

The Four Gospel Narratives and the One Gospel

In his book, *Jesus and the Gospel*, New Testament scholar Graham Stanton states:

"The decision to accept four gospels, along with the earlier acceptance of a plurality of gospels, was one of the most momentous ones taken within early Christianity, a decision which cries out for continuing theological reflection."

I concur. In fact, we often dodge the theological implications and richness of having four "gospels" or narrative accounts of Jesus' life and proclamation, death, and resurrection. Often, the question asked is the "why" question: *why* are there four gospels? As important as this question is, I think a more important question is this: *what do we do with four gospels?*

What do we do with the four narratives of Jesus' life—what we often call gospels? There are two dominant responses: harmonize or render irreconcilable. *Harmonization* is one of the most intuitive responses. By harmonizing them all, we do not have four different stories about Jesus, we have one unified, coherent account. Harmonizing eliminates the need for explanation and the possibility of question and doubt: did Jesus turn water into wine or not? Was Jesus on the mount or the plain when he preached his sermon? Or are they really the same spot, just put in two different ways? How many different times did Jesus say a certain saying? Such harmonization is not a new defense for the four gospels. It was attempted by Tatian, a Syrian Christian, way back in about 170 CE—a mere one hundred years after the gospel narratives were written. He compiled what is known as the *Diatessaron*—a harmonization of the four gospel narratives.

The other popular option is to conclude that the differences are irreconcilable: there are four different stories and the Jesuses within them are largely figments of the writers' imaginations or their community's expansion of the stories. The focus on the differences has rendered peripheral the question of the greater subject of the four evangelists' narratives. The differences lead to the conclusion that there is no center to the wheel—just a number of unconnected spokes.

Both of these approaches issue from certain *hermeneutical* positions about Scripture and the gospels. There are a few important assumptions and aims which stand behind these two ways of dealing with the four gospel narratives. First, there is an assumption of fear of difference. For some reason, the idea of different accounts of Jesus' life and different appropriations of his significance is troublesome. This assumption is tied closely with a second assumption: that the narratives are supposed to be historically factual accounts. That is, there cannot be difference among the gospel accounts, or else the historicity of them and thus of the gospel is called into question. This assumption additionally operates on a modern idea of history, where fact can be checked and the dominant mode of communication is written, not oral. Third, there is an assumption of uniformity. These attempts to lessen the impact of four different narratives assume that history reporting must be uniform from one person to another and without perspective (when has this *ever* been the case with historiography?). Fourth, there is a false assumption that differences are mutually exclusive of unity.

All of these assumptions are speculative and not well grounded. What if, rather than trying to explain away the phenomenon of four different stories of Jesus, we ask how they might *function* as four gospel narratives? This begs the question: *if they all offer slightly different accounts of Jesus' life, what then is the subject and purpose of the narratives we call "gospels"?*

First, in order to consider the gospel narratives in functional terms, we need to clarify two questions: What is *a* "gospel"? What is *the* "gospel"? The term "gospel" is a translation of the Greek term *euangelion* (*euvagge,lion*). What does *euangelion* mean? It means simply "proclamation" or "good news." The term *euangelion* is found among Greco-Roman writings and inscriptions. It can be used in reference to "good news" in general. For example, Philo, a first-century Jewish writer from Alexandria, Egypt in his treatise *Embassy to Gaius*, 18 uses the word to communicate good news of the end of a famine.

The interesting thing is that the proclamation of "good news" increasingly became associated with the rule or the rise to power of a new Roman emperor, carrying on the tradition established in reference to Augustus, the first Roman emperor. An insightful inscription from 9BCE states about Augustus:

The providence which has ordered the whole of our life, showing concern and zeal, has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving it to Augustus, by filling him with virtue for doing the work of a benefactor among men, and by sending him, as it were, a savior for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere...; the birthday of the god [Augustus] was the beginning for the world of the good news (euangelion) that have come to men through him.... For a moment, we can read this and simply insert "Jesus Christ" in place of Augustus. Interesting, isn't it?

Around the time Matthew wrote, the Jewish historian and apologist Josephus wrote in his book *The Jewish War* of the emperor Vespasian:

Accordingly, Vespasian, looking upon himself as already entrusted with the government, got all things ready for his journey [to Rome]. Now fame carried this news abroad more suddenly than one could have thought, that he was emperor over the east, upon which every city kept festivals, and celebrated sacrifices and oblations for such good news (euvagge,lia) (War, 4:618)

G. Friedrich writes in his article on eu-aggelion/eu-aggeli/zw ("good news"/ "good news-ize") in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* about the confrontation between Jesus and Caesar in the use of the "good news" terminology:

"Caesar and Christ, the emperor on the throne and the despised rabbi on the cross, confront one another. Both are "good news" (to the world). They have much in common. But they belong to different worlds." (2:725)

The word *euangelion* is also found in the Septuagint—the Greek version of the Old Testament. Isaiah 40:9-11 and 52:7 contain two important uses of the word in its verbal (participle) form.

Isaiah 40:9-11 Get up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings (o` euvaggelizo,menoj); lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings (o` euvaggelizo,menoj), lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" 10 See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his

recompense before him. 11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Isaiah 52:7: 7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace (po,dej euvaggelizome,nou avkoh.n eivrh,nhj), who brings good news (euvaggelizo,menoj avgaqa,), who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

In these passages, the "good news" relates directly to the activity of God, specifically in relation to God's rule. In these Isaiah passages, announcement of God's rule is "good news."

In Paul's letters, which were written before the narratives of Jesus' life, we find numerous references to the "good news" or *euangelion* (Rom 1:1-6; 15:15-16; 1 Cor 15:1-2; 1 Thess 1:4-5; 2:2, 8-9). If you look some of these up, you will find that the use of the term extends beyond referring to the narrative of Jesus' life. They refer to the whole event of what God accomplished in Jesus Christ—and it is not easily boiled down to "justification by faith."

