

Interpreting the Gospels

I. The Interdependence of the Gospels

A. Luke 1:1-4

B. Similarity in Wording: The degree to which these Gospels agree in wording naturally gives rise to the question of "why" they agree so closely.

Illus.: p113-116 from synopsis of the Four Gospels

1. Agree due to common history regarding the sayings and events of Christ's life.
2. Agree due to common Holy Spirit regarding the inspiration of text. (Assuming a dictation kind of method)

Problems:

- a. Doesn't explain why at times the wording doesn't agree
- b. Jesus spoke primarily in Aramaic and these agreements in the Bible are in Greek. It is unlikely that each writer would have independently translated the sayings and actions of Jesus from Aramaic into Greek in exactly the same manner.
- c. Doesn't explain why John's gospel is so different.

C. Similarity in Parenthetical material: It is highly unlikely that two or three writers would by coincidence insert into their accounts exactly the same editorial comment at exactly the same place

Illus. Mt.24:15-18 and Mk. 13:14-16 *let the reader understand*
Mt. 9:5, Mk.2:10, Lk.5:24, *he then said to the paralytic...*

II. The Form of Interdependence

A. Markian Priority: Both Matthew and Luke had available to them the Gospel of Mark

Evidence:

- a. The Shortness of Mark (661 verses compared to Matthew's 1,068 and Luke's 1149.)
Yet 97.2% of the words in Mark have a parallel in Matthew and 88.4 % have a parallel in Luke suggesting Mark as the source for Mt. and Lk. rather than the other way around.
- b. Mark's Poorer Writing Style such that Matthew and Luke have often changed to the correct style.
Example: Mk.10:20 compared to Mt. 19:20 and Lk.18:21 where a aorist middle is changed to the correct aorist active.
- c. Mark has more Aramaic Expressions
- d. Clumsy redundancies in Mark not found in Matthew or Luke.
- e. Harder readings in Mark that have been simplified by Matthew and Luke.
- f. The Lack of Matthew-Luke Agreements against Mark.
I.e. There are many agreements in wording of all three Gospels, and a fair amount of agreements between Matthew - Mark and Luke - Mark; there are much less agreements between just Matthew -Luke.

B. The Existence of Q: Both Matthew and Luke had available to them a second "Q" source. (No one is sure how the symbol "Q" was adopted, some speculate that it was an abbreviation for "Quelle" the German word for "source." It is now universally used to designate that material available to Luke and Matthew but lost to us now.)

Evidence:

1. Within Matthew and Luke, we find a considerable amount of common material not found in Mark.
Facts: 235 verses containing 4,290 words that Matthew has in common with Luke but not with Mark.
Illus.: Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:13; Mt. 7:7-11 and Luke 11:9-13.
2. The exactness of the wording (see above)
3. The order of the material such that many units that have no apparent logical or chronological succession are found in the same order such that the natural inference is a literary connection.
4. "Doublets" in Matthew and Luke, or the appearance of the same account or text two times in a Gospel

suggesting two sources.

Illus. Luke 8:16 & 11:33 compared with Mark 4:21 (markan source) & Mt.5:15. (Q source)

C. Theological Priority of Gospel Writers:

Given the above observations, one must resolve how to explain the particularities of one Gospel as compared to another. Why, for instance, do the chronologies differ if a "life of Christ" is the intention.

Illus. "A Sample of the Chronology of the Events in the Gospels"

Solution: The Author is primarily concerned with theology rather than chronological history or biography.

III. General Implications for Interpreting the Gospels:

A. Looking at Gospels as theology as written for a particular purpose within a given historical context will determine a particular approach to the Gospel in general and to each passage in particular.

I.e. Matthew's redemptive historical emphasis as to the Jewish expectations for the coming of the kingdom of God and the restoration of Israel.

Mark's sensitivity to the seeming "irony" of Christ's fulfillment of the Jewish expectations and how the "messianic secret" plays into the Old Testament predictions of the coming Messiah.

Method:

1. Read the gospel as a whole looking for frequently used words and/or themes. (Make special note of those major themes-key words in your gospel that is not a major theme-key word in other gospels.)
2. Develop an understanding of what the author means by the key words and themes, how they are developed within the story of Christ's ministry.
3. Do appropriate word studies when necessary. (See, "Methods in Bible Study, step seven)

B. Recognizing that the Gospels were a literary medium for doing theology rather than merely historical chronology will give the interpreter an eagerness to utilize the differences rather than try to "harmonize" them away. The emphasis of one as realized by a comparison to another will give insight into the intended point of a given passage. There is a "redaction" (editing) of the Life and teachings of Christ, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that needs to be evaluated.

