

I. Introduction

The accounts recorded in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John center on the life of Jesus of Nazareth. They are primarily focused on His ministry, which lasted the utmost of three years. Their contents have been debated, questioned, analyzed and defended since their emergence in the early church. Accordingly, the objective of this session is to (1) introduce the conversation concerning the genre of the Gospels (i.e., the literary world), and (2) provide a concise overview of the Synoptic Gospels and Acts (Matthew, Mark and Luke-Acts).

II. Genre

- A. Most Gospel scholars today view these works as ancient biographies.¹ They are obviously unique when compared to other ancient biographical works, but they meet the criteria to be identified as such. This immediately sets them apart from all other books in the Bible. Although the OT highlights the lives of certain figures such as Abraham, Moses, and Joshua, “who play central roles in the narrative portions of the Hebrew Bible,” the “biographical” elements never focus on individuals for their own sake but are always subservient to other, more overriding, literary intentions.”²
- B. Historically, the Gospels emerge during the ancient golden era of a historiographer’s sensitivities toward accuracy (ca. 200 B.C.–200 A.D.). When one surveys the emergence and evolution of ancient historiography, the biography becomes widely circulated in first century B.C. due to the work of Cornelius Nepos (i.e., the Lives of Greek and Roman dignitaries [e.g., Plutarch’s Lives was developed based upon Cornelius Nepos’s works]).³ Furthermore, the current evidence shows that he was the first to write at least one of his biographies while the subject in focus was still alive and was someone he knew personally (*Life of Atticus*).⁴ It is also clear that he, and those who followed him, were “clearly interested in using historiographical information” for their work—i.e., they understood biography as being rooted in historical authenticity.⁵ The Gospels exemplify the same biographical tenants displayed by Nepos—acclamation and historicity. Moreover, when we properly situate the Gospels in their ANEastern literary context, we learn that their “the level of literate skill... was exceptionally rare in the ancient world.”⁶

III. Introducing the Gospels ⁷

A. Overview of the Gospel of Matthew

- In the strictest sense, the author of this Gospel (ca. 60 A.D.), as with the others, is anonymous. The headings denoting the authors were likely added sometime in the first or early second-century to distinguish them.⁸ Although nothing in the actual text of the Gospel reveals its source, the most primitive tradition ascribes this it to Matthew, the disciple of Jesus. Citing the church father Papias (ca. 60–100 A.D.) the church historian Eusebius (ca. 260–339 A.D.) refers to Matthew the disciple as composing the oracles of the Lord. About 125 years prior to Eusebius, Irenaeus (130–202 A.D.) referred to what Matthew the apostle had written in his gospel, and Tertullian (155–220 A.D.) called Matthew “the most faithful chronicler of the Gospel,

because [he was] the companion of the Lord” (*On the Flesh of Christ*, 22). And Irenaeus is quoted as saying, “Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome and laying the foundations of the church” (*Against Heresies*, 3.1.1).

- In conclusion, Keener makes a great point as to Matthew being the author of the book, “Papias’ tradition probably dates to within a half century of Matthew’s publication, and no one in the years surrounding Papias’ testimony challenged Matthean authorship, nor was Matthew the most obvious name to attach to the Gospel.”⁹
- Structurally, Matthew can be divided into three major sections, and then several minor groupings within those. The phrase, “from that time on Jesus began to...” appears in 4:17 and 16:21, thus dividing the book into:
 - Introduction** (1:1-4:16; birth and preparation for ministry)
 - Body** (4:17-16:20; development of ministry, culminating with the Messianic confession of 16:16)
 - Conclusion** (16:21-28:20; movement toward the climax of Christ’s crucifixion, burial, and resurrection)
- Within these general sections we find recurring pairs of discourse and narrative. The teaching sections each conclude with the phrase, “And when Jesus had finished...” (Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς...) occurring in 7:28, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1 and 26:1.¹⁰

(1) Chs. 1-2: Intro	(2) Chs. 3-4: Narrative
(3) Chs. 5-7: Sermon	(4) Chs. 8-9: Narrative
(5) Chs. 10: Sermon	(6) Chs. 11-12: Narrative
(7) Chs. 13: Sermon	(8) Chs. 14-17: Narrative
(9) Ch. 18: Sermon	(10) Chs. 19-22: Narrative
(11) Chs. 23-25: Sermon	(12) Chs. 26-28: Closing
- Themes and Distinctions
 - a. Christology

