

WHAT ARE THE GOSPELS?

I. INTRODUCTION

II. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS

A. Jesus of Nazareth is undoubtedly the most significant figure in the history of Western civilization, whose influence on the course of history is completely unparalleled.

1. Within a century of his death, communities of followers had been established in all the major urban areas of the Mediterranean.
2. Two centuries after that, he was known, and even worshiped, by some members of the aristocratic elite in the Roman Empire; the Emperor himself, Constantine, became a follower in the early fourth century AD.
3. A century after that, the entire Empire was officially Christian. Christianity then became the central religion for virtually all of what became Europe and on into the New world
4. Throughout this period, from the early Middle Ages to today, the Christian church has exercised enormous political, economic, social, and cultural power—unlike any institution in the history of the West. At the beginning of it all is the man Jesus himself.

B. Followers of Jesus. The most obvious areas of Jesus' influence, of course, is in the religious lives of his followers.

1. The latest demographic figures put the numbers of Christians, of all kinds, at well over a billion.
2. Millions of people devote their lives to Jesus, to following his teachings to emulating his example. Millions believe that both their present well-being and their lives for all eternity are determined by what he did.

C. Non-believers. Even those who do not believe in him cannot escape Jesus' influence; his name, his life, and his teachings fill our culture, and nonbelievers think of him as one of the great moral teacher of the ages.

D. Well-known? You would think that a person who is this important would be well known. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

1. Almost everyone has an opinion about Jesus, but the opinions are so much at odds with one another that they can't all be right.
2. Remarkably, the situation does not improve much when you move from the popular media to the world of scholarship. Books and articles on Jesus number over 2,000, representing sometimes radically different conclusions. They can't all be right.

3. Why are there so many different opinions about Jesus, the most important figure in the history of our form of civilization? Which view is most plausible? How can we possibly know?

III. THIS COURSE

These are some of the basic questions that we will address in this course on the Gospels:

A. Genre identification. We will look at the Gospels in general and try to determine what type of literature they represent—genre identification—and with that we will try to determine what methods we can use to appreciate the Gospels and we will try to understand the limitations of those methods.

B. Unique contribution. As the course progresses, we will take each Gospel in turn and try to determine each of their unique contributions to our appreciation of Jesus, his message and mission, and his significance to the earliest communities that preserved the Gospels.

We will also be concerned about how the Gospels can influence our own lives—what they call us to be and do—ethics.

C. Contemporary scholarship. We will also hear the voices of contemporary Jesus scholars, who have provided, to a large degree, enormous contributions to what we can know and understand about Jesus. Reading the Gospels is a first, necessary step. But much, much more can be learned about Jesus and the earliest Christians by listening to scholars who have dedicated their lives to Jesus research.

IV. HOW HAVE PEOPLE VIEWED THE GOSPELS? ¹

A. Mark Strauss' view

Mark Strauss argues that the Gospels are historical literature:²

1. *They have a history of composition.* Authors drew on traditions and sources to compile their work. Thus the Gospels can be studied with historical-critical methods.
2. *They are set within a specific historical context,* namely first-century Palestine.
3. *They are meant to convey accurate historical information.* Strauss will also argue that the Gospels are “more than” historical reports. They are theological documents meant to encourage certain types of commitments to God, Jesus, and the emerging church.

Strauss says, “We can classify the Gospels as *historical narrative motivated by theological concerns*. Their intention is not only to convey accurate historical material about Jesus but also to explain and interpret these salvation-bringing events.” (29)

¹ For the following, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford University, 1999) 23-32.

² Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zonderan, 2007) 27-29.

Strauss gives seven motivations for writing the Gospels: historical, catechetical, liturgical, exhortatory, theological, apologetic, and evangelistic (3).

4. *However*, once Strauss includes these seven motivations, we must conclude that the Gospels are not histories in the modern sense of the word. They are not objective histories. They are not like unbiased news reports, not like “you-were-there” accounts. They were written out of faith to inspire more faith.

In my own judgment, the Gospels represent an ancient form of history. Ancient history included historical information, but mixed with legends, stories about the gods, and fabricated speeches. By ancient historical standards, the Gospels are histories, but they also contain historicized prophecy, symbolic narratives, parables, prayers, aphorisms, legends, all of which are not intended to convey historical information.