We can be fairly sure of each evangelist's interest and concerns by the way he selected, shaped and arranged his materials. (Stuart & Fee, How to Read the Bible for all its Worth)

Method:

1. Compare your passage with parallels (if any) from other gospels.
(Note: The purpose of this is not to fill out the story in one Gospel with details from the other and thus blur the distinctives in each Gospel that the Holy spirit inspired. Our goal is not the reconstruction of the historical Jesus as much as to know the intent of each gospel in relation to our rule of faith and practice)
 - a. If your particular unit/passage is not found in other gospel, consider what this might mean in your gospel, especially in relation to the major themes of your gospel and the immediate context.

- b. Compare word choice to discover differences and how this might help you understand your gospels use of this portion of Christ's ministry.
 - c. Compare the immediate context of your text with parallel passages in other gospels to determine any unique ordering of the story which might give you insights into the authors intended message.
- C. It is important to understand the first century social context.
- a. What does it mean that Jesus is living "under the law." What is the law and what its expectations regarding worship, ethics and the future of which Christ then came to fulfill.
 - b. What had happened between the writing of the Old Testament scriptures and the birth of Christ.
 - c. Who are the various groups mentioned in scripture how did they fit into the law, if at all. (Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, etc.)
 - d. What is are the economic practices and political structures that are often assumed by the gospels.
- Method:
- Refer to References:
1. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the time of Jesus*
 2. Eduard Lohse, *The New Testament Environment*
 3. J. Duncan Derrett, *Jesus's Audience*
 4. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*
 5. Robert H. Stein's, *The Method and Message of Jesus Teaching*
4. Take seriously the various forms (kinds of literature) used by Jesus and the Gospel writers. (See "A Listing of the Basic Literary "Forms" used in Studying the NT)

IV. The Parables-- Getting THE Point!

The parables have suffered a fate of misinterpretation in the church second only to the book of Revelation. Stuart and Fee...

A. Purpose of Parables: Importance of Mt. 13, Isaiah 6

Mt.10-17, Why speak in parables?

1. Question, v. 10
2. Answer, vv. 11-17
 - a. 11, Given to understand mysteries of kingdom of God
 - b. 12, Giving and taking away
 - c. Structure of 13-17, Isa. 6.9,10 and Jesus
 - i. 13, Some see and hear without understanding
 - ii. 14a, This fulfills Isa. 6
 - iii. 14b-15, Quote of Isa. 6.9-10
 - iv. 16-17, Blessed are you because
 - a) you see and hear

Implications:

1. Parables are not intended as a model for teaching per se. They are used in response to the Old Covenant anticipation of the coming of the Kingdom of God such that many

would be divided out as illustrated by the very use of parables itself.

2. To understand the parables, it is imperative to understand the coming of the "Kingdom of God" as developed by the Gospels from the context of restoration promises in the Old Testament. (See below)

B. Literary Classification.

Here the debate revolves around how to classify the parables of Jesus. The point is not moot, because the classification can inform the proper way to interpret them.

1. *parabole*.

a. Proverb. Lk.4.23

b. Metaphor or figurative saying. Mk. 7.14-17

c. Similitude (expanded from a single, explicit comparison to a picture). Mk. 4.30-32

d. Story parable (singular incident) Lk. 14.16-24; Mt. 21.28-31; 25.1-13

e. Example parable (explicit moral example or counter-example) Lk. 12.16-21; 10: 29-37; 14.7-14; 16.19-31; 18.9-14; Mt. 18.23-25

f. Allegory (story containing string of metaphors) Mk. 12.1-11; Mt. 13.24-29; Mt. 22.1-14

2. Conclusions regarding biblical usage.

Stein, p. 22: "At times in the Old Testament and/or the New Testament a parable can refer to a proverb, a simile, a taunt, a riddle, or a metaphor, as well as to various kinds of story type of parables and allegories...Simply for convenience we shall define a parable as a figure of speech in which there is a brief or extended comparison."

3. Significance for interpretation

1. Danger of reductionistic understanding of genre, which would exclude a proper understanding of parables.

2. Need for genre sensitivity.

3. Need to recognize that there are some observations common to all of the parables--figures of speech are different from other types of utterances.

a. Illustrative, but open-ended

b. Cognitive and affective--both

c. Reveal and conceal

d. "Levels of meaning" Payne, from J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*. Describe, evaluate, proclaim opportunity, warn, challenge. There are illocutionary dimensions as well as instructive/informative dimensions

4. Need to seek the prominent comparison or comparisons, and to justify the symbolic significance we find.

C. Caution about interpreting parables:

The parables are not allegories as we commonly think of them

Allegory: Every part of the story has a "hidden" meaning quite foreign to the story itself.

