the Word becomes flesh (1:14), the Word spawns words. In the conversations with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, Jesus proffers special meanings for common words: spirit, worship, water, born, thirst. To engage in a dialogue with Jesus means letting him define words as he will. He becomes the master of language itself. (Keefer 47-8)
Chapters 13-20: The Book of Glory

There is perhaps no greater evidence of John’s “high” Christology than his section explicating Jesus’s final days on Earth. Whereas the Synoptics share a 12-month timeline of events regarding the life of Jesus’ ministry, persecution, death, and resurrection, John offers a three-year window. (Note: you can track this timeline by the marking of Passover.)

For example, remember Jesus’s appearance at the temple in the Synoptic Gospels: the focus is physical, equating the earthly temple with the heavenly home. The Gospel of John, however, shifts the focus to the metaphysical through a series of descriptions in chapters 2, 14, and 15; as Keefer explains,

Jesus’ own words, combined with John’s narrative aside, emphatically equate[] ‘Father’s house’ with temple and with Jesus’ body. When ‘Father’s house’ appears again in this later conversation, it carries with it the earlier definition. In the semantic web of John’s Gospel, Jesus points not heavenward but to the mystical sense that the disciples will dwell within his body. (50)

John adds dimension to this premise by introducing the “Advocate,” at the closing of chapter 14: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him...” (v. 16-17a); “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (v. 26).

This “Advocate” is often represented as a white dove (see Fig. 16), and plays a key role in the development of the “Johannine school.”

Chapters 20-21: The Epilogue

In the closing chapter of John, readers will find new details to the story of Jesus’s resurrection. At once more compact and expansive than the Synoptics’, John’s account of Jesus’ final earthly appearance starts with Mary Magdalene outlasting the other disciples who “did not yet understand the scripture” (20:9). Once she had seen the “angels in white” (20:12), Jesus appeared behind her; not recognizing him at first, she responds to his call, “‘Mary!’” (20:16) before heeding his directions to “...go to [my] brothers and say to
them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her” (20:17b-18). Many scholars argue for Mary Magdalene’s position as an apostle based on this interaction, and it certainly is compelling, for not only is she the one who stays and thus sees the resurrected Jesus first, but she also heeds the call to testify to his resurrection – and is most certainly believed. (For further reading, check out Ann Graham Brock’s *Mary Magdalene, The First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority.*)

It is after this exchange that we return to the familiar doubts of Thomas (20:19-30) as well as Jesus’s exhortation to Simon Peter to “tend [his] sheep” (21:16b).

John then concludes with a tantalizing detail unique to his own text: “But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (21:25). Perhaps this explains the tight focus on the seven signs.

**Gospel of John Conclusion**

As we reflect on this final gospel, Keefer reminds us that, “The gospel writers were not ruled by dispassionate objectivity; they created narratives. For those interested in the New Testament, their creativity must surely be considered an asset, not a liability. The gospels have a depth that reporting alone could never match” (Keefer 50-1). The creativity of John manifests itself in the intellectual pondering of the divine spirit through the duality of Jesus’s physical body and the Word; we will see more of this manifestation in the books to come.

**Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion**

1. Who knows Jesus is the Messiah in the Gospel of Mark? Who doesn’t?

2. How would you describe Jesus’s relationship with his family, friends, and disciples in Mark? How does such a portrayal compare to their appearance in Luke, Matthew, or John?

3. What did you notice about the way Mark portrays Jesus? What stood out? Record specific examples.
4. How would you describe Mark’s style of writing?

5. Where in Mark are readers’ expectations disrupted, or where are readers surprised? Where do you find a gap between what is said and what is meant?

6. Why is Jesus so misunderstood? Could this be in part Jesus’s fault? He keeps asking everyone to keep his identity, his power secret (Mark 1:23ff, 1:34, 3:1ff, 5:7, 7:36, 8:30, 9:9). Why does he insist on keeping his identity secret?

7. How are we supposed to understand the meaning or function of suffering in this text? How does this align with or depart from the understanding of suffering in the Hebrew Bible?

8. Find 2-3 examples that help explain the relationship between the eschatological concerns of post-exilic literature and the Gospels.

9. Define/review the term *pericope* and find several examples. What do they help us know about the construction of the gospels?

10. Choose a parable and compare/contrast its portrayal among the Synoptic gospels. What could account for those similarities/differences? In what ways are those similarities/differences important?

11. Track the role of angels and dreams in the Gospel of Matthew; in what ways are they reminiscent of the Hebrew Bible and in what ways are they new?


13. Character focus: compare the portrayal of Judas Iscariot amongst the Synoptic gospels.

14. Character focus: compare the portrayal of Jesus’s death amongst the Synoptic gospels.

15. Character development: in small groups, create a Twitter profile for Jesus; Mary, Jesus’s mother; Judas Iscariot, the disciple; Peter, the disciple; Pontius Pilate; King Herod.
16. As you read, keep a record of the “I am” sayings. What sort of portrait do they paint about Jesus? How does that portrait compare to those of the Synoptic gospels? What connections do you see to the Hebrew Bible?

17. Review the term *metaphysical* and find 2-3 examples that help you better understand the concept.

18. If a traditional plot line is elusive in the Gospel of John, how would you visually represent its dynamic nature? Are there symbols or images or colors, etc., that would represent the gospel?

19. Apply your literary critic skills and use the parameters of the “miracle narrative” to outline the story of Jesus’ healing the blind man in John 9.

20. Of whom is Jesus speaking here: “I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled” (17:12)? What does that sense of destiny add to the collective gospel understanding of the Jesus’ life (and of those who were a part of it)?

21. How do the final words of Jesus in John 19:28-30 compare to those recorded in Mark, Matthew, and Luke? What do those differences add to our understanding of the different gospels’ representations of Jesus?

22. Look at the story of Jesus’ resurrection in chapter 20. What details are similar to and different from those of the Synoptic gospels? What could account for those differences?

23. What message is John trying to convey? How is it presented differently, or what makes it different from the other three gospels? Or is there a difference of message?

**Works Cited**


Suggestions for Further Reading

On Jesus


On the Gospels


On Women in the New Testament


On Historical Context

