

PART IV

THE NATURE OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVE (THE GOSPELS)

Before one begins the interpretation of the gospels, one must understand the nature of the genre that the author has chosen to impart his message. The nature of this story is what is known as “historical narrative.” Now the answer as to why this genre was used is quite simple. Historical narrative is used to reflect a plot scheme that occurred in the past, in history, for the purpose of establishing a message to the reader. Now the various messages that may be imparted to the reader are the following:

- To recall an event(s) that will relate a learning philosophy through which the reader will learn a lesson, that is, to use the philosophy that was successful (comedy) or reject the philosophy that was unsuccessful (tragedy). (e.g., George Washington chopping down the cherry tree).
- To recall an event(s) that establishes a foundational basis in history to give knowledge to the reader so that he can act in the present on that historical foundation. (e.g., the book “1776” which establishes the foundational basis on which American freedom was gained so that the reader will appreciate the nation which he now enjoys and will stand up for the principles of freedom).

Now it is not infrequent for some historical narratives to include both aspects. That is because the behavior (philosophy) that established the foundation on which the reader stands is frequently the same behavior that continues that foundational philosophy in the reader, although they will be acted out differently due to a different (i.e., post-foundational) scenario.

This is the case in the Gospels. Primarily the Gospels are to establish the foundation in time on which the church will act. Thus Jesus appears and changes things so that the church can walk on a different basis than had occurred before. Yet because the Gospels occur in the Biblical Story, they reflect a continual Hero (“God”) who has one message throughout His story (i.e., enthronement of the Christ, Psalm 2) and one response for the reader (i.e., faith in that Christ). That single response is to have faith in the “Seed of the Woman” (Genesis 3:15), the Messiah to come (Psalm 2), Jesus (the Gospels), who is to come again and establish His kingdom on earth (Revelation). Thus the Gospels play a foundational part in what is to come.

As God moves in history (recorded in historical narrative), there are three basic characters of concern. Two of them are in the narrative itself and offer the contrasting alternatives, God or Satan. The third character is outside of the historical narrative and is the reader who has an opportunity to respond to God or Satan. While the situations in the Biblical story change and are not repeatable, they form a foundation for the reader to understand. And while the reader does not have Christ present in front of him like the apostles, his faith must be the same apostolic faith that they had (Refer to 2 Peter 1:1 where one is instructed to have the same faith as the apostles who saw Jesus.)

“Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, “to those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ . . .”)

Thus the Gospels are about the appearance of God in human form, Jesus. He will come and be observed by unique men, apostles. They will affirm Jesus in His unique appearance so that the readers can observe and hear through their eyes and ears. (see 1 John 1:1-4). The conclusion of the Gospels is that men might believe on the One who was eye-witnessed by the apostles (see John 20:31). The readers are not apostles (or disciples) and cannot duplicate their feat as eyewitnesses. The readers do not have the same situation. They cannot repeat what the apostles did. They, however, can come to the same conclusions that the apostles had based on what they saw and heard. They will not have their power, nor be inspired to receive revelation from God as they were. The readers will be the beneficiaries of these gospel writers. This is what John tells his readers in 1 John 1:1-4. The apostles eye-witnessed Jesus so that the readers might listen to them and believe.

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life--² and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us--³ what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.⁴ These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

Thus, what is the conclusion that the reader should make after reading Matthew’s recalling of Peter’s experience with walking on water? It is the same conclusion that Peter made . . . “You are most certainly God’s Son!” It is not to take risks determined by some preacher or interpreter based on some contemporary perception of one’s audience. Nor is it to try to construct some similar presence of Jesus in your life, that is, to assume that Jesus is, or wants to be, talking to you audibly (or inaudibly)¹⁶. Nor is it to pretend Jesus is really there, speaking to you, telling you to do things. It is simply to . . . believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that what He has done for you is foundational for your life, i.e., “eternal life.”

IMPLICATIONS

¹⁶ This is the current “God speaks today” movement where people are urged to try to get God to speak to them, or in other terms, to be trained to listen to God who wants to communicate with them. This is simply an effort to bring what happened in the Gospels or in Acts (or in the Old Testament) to special anointed ones and make it their own reality. However, one must recognize that historical narrative is not normative. Only the philosophy developed by the historical narrative is normative.

One of my PhD students (and later a fellow professor) once said regarding the Bible, “Remember . . . “you” is never “you!” His point was that the entire Bible is written about people other than the reader. It is thus important to realize that all this literature is historical.¹⁷ That is the nature of historical, grammatical, normal interpretation. Thus, the disciples, Jesus, or the Pharisees in the gospels . . . are not you. While there are similarities, the common bond is in philosophy. That is, we share either the philosophy of the Pharisees (Satanic, fleshly) or we share the philosophy of Jesus (Godly, revelation of Messiah). But there is very little other than that which we share in this historical narrative. Mostly the reason we don’t share it is because Jesus was there! And He is not here (in the same way) now! But the massive differences are typically ignored. They are Jewish, while we are Gentiles (most of us). They lived in the first century under Roman control, while we live in the 21st Century in a democracy. They lived in an agrarian society, well . . . we live in a highly technical society.

Thus the function of the apostles is to eyewitness Jesus in His appearance so that we can believe (illumination) what they say (inspiration) about what they saw and heard. So while there will be things that the disciples do from which we may learn, it is all in the nature of faith toward God in His Messiah. It is NOT processes, insights into psychology, how to have small groups, large groups, leadership, etc. The only application is that of having faith in this Messiah whom they eye-witnessed, and its subsequent implications into our daily lives as we live for Him and the bodily resurrection.

What you will learn in the Gospels is about a real God who came to earth as a real human and died for our sins and was resurrected to show He and we will appear in the Kingdom. Thus it is His resurrection that drives us now, not a process, not a technique, not gathering 12 men around us, not praying with some special (i.e., superstitious) technique. One is only to trust in this Messiah who the apostles eye-witnessed. That is what we will derive. What should we trust Messiah to do . . . whatever He said He would do for us in this age and the next.

You can’t get out of the boat. You can’t watch your bread be multiplied. You can’t watch your Savior being crucified on a Roman cross, nor will you see the resurrected Christ. But you can, based on the testimony of these apostles, exclaim with Peter after walking on water that He is the Christ of God; with the multitude who saw the bread multiplied that He is the Greater Prophet than Moses, with Thomas when He saw the resurrected Christ, “My Lord and My God.” And you can listen to John retell the signs and believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have eternal life.

So, what shall I do? (“What’s the application?") Live like you are a child of God, paid and bought for by the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ, headed for a kingdom on earth that has no end. Show and give the mercy Jesus has given you as fast as you can and as

¹⁷ Within the historical literature, however, there may be prophecy, which may or may not apply to the future reader.

much as you can. And one day you will look God in the eyes and proclaim, "You certainly are the Son of God!" Oh, yes, and what will you do because He is the Christ and has promised you eternal life in His kingdom? Abandon everything that you hold as valuable in this mortal life and live for Him and His value . . . eternal life.