Illus.: Augustine allegorized the parable of the good Samaritan in this way for instance.

*a certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho -- Adam
Jerusalem -- the heavenly city of peace from which Adam fell
Jericho-- the moon, and thereby signifies Adam's mortality
thieves -- the devil and his angels
stripped him -- namely of his immortality*

beat him -- by persuading him to sin
left him half dead-- he died spiritually but physically
priest and levite-- the priesthood and the OT temple ministry
Samaritan-- guardian in Christ
bound his wounds-- binding the restraint of sin
oil-- comfort of good hope
inn-- church
innkeeper-- Paul as the apostolic father of the visible church
etc.

Parables: Although various kinds, they are intended to say ONE thing taken as a whole. Therefore, to interpret a parable one must locate the point of reference as they draw the hearer into it and with whom he or she is to identify in some way as the story proceeds. The point of the story is not in the point of reference but rather in the intended response to the whole story itself.

Example: Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)

Context of parable is in the murmuring of the Pharisees over Jesus' acceptance of and eating with the "wrong kind of people"

Point of Reference in the parable is the lost son, the son at home and the father. The parable turns out to rebuke the son at home for not sharing the fathers love for the lost son.

Point of the parable regarding the prodigal son is not anything about how to be a good parent, or a warning about being a good son, it isn't even about how we are to receive sinners into the church per se, rather it is about God's willingness to forgive sinners and receive them with joy and our therefore sharing in this delight rather than in self-righteous resistance to God's forgiving of others.

D. The Kingdom of God in the Gospels (Summarized by T. David Gordon)

1. Major interpretations of the Kingdom of God

A. Ancient to Reformation. Kingdom is Church

WCF 25:2--

The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation..

WCF 30:1-2

P1 The Lord Jesus, as king and head of his church, hath therein appointed a government, in the hand of church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.P2 To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed; by virtue whereof, they have power, respectively, to retain, and remit sins; to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the Word, and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the gospel; and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require.

B. Protestant Liberalism. Kingdom the realm within which God's universal Fatherhood, humanity's universal brotherhood, (infinite) value of individual soul, and ethic of love are taught.

C. Contemporary Evangelicalism. Reign of God in individual soul.

D. Eschatological approaches.

1. Consistently future. Albert Schweitzer

2. Realized. C. H. Dodd
3. Existentialized. Bultmann
4. Present and future: G. Vos, W. G. Kümmel, J. Jeremias, O. Cullmann, H. Ridderbos, G. E. Ladd.

For most of these, the kingdom is not both present and future (a kind of implausible dialectic), but the kingdom is present in some *aspects*, while yet future in other *aspects*.

2. The Background to Jesus's Teaching about the Kingdom

1. The *idea* of God ruling is well-known
2. *Resistance* to God's rule is well-known
3. The inadequacy of the human monarchy in Israel is well-known
4. Longing for God to rule decisively is widespread.

G. E. Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 48:

"Therefore, when Jesus proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God, he did so against the background of Hebrew-Jewish thought, which viewed men living in a situation dominated by sin, evil, and death, from which they needed to be rescued. His proclamation of the Kingdom includes the hope, reaching back to the Old Testament prophets, that anticipates a new age in which all the evils of the present age will be purged by the act of God from human and earthly existence."

3. Kingdom in Jesus' Teaching/Proclamation

1. It is central to Jesus' Teaching
Mk. 1:14-15. Mt. 4:17, 23, Sermon on Mount (Mt. 5-7).
2. Kingdom *of God*
The interchangeability of *qeou'* (God) and *oujranw'n* (heaven) such that Christ speaks distinctly of a Theocratic Kingdom: it is God's kingdom. God rules, establishing his justice.
3. It is a kingdom divinely established. Note the language of the kingdom itself, The emphasis is on the third word; this is *God's* Kingdom. Note also how its blessings come exclusively from God and his power. Mark 10:23-27
4. It is at hand. -Mt. 4:17; -Mt. 11:2-6; -Lk. 11:20:
5. It is supremely valuable. Mt. 10:34-39:
6. Its beginnings are small. Lk. 18:15-17: .
7. It divides. Mt. 11:18, 19:
8. It displays God's judgment. Mt. 10:28:
9. It displays God's grace. Mt. 9:2-7:
10. It is visibly manifest in the church of Jesus Christ. Mat. 16:18-19.
Note that there is such a close relation between church and kingdom here, that the assembly of Jesus will receive the keys of the kingdom.