B. Gospels as Supernatural Histories

1. Prior to the Enlightenment, everyone viewed the Gospels as "supernatural histories."
2. The Gospels recorded historical events, things that actually happened, including the miraculous.
3. Most people still view the Gospels as supernatural histories; but before the Enlightenment, everyone viewed them that way.
4. For example, the account of Jesus walking on water was a miraculous event, and one that actually happened.
5. For those who accept that the Gospels are supernatural histories, you would have seen Jesus defying gravity and not sinking into the water if you'd been there.

C. The Gospels as Natural Histories

1. The Enlightenment that swept through Europe in the eighteenth century involved a whole new way of thinking and looking at the world.
2. Philosophers (Locke, Hume) and scientists (Newton) had come to distrust traditional sources of authority and started to insist on the power of human reason to understand the world.
3. Certain philosophers and scientists asserted the importance of cause-and-effect relationships and developed scientific notions of "natural law," that is, highly predictable ways that nature worked. The "laws" could not be broken by any outside agency (like God).
4. There were a number of biblical scholars who were heavily influenced by the Enlightenment, who took a rationalistic view of the Gospels.
5. According to these scholars, the miracles of the Bible obviously didn't happen.

6. For these scholars, the Gospels do not contain supernatural histories. Instead, the Gospels recount "natural histories." That is, the Gospels record events that happened, but the ancient authors *mistook* what they saw as miracles.
7. One famous scholar who argued this way was Heinrich Paulus. In 1827, he wrote a book called, *The Life of Jesus*. And in that book, Paulus tries to show that each so-call "miracle" can be explained in rationalist terms.
8. Take, for example, the feeding of the 5000. Paulus argues that when Jesus instructed the disciples to pass out the five loaves and two fish—clearly not enough to feed 5000—the crowds saw what Jesus was doing and were inspired to share their own food with one another. So, it was a "miracle" of sharing.
9. Did Jesus walk on water? According to Paulus, the disciples put their boat out into the Sea of Galilee, but when the storm arose, they became so disorientated by the darkness and fog. They did not realize they were actually near the shore. So, when Jesus appeared to them, they thought it was in the middle of the Sea, when in fact he was merely walking in the shallow water on the shore.
10. Paulus' explains all the miracles in this way.

D. The Gospels as Myths

1. Prior to 1830, just about everyone understood the Gospels as either supernatural histories or natural histories.
2. But, in 1835-36, David Strauss wrote, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, a 1500 page book that revolutionized the way the Gospel had been read to that time.
3. On the one hand, Strauss agreed with the rationalists who said that miracles don't happen. But, on the other hand, he found the "enlightened" natural explanations of Paulus to be ludicrous.
4. For Strauss, the Gospels were not supernatural histories or natural histories, but myths.
5. Today, most people understand a "myth" to be something that isn't true. But for Strauss (and others) it was just the opposite. A myth was "true" but it didn't happen.
6. For Strauss, *a myth is a history-like story that is meant to convey a religious truth*.
7. Take, for example, Jesus' walking on water.
 - a. On the one hand, the supernatural explanation defies natural law. On the other hand, the natural explanation completely ignores what the text says—the text says that Jesus walked on top of the water, not on the shoreline, and the boat was in the middle of the Sea.

b. So Strauss argued that Jesus' walking on the water was a myth—"a history-like story that is trying to convey a profound truth."

It works like this: In early Christianity trials and tribulations in this life were like stormy seas that threaded life and limb. Who is able to rise above the fears, the hatreds, the enmities of this world? Who can overcome the persecutions, the sufferings, the setbacks of this life? Who can rise above the trials and tribulations of our daily life? According to this story, Jesus can. And if we follow him, so can we.

Thus, the story of Jesus walking on water is not something that *happened*. It is something that *happens*.

E. History, Myth or What?

1. Most scholars agree that the Gospels contain stories that have some contradictions in their details. But they disagree on the degree of historicity. Do the Gospels *primarily* contain historical accounts? Or do they *generally* provide historical account? Or do they *occasionally* provide historical information?

2. In addition, when we come across contradictions, be on the alert for discovering "the truths" that the Gospel writers wanted to convey. With the story of the healing of the Centurion's servant, there is a contradiction about whether the centurion spoke to Jesus personally; but this helped us to see that Luke focused on the truth of "humbling coming to Jesus" and Matthew focused on the new for having "trust in Jesus."