Jesus is emphasized as the Son of David and the glorious Messianic King of Israel (cf. 1:1, 20; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30, 31; 21:9, 15; 22:42).¹¹ There is also his use of Son of God, which (1) frames up key Matthean sections (2:15; 26:53); (2) Satan uses to identify Jesus as God’s son (4:3, 6); (3) conveys the worship and revelation of Disciples (14:33); and (4) is part of Peter’s climactic confession alongside “Christ” (16:16).¹² In several ways, Matthew also emphasizes Jesus in the office of the OT **Prophet**, pronouncing judgment upon the Jewish nation/leadership (13:10-17; 21:18-22:14).
 - b. Israel and the Gentiles
 - (1) Matthew is arguably the most Jewish Gospel. Part of its uniqueness is how it revolves around the use of OT scripture. Fifty-five times he quotes the OT, while Mark, Luke and John give a combined total of sixty-five. Furthermore, about twenty of these scripture quotations

are distinctive to Matthew alone. In fact, “In addition to explicit quotations, numerous allusions and echoes of Scripture may be discerned in every part of this Gospel, roughly twice as often as in Mark, Luke or John. Virtually every major theological emphasis of Matthew is reinforced with OT support.”¹³

- (2) It is possible that this is the reason why Matthew is placed as the first book of the NT. It possessed the clearest link back to the OT and thus would be the smoothest transition into the NT.
- (3) Matthew also includes a much longer account of the Sermon on the Mount, dealing with the relationship of Jesus’s teaching to the Law. Furthermore, references are made to Jewish customs without explanation. It is on this point that scholars have rested their belief that “Matthew reflects a worldview closer to that of the rabbis than any other writer in the NT.”¹⁴
- (4) There is also a move beyond the Jewish people in Jesus’s ministry that “foreshadows the Gentile mission as clearly as any of the other three” Gospels (2:1-12; 21:18-22:14).¹⁵

B. Overview of the Gospel of Mark

1. John Mark, who is found in the Gospels and throughout NT literature, has traditionally been considered the interpreter and scribe of Peter and the author of the second gospel (Acts 15:37; Col. 4:10; 1 Pet. 5:13).¹⁶ Irenaeus (*Heresies*, 3.10.1, 5), Tertullian (*Against Marcion*, 4.5), Clement of Alexandria (cf. Eusebius, *History*, 6.14), Origen (cf. Eusebius, *History*, 6.25.5), and Eusebius (*History*, 3.39.16), all hold Mark as the author and associate him with Peter.¹⁷ The gospel is generally dated between 60–70 A.D. Irenaeus indicates Mark penned the account following the martyrdom of Peter by Nero in c. 65–70 A.D.¹⁸
2. The Gospel’s structure divides neatly into three distinct sections.
 - Introduction** (1:1-13)
 - The Ministry of Christ** (1:14-8:30)
 - The Passion of Christ** (8:31-16:28)
3. Themes and Distinctions
 - a. Christology

Mark devotes half of his gospel to the latter portion of Jesus’ ministry with a clear view to the Cross, with one-third being devoted to the latter (11:1-16:20 is the final week).¹⁹ Relevant to the situation created by Nero in 64 A.D., the Gospel concentrates on suffering and persecution (e.g., 2:5-7; 2:16-17, 20; 2:24; 3:1-6, 16-19, 22; 6:17-29; 7:1-13; 8:11; 8:31-35; 9:12-13, 14; 10:2; 11:18; 11:27-33; 12:13-17; 12:28; 14:1-2; 14:43; 14:53-65; 15:11; 15:31). The necessity of the Son of Man to suffer as the Messiah is emphasized (2:10; 2:28;

8:31, 38; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33, 45; 13:26; 14:21 [2x’s], 41, 62).

