

Sermon Series on Genres of the Bible

The Gospels

Jesus said, "Follow me!" (Mt 4:17-25)

Jerry Truex; Aug 3, 2008

A. Introduction

We continue our series on genres of the Bible. It's important to know what kind of literature we are reading so we can apply the right type of tools to interpret it. Over the course of the summer, we have demonstrated that the different biblical genres—law, poetry, poetry, parable, apocalyptic—require different assumptions and reading strategies.

Today, we will look at the unique nature of the Gospels and in particular, the way Matthew presents the inauguration of Jesus' ministry and the Kingdom of God.

B. The Nature of the Gospels

1. Oral culture

During the time of Jesus, very few people could read and write. The rate of literacy was under 10% in the Roman Empire and the evidence from Pompeii, Italy, suggests that only 2-3% of the residents could read or write.¹

Since it was not a print culture, and there were no publishers and no mass-production, oral communication was the primary means of communication.

Nearly all of ancient literature in Greek and Roman antiquity was oral; that is, it was performed or recited, not read. Greek and Latin dramas were performed publicly in elaborate stage productions with actors in city theaters. All types of poetry, public and private, was chanted or sung.²

2. Earliest Jesus-traditions

¹ See Richard A. Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001, 54, who basis his comment on the work of William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1989) esp. 114, 264, 13, 22..

² Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 55.

Jesus was well-known as a healer, an exorcist, a social prophet, a wisdom teacher, and a movement founder. When Jesus arrived in village or town, we can easily imagine hundreds of people flocking to see and hear him. As in all oral cultures, when Jesus taught, it was a oral performance (perhaps similar to a modern day comedian or one-person theatrical performance).

In an oral culture—without TV, radio, internet, newspapers, etc—when a famous teacher came to town, hundreds, even thousands of people came to hear him. Over the course of a few years, we can imagine that thousands and thousands of people had heard and seen Jesus. They remembered his teachings—his interpretations of the Torah, his prayers, his parables—and then they continued the process of successive retellings or oral performances begun by Jesus. It was a communal process.

Recent studies indicates that, “Whenever narratives pass from mouth to mouth the central point of the narrative and general structure are well preserved; but in the incidental details change take place.”³

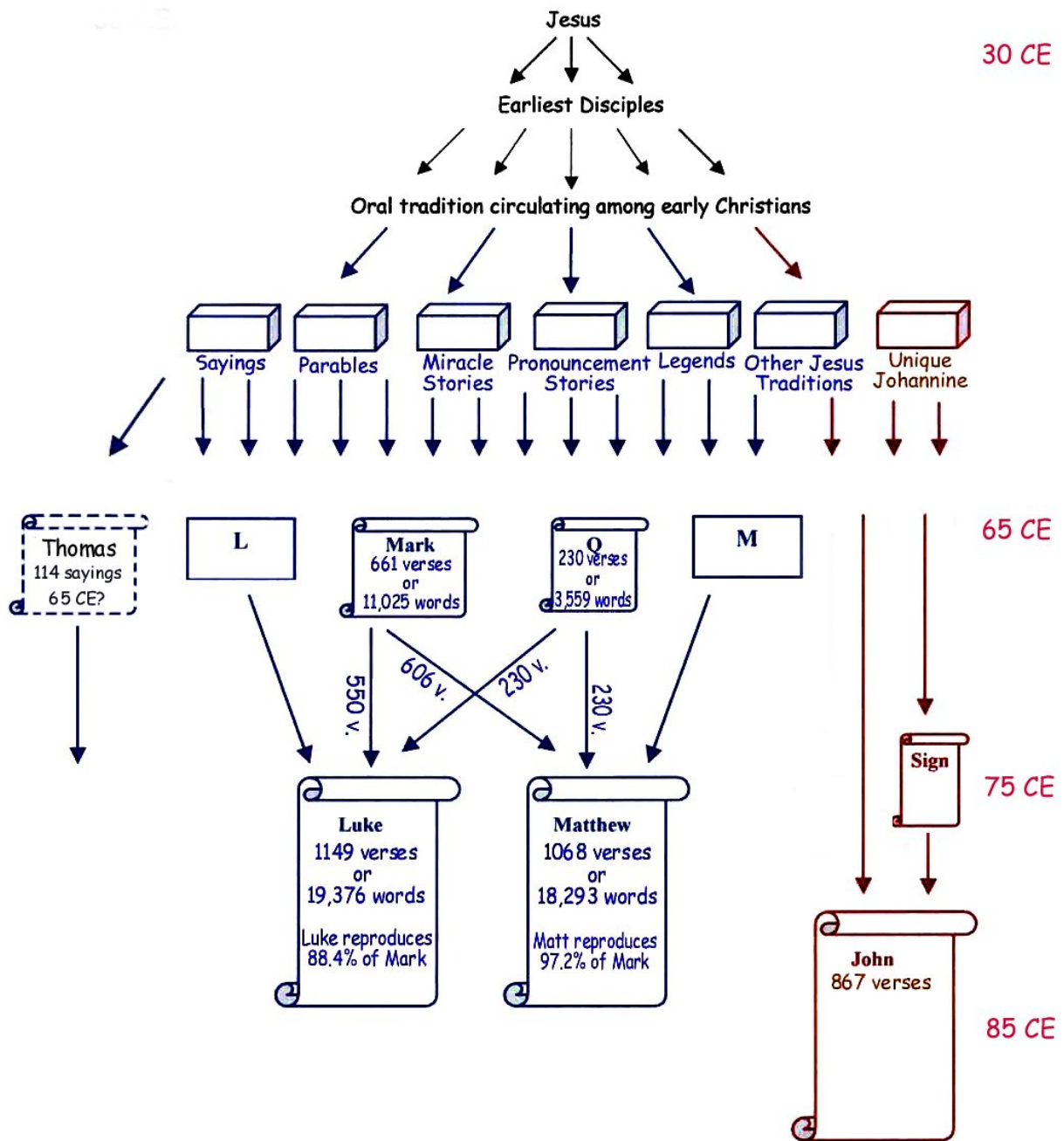
We are not an oral culture. We are far from it. And yet we have stories that remain stable and reliable over long periods of time. Consider the story of the “Three Bears” or our memories of the event of 9/11—the central points and general structure remains stable (controlled), although the exact details may change (flexible). The community guarantees the reliability of important stories—there were not four bears and there was two planes hitting the twin towers, not one or three. The community guarantees the reliability of important stories, even in our print and visual culture.