F. The importance of genre identification

1. Readers bring different sets of expectations to different kinds of literature

- newspaper editorial vs. newspaper article
- science fiction vs. science textbook
- historical accounts vs Harlequin Romance novel

2. Example: Suppose you were to read about a breakthrough in genetic research that could potentially save the human race from AIDS and cancer. However, the research is highly dangerous and, if artificially manipulated gene specimens were to escape the laboratory, they could mutate beyond control and bring worldwide torment and death. If you read about this in a novel by Stephen King, you might enjoy it and recommend book to friends. But if you read about on the front page of the New York Times, you might react with some degree of panic and decide to write your senator.

3. The point is: The expectations we have of different types of literature have a profound effect on the way we read.

V. WHAT IS A GOSPEL? — ANCIENT BIOGRAPHY

A. Ancient Greco-Roman biographies (*bioi*)

Plutarch [46-120 AD], *The Life of Alexander*, chapter 1. In writing for this book the [life] of Alexander the king ... I have before me such an abundance of materials that I shall make no other preface but to beg my readers not to complain of me if I do not relate all [his] celebrated exploits or even any one in full detail, but in most instances abridge the story. I am writing not histories but lives [*bioi*], and a man's most conspicuous achievements do not always reveal best his strength or his weakness. Often a trifling incident, a word or a jest, shows more of his character than the battles where he slays thousands, his grandest mustering of armies, and his sieges of cities. Therefore as portrait painters work to get their likenesses from the face and the look of the eyes, in which the character appears, and pay little attention to other parts of the body, so I must be allowed to dwell especially on the things that express the souls of these men, and through them portray their lives, leaving it to others to describe their mighty deeds and battles.

B. What kind of literature/genre is a Gospel?

1. Pre-19th century:

Prior to the nineteenth century, the Gospels were often assumed to be biographies or accurate historical records. Writers often attempted to stitch together pieces from all four Gospels in order to write a modern biography of Jesus. (See the various harmonies of the Gospels.)

2. 20th century:

Then, in the twentieth century, scholars began to see the Gospels as entirely unique pieces of literature (oral proclamation of the early church and not at all like historical records). Even though the Gospels were about a person (Jesus), they were not like modern biographies. They excluded a lot of information modern biographies include—psychosocial or political development of the person, lots of data, like names, dates, places, and events—all of which show concern for factual accuracy.

3. 21st century:

However, the newer view is that the Gospels are not entirely unique. They appear to be very similar to ancient Greco-Roman biographies (*bioi*). There are numerous examples of Greco-Roman biographies from Plutarch, Suetonius, and Tacitus. Most ancient biographies were less concerned with giving complete factual data about an individual's life.

a. Research methods were different then. There were few surviving documents. There were (by our standards) inadequate tools for record-keeping and data recovery. Biographers relied heavily on oral information that had circulated for long periods of time. Most ancient biographers preferred oral information, because then they could *interrogate* the people that passed on the material

b. Ancient biographers were not so interested in showing what actually or factually happened in their subjects' lives. Rather, they were interested in portraying the character of the person, not by describing the person, but by letting the actions and words of the person speak for themselves. When an ancient biographer recounted events in the life of his subject, it was to demonstrate what the character of the person.

c. Ancient biographies highlighted a person's character—not for providing a history lesson—but for providing instruction for proper behavior.

C. The Gospels as ancient biographies

1. Recent Scholarship

Many recent scholars—particularly Richard Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Greco-Roman Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) and Aune, Talbert, Ehrman, and Stanton—have come to recognize that the Gospels are a kind of ancient biography.

2. Gospels unique

Of course, the Gospels have distinctive features of their own. For example, the Gospels emphasize that God is known through Jesus Christ. The Gospels also put an inordinate emphasis on the death of the main character. Moreover, the Gospel writers put a lot of emphasis on seeing the life of Jesus as the fulfillment of OT prophecy.

3. What was included in ancient *bioi* (“Lives”)?

Nevertheless, ancient readers/hearers would have recognized the Gospels as biographies of a religious leader. Based on other ancient biographies of religious leaders, they would have looked for:

- A miraculous beginning and a miraculous ending to his life
- Evidence of the Jesus' teaching and deeds were divine
- How Jesus' character was reflected in his reactions to various challenges
- How consistent Jesus' character was from the beginning of the Gospel to the end