

The Shape of the Gospels

By shape I mean the selection of episodes that make up the narrative, the order of those episodes, the genre, and the unique thesis of each. A discussion of shape might take books, and has. This essay will deal more briefly but I hope helpfully for those who want an introduction to the subject.

Episodes

One observation that is made by many readers and scholars is that most of the events Mark includes are found also in Matthew and Luke. There are differences and episodes in Matthew and Luke that are not found in Mark, of course, but there are a great many similarities. That has led many scholars to conclude that Mark was the source for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and that Mark must have been the first Gospel written.

The more important question is not the priority of Mark as the first written but the source. Among others, Rikk Watts a professor of New Testament at Regent College observes that it was not Mark's Gospel that was the source so much as Peter, whom Mark used as his source. See "Why the Narrative Shape of the Gospels Matter" [Shape](#).

I agree and add only that Peter's Gospel was the oral Gospel shared by all the apostles from the day of Pentecost for thirty years and more until the written Gospels began to be circulated. The oral gospel provided the shape of the narrative of the three synoptic Gospels.

But there is an additional observation. The oral Gospel in part and as a whole narrative would have been shared by many and would have included personal stories of the twelve apostles who had with Peter been witnesses of Jesus. Matthew, who was one of the twelve, would have had his own memories and stories to share. The sermon on the mount in chapters 5-7 is a notable example. It would have caught Matthew's attention because it was significant to Matthew whose personal interest was how Jesus' teaching interfaced with the central interest of Judaism, the law.

Luke is interested in revealing the humanity of Jesus and his compassion for marginalized people. It is no surprise that he includes the nativity and emphasizes Jesus as a child born into poverty. Both of those different emphases shaped the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Another of the differences between the Gospels is certainly the difference in how the stories were told. Mark's stories in the core of the Gospel are simply told and follow a

form called chiasmic. That makes them easily remembered and is typical of stories designed to be remembered and transmitted orally. Matthew typically does not use a chiasmic structure (See the story of the man with a withered hand in [Matthew 12:9-14](#) and [Mark 3:1-6](#).) That gives Mark and Matthew slightly different shapes.]

Order of the Episodes

The order of the narrative of the synoptic Gospels followed the order of Peter's oral Gospel, or the order that Mark as the editor of Peter's oral presentation imposed on Peter's teaching. (As for the Gospel of John, many scholars today, like Watts, are finding John's Gospel to be an addendum to Mark with little overlap I think John is not a gospel or announcement at all but a defence of the divinity of Jesus. Jesus had already been announced in the other Gospels. Mark and the synoptics are focused on Galilee until the final week where the focus shifts to Jerusalem. Why? Probably because Jesus did most of his teaching (gospeling) and miraculous works in Galilee. But it is in Jerusalem where he presented himself as the Son of God. That is John's focus.

We should remind ourselves that the purpose of the Gospels is not to write a biography of Jesus' life. It is to present Jesus as Messiah. Mark is most direct when in the first verse, which can be considered the title, he wrote: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Mark notes six additional times when Jesus uses the word gospel. Matthew uses "gospel" four times. Luke-Acts twenty-four. It is the intent of all three to make that theme the focus of their Gospels and order their narratives to develop that theme. All three end with the good news of the resurrection. That is not simply because it happened but because it is the ultimate good news.

John does not use the word "gospel." Why? Because the Gospel was already being proclaimed. He is adding only the identity of the one at the center of the Gospel, the Logos and the Son Jesus. That focus on Galilee gives the synoptics a different shape than John where the focus is on Jerusalem.

Genre

Genre refers to the category of literature the piece fits into. The genre of Mark's Gospel is identified in the first verse. It is gospel or announcement. The Greek word is *euggelion*; it means good news. Strong's Greek lexicon describes the use of the word in Greek and Roman literature: "In the Greco-Roman world, "euggelion" was used to announce significant events, such as the birth of an emperor or a military victory. The early Christians adopted this term to convey the transformative and victorious message of Jesus Christ."

All three of the synoptic Gospel writers choose the episodes they include and the organization of the narrative as an announcement of Jesus as the Lord and Savior.

Thesis

Thesis is the message the Gospel was written to convey. The message of Matthew is not hard to discover. It is that Jesus is the **Messiah** foretold in the Hebrew scriptures. That is why Matthew includes so many quotes from Old Testament prophets. His audience is the Jewish people, and he wants to authenticate Jesus as their Messiah. It shaped his Gospel.

Luke has a different thesis. He is intent upon showing that Jesus is the **Savior** of both Jew and non-Jew. He is the Savior of all men. That is why Luke includes more episodes that show Jesus interacting with men and women who are not Jews as well as the outcasts among the Jews. It shapes his Gospel.

Mark's thesis is the most difficult to determine. It requires a knowledge of the audience to whom Peter spoke. Everything we know of that from those who wrote about Mark and his Gospel in the early years tells us that his audience was Romans and Greeks living in Rome. As we read Mark we can see that in his description of Jesus as a man of action or **servant** serving. It was a characteristic the Romans and Greeks valued. That caught the attention of Roman readers and impressed them. It shaped his Gospel.

John's Gospel was just as shaped by his thesis. It was that Jesus was the **Logos/Word** who became flesh. John chose to include many episodes and the text of several of Jesus' messages that reinforced that controlling idea. His Gospel was not an announcement of Jesus and his message as were the others. It was not by genre a gospel. The genre of John's Gospel is apology or giving a defense to a challenge to the person of Jesus revealed by his words and deeds. That shaped the Gospel of John.

These similarities and differences between the synoptic Gospels explain why the Gospels took the shape they did. They make each one unique while at the same time telling the story of one man, Jesus. They also set the Gospels apart from literature of the time and from the non-canonical gospels that do not seem to be announcements so much as biography or cultic writing.

There were many additional gospels, letters, and philosophical writings about Jesus coming from the first and second centuries. They testify to the impact Jesus made upon

the eastern Mediterranean world of that time, but they were also competition for the four Gospels that were recognized as apostolic.