The point is, the teachings of Jesus and the stories about him were reliably (stable) passed from one person to another with slight changes in detail (flexible), depending on the person, or later the Gospel writers, who re-told or re-performed them.

3. Gospels as composite documents

The Gospels are composite documents. That is, early Christians gathered the oral stories and teachings of Jesus and put them into written documents beginning about 50 AD (Q-source) and then culminating with the four Gospels we now have. The oral teachings of Jesus and the oral traditions about him—including pronouncement stories, parables, sayings, legends, and other stories—circulated as independent oral units for about 35 to 40 years after Jesus death until they were finally gathered and written in what we now call the Gospels. [See the chart below.]

³ James G.D. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered. Christianity in the Making (Volume 1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003)* 193.



The Synoptic Gospels contain hundreds of oral traditions about Jesus. If you look at one of the Gospels in a standard Bible, you can see paragraph headings running throughout. Each paragraph unit—roughly speaking—is a unit of oral tradition that the writers linked together in their Gospel.

The traditions about Jesus were gathered and arranged into an “artificial” chronological framework. We find the same story or saying, but in different contexts. What this means is that each Gospel writer arranged the material they had in the way they wanted. Except for the rough outline of Jesus life—birth, ministry, arrest, trial, crucifixion, resurrection—we do not have a chronology of Jesus’ life. Notice how the material in Matthew chapter 8 is distributed differently by Mark and Luke.

| Pericope | Matthew | Mark | Luke |
|-------------------------------------|----------|---------|---------|
| Healing a leper | 8:1-4 | 1:40-45 | 5:12-16 |
| Healing the centurion’s servant | 8:5-13 | Omitted | 7:1-10 |
| Jesus heals people at Peter’s house | 8:14-17 | 1:29-31 | 4:38-39 |
| Would-be followers of Jesus | 8:18-22 | Omitted | 9:57-62 |
| Jesus stills the storm | 8:23-27 | 4:35-41 | 8:22-25 |
| Jesus heals the Gadarene Demoniacs | 8:28-9:1 | 5:1-20 | 8:26-29 |

C. The Inauguration of the Kingdom (Matt 4:12-22)

Now we turn to an example from the Gospel of Matthew, which includes a summary statement of Jesus’ ministry and the power of his words and deeds.

1. The Proclamation of the kingdom (4:17)

¹² When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.
¹³ He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea ... ¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

At this point in Matthew’s Gospel, we have been given the Genealogy of Jesus, the infancy story, the preaching of John the Baptist, and Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness. As Jesus leaves the wilderness, he takes up residence in the village of Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee.

Matthew summarizes Jesus’ message, which is taken from Mark: “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near.” There are two elements to note in this summary statement.

a. Repent!

First, Jesus issues a command: "Repent!" (metanoie/te). Repentance refers to "a radical change of heart and mind, a 'rebirth' of sorts."⁴ For Matthew, repentance is primarily associated with entrance into the Christian community.⁵

b. The kingdom of heaven

Second, repentance is grounded in the coming of "the Kingdom of heaven" (h` basilei, a tw/n ouvranw/n). It refers to God's reign or rule. God's reign happens when people are in a right relationship with God, each other, and their own selves. God's reign happens when peace and justice prevail. It is God's saving activity.

