**Reading the Bible Again…For the First Time**

**(Hermeneutics: The Science and Art of Biblical Interpretation)**

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**LESSON SEVEN: Select Issues in Reading the Gospels**

*“Those who would dismiss such study [of the Gospels] with a curt, `We would see Jesus’,*

*are simply closing their eyes to the one way in which it is possible to see Jesus.”*

E.J. Young

*Thy Word is Truth* (p. 129)

1. **The Gospels as Literature Within the Flow of Redemptive History (Historical Context)**

A. **The Gospels bridge the period between Israel and the Church**, between the old and the new covenant, between an almost exclusive Jewish setting to the mixture but dominant Greco-Roman setting of the mid to late first century of the common era.

IF you had never heard of the Bible and you were washed up on a desolate Island and a Bible floated onto your shore in your language, you would read it. WHEN you finished the OT and entered the Gospels, you would be confused. The OT would not have prepared you for much of the Jewish setting you will confront. You would not know about Alexander the Great and how he change the entire world. You would not know about the developments within Judaism since the close of the OT. You would not understand the implications of the Herodian dynasty…etcetera, *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseum* !!

WHY? Because the centuries from the close of the OT canon to the birth of John and Jesus were marked by the development of Jewish literature, religious structures, and cultural aspects that were not in the NT. This was the world that Jesus and the Apostles have to address.

1. **The Gospels must be read in light of OT and inter-testamental historical and cultural backgrounds (Second Temple Judaism\*).** It has been about 400 years since any Bible was written for the OT. The OT Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha require two oversize volumes. Also, contemporary with the Apostles is Josephus (born in 37 CE). He was a major player in the Great War (66-70 CE). Josephus provides us with over 1,000 pages of First Century Jewish History.

\* **Second Temple Judaism** is “a common **designation for** the Jewish traditions that flourished between the return of exiles from Babylon and the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple under Persian patronage **from 538** to 515 BCE, and the destruction of the Temple by Roman forces in **70 CE**.” It is during this period that the Jewish Septuagint, Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha literature was produced (mostly 3rd century BCE and following). It is also the period of the development of many issues and groups that we find in the Gospels that ARE NOT in the OT (e.g. Sadducees, Pharisees, Herodians, Josephus, etc.).

1. **The Gospels must be read with OT interpretive principles in mind** (cf. Robert Stein, *Interpreting Puzzling Texts in the New Testament* [Baker, 1996]).

For example, in the Gospels, “righteousness” is viewed as functional (what you do) not forensic (who

You are). John Baptized Jesus to “fulfill all righteousness.” Proving you were a true believer meant you

had to “bring forth the “fruits of righteousness.” To follow Jesus required evidence of “discipleship.”

D. Although **the Gospels were written and distributed several decades *after* Jesus’ death** and during the time of Paul’s mission, it maintains the integrity of the period it professes to reflect.

E. Contrast the claims of the “Jesus Seminar” and, to a lesser degree, liberal gospel scholarship.

Modern “liberal” Gospel scholarship is “looking for Jesus” because they have created a chasm between the **“historical Jesus” and the “kerygmatic Christ”** (this means that some claim that the canonical gospels are the early church’s view of who Jesus was **rather than** a representation of what he thought about himself).

1. **The Gospels as a Distinct Literary Genre**
2. The term “Gospel” to describe a group of writings in the NT was invented after the times of the apostles.
3. The Gospels represent a kind of literature which has some similarities to Greco-Roman literature but which also stand in comparison to such literature and are therefore unique in their own right. These books developed to meet the early church’s need to convey what Jesus said and did and, therefore, generated new dimensions in literary genre.
4. The **nature of the Gospels as literature**.

Snapshots, Portraits, or Abstract Paintings?

Historians? Theologians? or Both?

**Luke 1:1-4 tells us “how” the Gospels were written.**

Luke’s description affirms that the Gospels were written ABOUT Jesus, NOT BY Jesus. The Gospels are not a “tape recording” of Jesus. They are the story as the Evangelists deemed to record it. The PRODUCT is inspired Scripture. **The Gospels “are the memoirs of the Apostles”** (Justin Martyr, F&S, 135).

“The Synoptic Problem” (deals with why Matt, Mk, and Luke can be so much the SAME. It is an inductive study of “sources”).

1. What about **the “words” of Jesus?**

In what way are the Gospels the “**words** of Jesus.” Because we have the Synoptic Gospels…3 books recording

many of the same discourses and events…we can compare their texts. The comparison is surprising and, to

some, shocking. When accounts are the same discourse or event, the sentences are so identical BUT often

different! At the end of the day, the Gospel accounts are what God ordained and they must be defined (e.g.

inerrancy) on their own terms. The solution is in the **voice** of Jesus.