In fact, the Suffering Servant of Isa. 52:13-53:12 is almost certainly the theological backdrop of Mark’s authorial intent (cf. 9:12; 10:45; 14:21, 43-52). As articulated by F. F. Bruce, we are “prepared for the passion narrative not only as the climax of the Gospel but as the consummation of Jesus’s ministry.”²⁰ Mark also focuses on the sovereign authority of Jesus, particularly through the miraculous (1:23-26, 32-34, 39-42; 2:11-12; 3:5, 10, 11, 15, 30; 5:1-13, 21-24, 25-34, 39-43; 6:5, 7, 13, 55-56; 7:25-35; 8:22; 9:25, 38; 10:46-52; 16:17-18) and does not include the volume of discourses found in other gospels.

C. Luke-Acts

1. Authorship

- a. The almost unanimous witness of modern scholarship is that Luke and Acts “share the same author” and are narratively unified.²¹ Furthermore, the evidence reveals him to be a Gentile physician named Luke who traveled with Paul during his missionary journeys through Asia (Turkey’s Western coast), Asia Minor (inland Turkey), Macedonia, and Greece (Col. 4:11, 14; cf. Acts 16:10; 20:4-5; Rom. 15:27; 2 Cor. 8:23).²² The most probable dating of Luke-Acts is the early 70’s A.D., although arguments for the 60’s and late 70’s are also possible.²³ Specifically in relation to the Gospel, we see him providing us with his authorial intent at the beginning—i.e., to write “an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us” (1:1). There is wide consensus among modern scholarship that Luke 1:1-4, when paired with the entire Lukan narrative, bears witness to the genre of ancient historiography.²⁴

3. Structure of Luke

Birth narratives and infancy of Jesus (1:1-2:52)

Introduction to Jesus’ ministry and John the Baptist (3:1-4:13)

Jesus in Galilee (4:14-9:50)

Extensive Travel Narrative (9:51-18:34)

Final Perean and Judean Ministry (18:35-21:38)

Passion and Resurrection (22:1-24:53)

2. Overarching Structure of Luke-Acts

a. Birth of Jesus

(1) Galilean Ministry

(a) Samaritan, Perean, and Judean Ministry

(i) Passion Week

(a) Resurrection

(b) Ascension

(ii) Church in Jerusalem

(b) Church in Judea and Samaria

(2) Church in Gentile World

b. The Gospel in the Roman Capital of the Gentile World (Rome)

4. Themes and Distinctions

- a. For our purposes, the best location to identify Luke's theological agenda is found in Jesus's first public message in 4:16-30.

When He came to Nazareth... He went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was His custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ²⁰And He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. ²¹Then He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²²All spoke well of Him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from His mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" ²³He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to Me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure Yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in Your hometown the things that we have heard You did at Capernaum.'" ²⁴And He said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove Him out of the town, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl Him off the cliff. ³⁰But He passed through the midst of them and went on His way. Luke 4:16-30

- b. Seven times Luke's gospel speaks of Jesus' activities and teachings on the Sabbath (4:16-30; 4:31-41; 6:1-5; 6:6-11; 13:10-21; 14:1-24; 23:54) and this is the only time out of these occurrences that the contents of His message are given. It is highly likely that this pattern, which is also continued in Acts with Paul's speeches, intends to provide the framework for Jesus's synagogue sermons. Its contents convey the dawning of an eschatological era where "salvation has arrived," as Marshall notes, "it is the year of the Lord's favor, characterized by the preaching of good news to the needy and the performance of mighty works."²⁵ Luke is using these verses to articulate the identity of Jesus and explain His role.²⁶ It is in Jesus, who has been anointed by the Spirit and has come as the end-of-the-age Prophet, that the Scriptures find their fulfillment, forgiveness is offered to humanity, and societal stratification is turned on its head.²⁷

¹ Cf. e.g., Talbert, Gospel, throughout; Richard Bauckham, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 511; David E. Aune, "The Gospels: Biography or Theology" Biblical Review 6.1 (1990): 14–37; Richard A. Burridge, "Biography, Ancient," Dictionary of NT Background, 167–70; Craig S. Keener, Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), throughout.

² Aune, "Biography or Theology," 19.

