

PRACTICAL STEPS IN INTERPRETING GOSPEL NARRATIVE

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The Gospels represent an act of communication about Jesus to the Gospel writer's audience. Two practical steps in interpreting a narrative passage grow out of this idea of the Gospels as an act of communication: to identify what the Gospel writers say about Jesus and to identify the appropriate response to Jesus. These two steps relate to the three parties involved: the Gospel writer, Jesus, and the Gospel writer's audience. Other interpretive tools such as background studies or word analysis are important, but attention to the Gospel narrative form as an act of communication will ultimately help lead the interpreter to take two further steps.

Step # 1: Identify what the Gospel writer is teaching about Jesus.

The Gospels are about Jesus. In particular, they are about his earthly life, including both his works and his words, as it moves toward his suffering and death on the cross and his resurrection (and in the case of Luke's Gospel, his exaltation). Perhaps this point seems so obvious that it hardly needs to be mentioned, but it is surprising how much teaching on the Gospels loses sight of what the Gospel writers are saying about Jesus. Yet Jesus stands at the very center of story. The Gospels are not books with a hidden meaning or agenda. They are what they present themselves to be: realistic portrayals of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Each of the Gospels gives a coherent picture of Jesus, one that holds together throughout the shifting movement of the plot as a whole. Since the Gospels are about Jesus, the most practical step for understanding any particular passage in the Gospels is to determine what the passage says about Jesus.

For the most part, Jesus is the focal point of each scene of the Gospels. Even the passages that omit Jesus somehow contribute to the overall message of the Gospel writer concerning the identity and mission of Jesus. For example, Mark's Gospel focuses directly on Jesus in almost every passage. Mark takes on the role of a storyteller, emphasizing the activity of Jesus more than the teaching of Jesus. As a result, the story rushes forward, moving from one event in Jesus's life to the next and heading inevitably toward the cross. There are only a few passages in Mark's Gospel where Jesus is absent, but even these scenes convey important truths about him. Matthew's Gospel is similar to Mark's in its focus on Jesus but different in that it provides much more of the content of Jesus's teaching. Matthew himself seems to take on the role of a teacher, seeking to make disciples by communicating all that Jesus himself has taught and commanded. He is like a scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom, bringing out of his treasure things both old and new (Matt. 13:52). Yet, just like Mark, Matthew uses the story of Jesus's earthly life as the framework for his presentation as a whole, and he keeps the focus constantly on Jesus, his works as well as his words. Luke, perhaps more than the other Gospel writers, functions self-consciously as a historian, placing the events of Jesus's life within the context of the broader history of that time (e.g. Luke 1:5; 2:1-3; 3:1-2). Luke has investigated everything carefully, drawing on written sources and eyewitness testimony, in order to convey the exact truth about Jesus (Luke 1: 1-4). The Fourth Gospel presents John as a witness, testifying to the truth about the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:30~31; 21:24). John's testimony about Jesus does not stand alone; instead John calls on other witnesses to corroborate his message, such as John the Baptist (e.g. 1:7-8), the works given to Jesus by the Father (5:36), the Scriptures (5:39), the Holy Spirit (15:26), and the other disciples who were with Jesus from the beginning (15:27). As a storyteller, teacher, historian, witness, or some combination of all four, each Gospel writer in his own way writes a narrative about Jesus and keeps the attention on him.

Since the Gospel writers keep Jesus central to their message, any interpretation that is faithful to their written works must do the same. Practically, that means coming to a passage in the Gospels with questions like: What does this passage emphasize about Jesus, about his identity or thinking or mission or destiny? How do the details in this episode contribute to the Gospel writer's portrayal of Jesus? How does this passage fit in with the broader narrative and its story of Jesus? How does it connect with important themes concerning Jesus that the Gospel writer has been emphasizing throughout his narrative? Such questions can maintain the interpreter's focus on Jesus and can serve as a reminder that any teaching on the Gospels best starts with Jesus.



Step # 2: Identify what the Gospel writer is teaching about an appropriate response to Jesus.