Vos, *The Kingdom and the Church*:

Peter's confession, therefore, was distinctly a confession which stood in contrast with the rejection of Jesus by others. From this we may gather, that the church of which Jesus speaks will have for its peculiarity the recognition of the Messiahship of Jesus in contradistinction from the denial of this Messiahship by those without...When Jesus says, "I will build *my* church," he evidently places this church over against another, to which this designation does not apply. The word *Ecclesia* is the rendering of the Hebrew words *Qahal* and *'Edah* which latter were the standing names for the congregation of Israel. In such a connection "my church" can mean nothing else than "the church which by recognizing me as Messiah will take the place of the present Jewish church." (78) ...Objectively considered, therefore, the church is that new congregation taking the place of the old congregation of Israel, which is formed by Jesus as the Messiah and stands under his Messianic rule. (79)

...It must be possible, this much we may confidently affirm, to call the church the kingdom. It is another question, to which we shall presently revert, whether the kingdom can under all circumstances be identified with the church. (81-82)...From what has been said it appears that every view which would keep the kingdom and the church separate as two entirely distinct spheres is not in harmony with the trend of our Lord's teaching. The church is the form which the kingdom assumes in result of the new stage upon which the Messiahship of Jesus enters with his death and resurrection. So far as extent of membership is concerned, Jesus plainly leads us to identify the invisible church and the kingdom. It is impossible to be in the one without being in the other. (86)

...But what about the relation of the visible church to the kingdom? Here again we must first of all insist upon it, that our Lord looked upon the visible church as a veritable embodiment of his kingdom...We must say, therefore, that the kingdom-forces which are at work, the kingdom-life which exists in the invisible sphere, find expression in the kingdom-organism of the visible church. That Christ is King in this church and all authority exercised within any church-body derives from him is an important principle of church government...(87)

E. Methodological Considerations:

(From "Methodological Considerations when interpreting the parables, T. David Gordon)

1. As in all biblical interpretation, **pray that God would give you a desire to discover *his* mind** in scripture, rather than to assert your *own* mind into scripture.
2. **Narrow the range of interpretive options by considering the literary context.**
 - a. General context: Jesus's teaching about the Kingdom of God throughout the gospels. Can you justify your interpretation as consistent with what is taught elsewhere?
 - b. Specific context: In a given gospel, what precedes and follows?
3. **Narrow the range of interpretive options by considering the usage of "stock" figures of speech** in Jesus' day (sheep, vines and trees as God's people, God as a judge, shephard, king, or father, etc.)
4. **Recognize that no analogy is a *perfect* or *total* analogy.** Ask: "In what *specific* way is this figure in the parable analagous to some other kingdom reality?"
5. **Recognize the historical, redemptive-historical, and covenant-historical context in which the parable was originally told.** During Jesus' earthly ministry, he had not yet given himself as a sacrifice for sin. The various institutions of the Sinai covenant were still in effect during his earthly ministry, and the great turning-point events in the history of salvation (associated with the exaltation of Christ, e.g., resurrection, ascension, sitting at right hand, returning to judge, gathering the Gentiles) had not yet occurred.

6. **Be very alert to characterization**, and to which (if any) character or characters in a parable are the “focus” of the parable. Even if you cannot be sure, on literary grounds, at least be alert to the choice you have made, and how that influences the interpretation (e.g., in the parable of the “prodigal son,” how is the parable different if it is considered the parable of the begrudging son, the prodigal son, or the receiving Father?).

7. In seeking the primary focus or purpose of a given parable, **look for what aspect would have been unsettling or surprising in Jesus’ generation** (e.g., is it surprising that those who labored in the vineyard all day received a day’s wage, or is it surprising that those who only labored a brief amount of time received a day’s wage?). Note that everything we can learn about social customs (how his culture understood shame, honor, etc.) in Jesus’ day will help here.

8. **When in doubt, play it safe.** If no known interpretive option is without some difficulty, choose the one that has the fewest difficulties, remembering that it was intentional on Jesus’ part to speak in a dark, obscure, and enigmatic way. By contrast, his apostles, after his resurrection, spoke plainly about kingdom realities. Interpret the less-clear in light of the more-clear.