³ Cornelius Nepos wrote at the end of the Roman Republic, introducing us to the Lives of significant figures. In The Art of Biography in Antiquity (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Tomas Hägg says of Nepos that he "stands as the sole survivor of the pioneering generation of biographers of Late Republican Rome" (188). Furthermore, as highlighted by Sean A. Adams, prior to this period, "On the whole, it is difficult to provide a secure typology for understanding biography in the early Hellenistic period. Almost all of the extant evidence is fragmentary, available through papyrological finds or through references in later works, and it is only from the beginning of the Roman Imperial age that a significant number of complete biographies are available to provide a more stable form of classification" (The Genre of Acts and Collected Biography [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013], 79); cf. esp. Simon Swain, "Biography and Biographic in the Literature of the Roman Empire," in Portraits: Biographical Representations in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire, M. J. Edwards Simon Swain, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 1–37.

⁴ Hägg, Biography, 190.

⁵ Keener, Christobiography, 78; cf. Polybius, Hist., 2.56.10–13, where the historiographer chastises another historian for their careless documentation of the Cleomenic war.

⁶ Robyn Faith Walsh, "The Origins of the Gospels" BAR 48:3 (Fall, 2022), 62–63.

⁷ See the many different approaches to studying and analyzing the NT in Joel B. Green, ed., Hearing the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

⁸ Craig L. Blomberg, Matthew, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 43.

⁹ Craig Keener, The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 39.

¹⁰ Donald Guthrie, New Testament Introduction (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 39; Walter C. Kaiser, Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1981), 73. For a summary of views on Matthew's structure, see Jack Dean Kingsbury, Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). It is this five-fold structure that presents the Gospel as a "Christian Torah" (i.e., it parallels Gen.–Deut.); cf. F. F. Bruce, The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable? (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 41.

¹¹ "Son of David" occurs nine times in Matthew. Eight of the occurrences are unparalleled in the other Gospels.

¹² It should also be noted that Matthew's gospel begins with "God with us" (Immanuel; 1:23) and ends with the promise that he will "always" be with His followers (28:20).

¹³ Blomberg, Matthew, in Commentary on the Old Testament Use of the New Testament, eds. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1.

¹⁴ Keener, Matthew, 43.

¹⁵ Blomberg, Jesus and the Gospels, 131.

¹⁶ Robert H. Gundry, Mark 1-8: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 29.

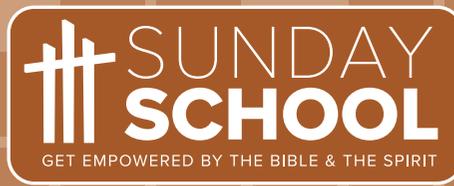
¹⁷ Blomberg, Jesus and the Gospels, 123.

¹⁸ William L. Lane, Gospel According to Mark, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 17; Keener, Bible Background Commentary, 126; Cf. Ben Witherington III's discussion in The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 20–31, where he argues for a dating between 66–70 A.D.

¹⁹ F. F. Bruce, The Message of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 20.

²⁰ Ibid., 20.

²¹ Keener, Acts: An Exegetical Commentary (Baker Academic, 2014), 1:402. Cf. his note there that provides a long list of scholars who have adopted this view.



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22 The internal textual evidence concerning his occupation as a physician is found not only in the Pauline attribution of Col. 4:14 but also in his use of medical terms—e.g., ἐπιχειρέω, “undertake,” “take in hand,” is unique to Luke-Acts and is used by the great classicist writer of medicine, Hippocrates (e.g., Epid. 1147; Haemor. 891); cf. the long list of medical terms that are unique to Luke when compared to the other Gospels in William K. Hobart, Medical Language of St. Luke (Dublin: University Press, 1882), 54–84. Furthermore, the current evidence shows there is not a single location in all of ancient historiography where “I” or “we” is used, and it does not refer to an eyewitness account!

23 See the summary of dating argument in Keener, Acts, 1:385–400.

24 Joel B. Green, The Theology of the Gospel of Luke (Cambridge: University Press, 2013), 21. This is also something that

25 I. Howard Marshall, The Gospel of Luke, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 178.

26 John Nolland, Luke 1:1–9:20, WBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 202.

27 Marshall, Luke, 178.

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