The Gospels are dangerous. The Gospel writers are not simply interested in giving certain facts about Jesus, although indeed they do. They are not at all interested in producing an objective dispassionate reception on the part of their audience. They have every intention of calling for a response, pressing people to believe that Jesus really is the Messiah and the Son of God and to follow him, bowing to his authority as Lord and King and living with obedience to his commands. Those who plan to walk away from the Gospels unchanged must do so at their own risk, because the plan of the Gospel writers is to convert everyone into following Jesus.

They are, in their own right, evangelists. The Gospel writers offer a beautiful picture of God's Messiah, one that is difficult to resist. Jesus is a compassionate shepherd, who calls on all those with heavy burdens to come to him to find rest for their souls (Matt. 9:36-38; 11:28-30). In the face of Jesus's powerful works and deep care for those in need, it is difficult not to agree with those who say, "He has done all things well" (Mark 7:37). Jesus is a friend to sinners and welcomes them into his kingdom, along with the poor and crippled and blind and lame (Luke 14:21; 15:1-2). Above all, Jesus shows through his willingness to go to the cross that indeed he will love his own to the very end (John 13:1). If this is not God's Messiah, what kind of Messiah should God have sent instead?

The Gospel writers reveal the response they want from their audience in part by presenting the various reactions of different people within the story itself, reactions that indeed are realistic and true to life. Some in the story choose to believe in Jesus and his message and decide to follow him. Yet even Jesus's disciples find him at times difficult to understand and difficult to follow. Others respond to Jesus with indifference. They listen to Jesus's teaching but they walk away, anxious instead for an easy life or for wealth, power, and recognition. Some oppose Jesus, actively seeking how they might destroy him. Yet time and again these opponents, although religiously devout, show themselves to be hardened against the truth and foolishly dominated by their own self-interest. The overall narrative shape of the Gospels makes a difference in how the Gospels influence us. As we encounter the Gospel narratives, we leave our own place and time and enter into that story, view the responses of others, and reflect on our own potential reaction. This is all the more true when we look at a Gospel narrative as a whole. We see the lack of faith on the part of the disciples and their unwarranted self-confidence and then finally the end of their story, their failure and the bitter weeping of Peter. The same is true for the plot line of Jesus's opponents. The end of the story reveals that they were indeed wrong about Jesus, since the resurrection stands as God's verdict on their actions. The stone that the builders rejected has become God's chosen cornerstone. These plot lines compel us to find a different way.

Since the Gospel writers call on people to believe in Jesus and follow him, any interpretation that is faithful to the Gospels should also call on others to respond in this way. In practical terms, those who are studying the Gospels in order to teach their message should ask questions such as: In what way does the Gospel writer present Jesus's life as an example to follow in this passage? What does Jesus teach or command in this episode that calls for my obedience? What promises does Jesus give to those who follow him that I need to embrace? How should the responses of various people in the passage guide our own response to Jesus? What does the Gospel writer want us to learn from positive examples or negative examples in this scene? How do the reactions of the people in this passage connect with important themes in the broader narrative about what it means to follow Jesus? Questions such as these can help interpreters to reflect on how we can trust Christ more fully and follow him more faithfully.

Before moving on, I want to draw attention to the common element in the two practical steps mentioned above. Both steps start with: "Identify what the Gospel writer is teaching about ... " In other words, it is important not to forget the role of the Gospel writer in this act of communication. The focus of interpretation in the Gospels is not simply on the information found in the passage but on what the Gospel writer communicates to his audience about Jesus through that information. Each Gospel writer has a voice and uses it to emphasize certain truths about Jesus and about what it means to follow him. It is not enough simply to dig out information about Jesus from the Gospels and decide for oneself in what way that information is significant, as though the truth about Jesus is immediately self-evident. As we have already seen, the Gospel writers themselves notice how various people respond in various ways to Jesus, some in decidedly negative ways. In the actual practice of interpreting a passage in the Gospels, it is necessary to listen carefully to the voice of the Gospel writer, to what he highlights in the passage. The Gospel writer must be our guide in what we should learn about Jesus and about following him.