Kingdom language is also political language. It is meant to contrast with the kingdom of Caesar or any other earthly kingdom. Christians are to give loyalty only to God's rule. Only insofar as an earthly kingdom or political power coheres with God's reign, are we to cooperate with worldly powers.

Jesus is announcing that God's reign—God's saving activity—is at hand. Although the kingdom in its fullness is still future, it is already dawning in the ministry of Jesus and among his followers. It is already, but not yet fully realized.

2. The Invitation to Discipleship (4:18-22)

¹⁸ As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea-- for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. (NRSV)

a. Follow me!

⁴ Dale C. Allison and W. D. Davies, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Volume 1, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988) 388.

⁵ Allison and Davies, 388-9.

First, Jesus issues a command: "Follow me!" (deu/te ovpi,sw mou). Jesus calls all to repent, but a smaller group receives the call to follow Jesus. In this case, the invitation is given to two sets of brothers (Simon/Peter & Andrew, and James & John).

To follow literally means to walk behind. But in Matthew's Gospel "to follow" takes on the additional meaning of becoming Jesus' disciple. The two sets of brothers are called to literally walk with Jesus, to journey with him, and they are also called to learn from him and find disciples to follow them into the reign of God.

Matthew stresses that their response to Jesus was immediate. They responded to Jesus without hesitation. Their decision was complete. The immediacy and completeness of their response—they left their nets, they left their boat, they left their father—vividly shows the power of Jesus' word.

Just as God said, "Let there be light," and it happened, so also, when Jesus says, "Follow me," it happens. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' word creates reality. With a word, Jesus rebukes the demons; with a word, he calms the stormy sea; with a word, he heals paralytics; and with a word, he creates a community of faith to follow in his steps.

When you hear the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' word is addressing you and creating in you the power to follow him and to form the new community of God's reign.

b. You will fish for people

Second, Jesus has a mission in mind. Jesus was a healer, exorcist, social prophet, teacher, and movement founder. This is the "movement founder" part. The two sets of brothers were fishermen. Only now, they will cast their nets for people. They are to find, lure, and drag people into the kingdom of God. Later, Jesus says:

Matt 13:47. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind;

Notice that Jesus' disciples are to fish for people and bring in "fish of every kind." That's inclusive talk.

The disciples of Jesus are to follow Jesus, learn from him, and then, in turn, just like Jesus, draw people into the sphere of God's reign.

We are to make disciples. We are to learn enough from Jesus—get our lives straightened out, live in a right relationship with God, others, and our own selves—and then we are to find people and teach them and show them the way of Jesus.

We are to be disciples and then disciple others. Discipleship is the way of Jesus. This is emphasized by the last two verses of Matthew's Gospels, which is called, the "Great Commission":

Matt 28:19-20. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (NRSV).

3. The Power of the Kingdom (4:23-25)

We have seen that Jesus' word is powerful. His word creates new social realities. People hear Jesus invitation to follow him and they do.

Now Matthew shows us that Jesus' deeds or actions also have creative and transformative power. Here is Matthew's summary statement describing the impact that Jesus has on the lives of people.

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. ²⁴ So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. ²⁵ And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. (NRSV)

Jesus did three things:

a. Jesus went out

First, Jesus went throughout the region of Galilee. He didn't sit at home in Capernaum and wait for people to show up at his door. He left the comforts of his home and walked from town to town, bringing the kingdom of heaven to people in word and deed.

b. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom

Second, Jesus proclaimed the good news of God's reign. The Sermon on the Mount gives us a good indication about the content of his preaching. The SOM concerned how to be righteous or how to have a right relationship with God, others, and one's self.

c. Jesus healed people

Third, notice that the kingdom of heaven—the reign of God—has impact in this world for those who receive Jesus. When Jesus comes, when the kingdom of heaven dawns, people are not taken up into heaven; rather, the effects of the kingdom is this worldly. People are healed, demons are cast out, and a new social entity emerges, namely, the Jesus movement, which is now known as the church.

D. Reflections

1. Gospels as community memory of Jesus

Today, I have tried to give you very brief glimpse of the nature of the Gospels. When we hold the written Gospels in our hands, we hold some very unique literature. We have in our hands hundreds of the oral traditions from and about Jesus that was faithfully remembered and passed by hundreds/thousands of Jesus' earliest followers.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John represent, not just four witnesses to the life and teaching of Jesus, but the faithful remembrances of Jesus by hundreds/thousands of his first followers.

2. Called to be disciples

The kingdom of God is a gift that offerings blessings to the poor, to those who need rescue, and to ordinary people who need to straighten out their lives.

Jesus inaugurated a new era of God reign in which people are to live in just and peaceful relationships with each other and God. People who follow Jesus are to form a new, counter-cultural community that exhibits the reign of God.