The concept of ipsissima verba (**very words**) and ipsissima vox (**very voice**) in relation to gospel records has been developed to clarify how the gospel writers conveyed Jesus’ teaching. [See article by Paul Feinberg in Geisler, editor, *Inerrancy*. This volume has articles from “The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy” that probe the validity, yea necessity, of this model.

**CONCLUSION = the words in the gospels may not be the exact words (verba) spoken by Jesus (although the exact words may at times be present) BUT the words which are found *convey an absolutely accurate renditio*n (vox) of the *identical meaning* of what Jesus intended to convey (when the Evangelist so represents Jesus).**

1. **The Gospels As Documents for Comparative Study**
2. Using a “Harmony of the Gospels” without “flattening” God’s choice of communication.
3. The harmony helps us to see common and unique materials between the four gospels.

The Gospel % of **Unique** Features % of Common Features

Mark 7 % 93 %

Matthew 42 % 58 %

Luke 59 % 41 %

John 92 % 8 %

1. **Comparing the gospel accounts can help us to see certain emphases of a given writer.** For example, cf. the attached example of the temptation account.

3. The **Gospels must be read vertically** (each one on its own) **and horizontally** (all together).

The Gospels were given to us “vertically.” This is our first task…how is that writer shaping his story of Jesus?

The total package of Jesus’ life also requires a “horizontal” analysis. We trace him from his birth to his ascension. To do this requires a *Harmony of the Gospels* (Thomas and Gundry). Writing a harmony started about 170 CE with Tatian’s *Diatessaron*.

1. The **nature of biblical inerrancy** centers in Gospel studies.
2. Principles of harmonization of apparent differing accounts

The unique feature of the gospels is that several books present the same event. The challenge is that these accounts often vary in their report. The task of comparing them in order to explain the variations is called “harmonization”.

1. Harmonization is ***not*** a leveling of the accounts into one composite whole. To do so violates the way God has given us the information. We must celebrate diversity in unity.
2. Harmonization is a process to account for the variations.

1a. A usually unsatisfactory solution:

Join divergent accounts,

If they will not merge,

Posit that they are two separate accounts.

2a. A better solution: Study the accounts and let their diversity dictate how to define the total event.

Cf. the Temptation texts; accounts of Judas’ death; Peter’s denials

3. Harmonization will ultimately allow all the details to stand together. The sum of the accounts is the total story. The writers exercised selectivity in how they tell their story.

The Temptation Narrative

**IV. Reading the Gospels in Context**

The accounts in the Gospels are not haphazard stories pieced together without regard to their connections. The Gospels must be read with an awareness of the larger context of Jesus earthly ministry in relation to his conflict with Israel’s leadership. Scholars have tagged this **the “conflict motif”**. It conditions a great deal of the Gospel material.

E.g. The Sabbath Controversies (Jn 5 [Sec 57]; Mk 2:23-3:6 [Secs 60-61])

Theological Controversies (cf. Mk 2:1-12 [Sec 53])

General conflict with the authority and opinions of Israel’s national and religious leadership.

Cf. John 43-47

Luke 16:31

1. **Illustrative Readings of Select Gospel Texts in Their Context**

A. The Birth of Jesus--the question of using the OT

B. The Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7; Luke 6)

C The “widow’s gift” (Mk 12:41-44 [Sec 201]) in light of the Temple Discourse context.

D. The Parables of Jesus--the question of the conflict motif

1. The nature and interpretation of parables

1a. Parables are extended similes. Parables are fictional stories using comparison to make a point. The details are not to be chased but are to complement the comparison. Nearly 1/3 of Jesus teaching was in parabolic form.

2a. Parables are not allegories to be spiritualized at every point (cf. Augustine’s abuse of The Good Samaritan).

3a. Parables are vehicles to convey a point in story form. As such they

1b. usually focus on a primary point to be scored and the entire parable should be read with that point in view;

2b. are formed to invite real rather than superficial hearing (Mt 13; Mk 4);

3b. parables do not work like narrative (e.g. the “what if” questions. Stein, 159);

4b. are designed to draw in even the rejecting hearer who becomes self-condemned when the punch line arrives (cf. the Temple Discourse during passion week, esp. Mt 21:40-46 [Sec 194]).

1. Illustrated readings of parables

Luke 10, The Good Samaritan

Luke 15, Lost Things: 100 Sheep, 10 Coins, 1 Brother

Luke 16:19-31, The Rich Man and Lazarus

Resources:

Geisler, Norman L., editor. *Inerrancy*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980.

Green, Joel B., Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, editors. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992.

InterVarsity Press has a series of dictionaries that cover the whole Bible!