When we turn to the gospel narratives, Mark's narrative is the only one that describes itself with the word "good news." Mark 1:1 reads: "The beginning of the good news (*euangelion*) of Jesus Christ [son of God]." This can be read in two ways: 1) it can mean the "good news" *about Jesus Christ* (objective genitive); 2) it can mean the good news *communicated through* Jesus Christ (subjective genitive). A third option is to understand that both are implied. This means not only that Jesus embodies the good news, but also that Jesus actually proclaimed the good news! Where do we get the idea that Jesus proclaimed good news himself? Answer: Mark 1:14-15 and parallel verses in Matthew 4:17: "Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the good news and saying that the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the good news."

Most scholars take Mark as a cue for the other narratives of Matthew, Luke, and John. That is, the other gospel narratives, like Mark, tell of the "good news" about and proclaimed through Jesus Christ. In short, and keeping in mind the ways in which the term is used in the Greco-Roman world and in the Septuagint, the "good news" is something proclaimed in the gospel narratives and by early Christians (and by us today): it is the message of God's action for the world in and through Jesus Christ. God worked through Jesus Christ, who both embodied and proclaimed God's work. An important conclusion to be drawn from this background of the word *euangelion* is that the "good news" is something more complex than a story of Jesus' life, God's love, or forgiveness of sins; *it is a dynamic, cosmic, event that is theologically, politically, and socially charged.*

So what are the "gospels"? Mark's opening verse leads to the confusing claim by some scholars that Mark created a new literary genre (type of literature)—a "gospel." I have suggested here that "gospels" are not types of literature in the way that a cookbook or short story is a type of literature. Rather, the "gospel" is the good news—a sort of key word that signifies the sort of message about Jesus and through Jesus.

Following the work of the British scholar Richard Burridge, scholars have recently shown that the gospels themselves are more like biographies (*bioi*) from Greco-Roman antiquity. The

general characteristics of *bioi* in antiquity include a presentation of a person's life, things said, things done, stories, miracles—though not necessarily a full account or in perfect chronological order. Writers of biographies often draw upon multiple sources. There are a number of possible purposes for writing an ancient biography: to extol the life of the person as one worthy of imitation; to show the magnificence of a particular person; to defend a certain way of life or thought—exemplified in the main character of the *bios*; to tell the story of the origin of a certain school or movement. More than one of these may be present, and there may always be one that could be the overall purpose of a *bios*. Such a conclusion needs to be argued and shown from the story itself. Whatever the specific purpose, biographies generally aimed at moral and community formation and communicating the significance of an individual rather than simply communicating historical information, though they are largely based on historical reminiscences.

Our gospel narratives have these general characteristics common with other biographies. **So what are the "gospels"?** They are biographies, narratives that proclaim God's good news in the life and deeds of Jesus Christ. Because the writers of these narratives believed that Jesus was God's son—the one sent by God to redeem and reconcile the world and God's people to God, and the one to usher in God's kingdom—the gospels through their narratives "proclaim" this good news. The important thing is to recognize that each narrative has a distinct way of, and purpose for, telling the story of God's work in and through Jesus. Differences and changes were part of the expected manner in which these writers wrote. Alteration was minor and was not considered being unfaithful with the material. They aimed at or achieved not the *ipsissima verba* ("the very words"), but the *ipsissima vox* ("the very voice"). But more than that, they were intent on proclaiming something other than the historical story of Jesus of Nazareth.

This helps us understand better what exactly these narratives are and how they function. **The gospel narratives of Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John are narratives aimed at recounting the life of Jesus because he was the one in whom early believers believed God had been revealed, the kingdom inaugurated, and the one after whom they sought to live their lives. This was done for the purpose of the formation and encouragement of the life and faith of the early Christian communities, and by extension us. The recounting of Jesus' life is not intended to be historical; rather, drawing on historical information they tell Jesus' story for the proclamation of the kingdom, and for the faith and encouragement of themselves and others.**

If we understand the gospel narratives in this functional way, then we are in a better position to see the usefulness of having more than one. The four provide for us four contextualized proclamations of the one gospel message. In a sense, they are like long, long sermons given by a certain writer to a certain people in a certain time and place. When we look closely, we will see how each writer said things or articulated points differently. We get a glimpse of how important it is to be contextually sensitive when proclaiming the gospel. We also see in the closeness of the many details that the gospel does have a definite content; it is not endlessly flexible without its parameters. Answering where the parameters are becomes clearer only through close reading of these narratives in conjunction with one another and the rest of the New Testament.

When we look at Matthew, then, it is important to keep in mind that Matthew is not intended to be an accurate, chronological, historical account of Jesus' life. This is not to say they are false,

either. Rather, we should read it as one of four narrative, biographical, *proclamations* of God's action in and through Jesus Christ. Matthew proclaims the story differently than Mark or Luke—we should be more concerned with asking how this can enhance and challenge our faith and witness, rather than whether it is more historically reliable than one of the others, as important as that question is.

What is the payoff for all of this? Here are a few points to consider:

1. We are in a better position to recognize the usefulness of each gospel narrative in its own right.
2. We can glimpse the importance of contextually, but faithfully proclaiming the gospel message.
3. We can expand our horizons of the applicability of the gospel message.
 1. This opens up discussion for answering: *how* has God shown love in Jesus? In what ways does God's act in Jesus challenge our world and presuppositions?
 2. This gives us some sense of the points of adaptability and the points which are not adaptable. We can see where the writers find more flexibility in their proclamations of God's work in Jesus Christ and what are the central "pillars" of the gospel message.
 3. We are also provided a fuller "script" to embody in our own lives and communities.