

# The Gospel As Stories of Jesus

*Maurice W. Lusk, III*

The gospel is an *euangelion*, which is a message or story that tells of something that has happened or is about to happen that will create great rejoicing those hearing it. The gospel of Jesus is such a story. The New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are a collection of such a story, which are, essentially, stories about Jesus. Prior to the appearance of these *euangelia* (**gospels**) there does not appear to have been a genre of writings like them. There were **histories** or **biographies** of famous people like Plutarch's *Lives* (i.e., a collection of biographies of Greek and Roman figures). There are collections of **memoirs** written by or about famous people as Socrates and Plato, and there are collection of **acts** or **deeds** of famous figures such as Alexander the Great, the Caesars, most of which is a collection of legends. Then there are collections of religious stories called **mythologies**, which were the stories told of the activity of the gods and goddesses in their interactions with mortals.

The Gospels (*euangelia*), however, are not like any of these writing of the ancient world. They are not historical biographies or lives of Christ. The writers of these gospels were not archivists or historians, nor were their writings intended to be exacting chronological accounts of the life of Jesus, nor were they simply the reminiscences of his friends and followers. The Gospels do not contain the day-by-day, event-by-event record of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. They do contain history, days and events in the life of Jesus, but there is significance to each thing written beyond the chronological order or its historicity. These matters are important only in so far as they are a part of the story the writer wishes to tell. The story is not just any story, nor is it an ordinary story; rather, it is a story filled with the power of God as relates to the salvation of the man.

## The Gospel Writers As Storytellers

The writers of the four Gospels of the New Testament were called *euangelistai* – storytellers or evangelists, and their writings were called *euangelia* – stories which fill the listener with joy resulting from good news of something that has happened or is about to happen. To call them "evangelists" is to simply transliterate the Greek word *euangelistes*. The actual translation of the Greek word would be a message bearer or a storyteller or teller of stories that bring joy.

What is significant and different about these stories is that they were filled with wonder and power capable of causing a transformation of life to occur within those who believe them. How so? They are stories told of a messianic figure that, as a heavenly redeemer, came into the world to bring deliverance to a race that had enslaved itself to the powers of darkness and evil through rebellion against its Creator.

### True Stories and Revelations of Truth

These stories were not told as legends, nor were they told as mythologies, as with the stories of the deity figures of the first century Hellenistic world. They were told as stories of a divine visitation that had broken in upon the realm or dimension of time and space to bring deliverance to the people dwelling within the realm of existence. The major character of this story was not presented as a mythological redeemer figure; rather, the one who came was believed to be the very presence of God in our midst - who was here in the flesh, as the historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth.

Belief in this story was powerful enough to effect a complete change in the life of the ones believing it. It was believed to be true in the fullest sense of the word, and because it was a story that filled the life of the one hearing it with joy, it was called an *euangellion* – a story of good tidings or news and the writers of this story of stories were called *euangellistes* – storytellers.

## The Four New Testament Gospels

The Gospels found in the New Testament Scriptures are titled by the traditional names of those believed to have written them: Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. These are a part of the New Testament Scriptures because the early Christians believed them to be the only accounts of the story of Jesus having been inspired of God. They were later called the Canonical Gospels (i.e., the standard) because there were, in the period following the first century AD, a large number of writings called gospels, which were not believed to have been inspired of God and were filled with teachings not recognized as having come from Jesus or those known to be apostles of Christ or those closely associated with one of the apostles of Christ.

The most essential reason for the rejection of these other gospels was the fact that contained data in conflict with or contradicting the teachings known to be of one or more of the apostles on a close associate. In this collection, called "the apocryphal gospels," one finds: the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Matthias, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, the Gospel of the Nazarenes, the Gospel of the Ebionites, and the Gospel of the Hebrews, to mention a few. These were documents written to advance a theological heresy called Gnosticism, which presented a different Jesus other than the Jesus preached by the recognized apostles of Christ. Those known as the apostles of Christ and those known to be a companion of one of the apostles, were the earliest recognized *euangelistes* - storytellers or teachers of the story of Jesus.

The authors of the apocryphal gospels (secret gospels) were given to be persons whose could not have been the actual writers. All of these gospels were written in the second century and were too late to have written by anyone who was one of the original followers of Jesus. The Christ of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John was a very different savior and offered a different salvation than those who followed Jesus during his lifetime. The authors of these gospels were associated with a movement within early Christianity called Gnosticism, who taught that the Messiah/Christ was not a real historical person but a phantasm who only looked like the historical

Jesus. Other groups standing behind some of the non-canonical gospels were Jewish Christians called Judaizers, who taught that Jesus was a Jewish prophet or Messiah sent only to the Jewish people and that to become a Christian one must first become a Jew. The four canonical gospels are the only gospels held to be identifiable with the earliest followers of Jesus and for this reason are considered to have a guarantee of truthfulness as documents given inspiration of God.

## Conclusion

This presentation of the New Testament Gospels as messianic stories should help set the stage for a study of the Gospels as stories. To approach them as theological compositions only sets the reader at a distance from them. To approach them as stories gives the reader an ease of access that is possible by seeing them for what they are, stories.

Anyone can listen to a story. Everyone enjoys hearing or reading a story. Most of us enjoy telling a story, whether a story about ourselves or someone else. We love hearing and telling funny stories or jokes. It would be interesting to know the amount of time most of us spend being entertained or taught by stories. The beauty of this is that most everyone knows what a story is and how to recognize a good story when they hear it. It is just one step from this to see how easy it can be to analyze a story; or, perhaps, we should say, "take a story apart." That is what story analysis is all about, i.e., taking it apart and looking at the various features that makes it a story.

The gospel is simply "God's story." The Gospels of Mark is a story of stories, most probably, stories he received while a companion of Peter; Matthew's Gospel is a story of stories drawn from Matthew's recollection, written down by an amanuenses or secretary, which accounts for the excellent Greek which a Hebrew publican would not have known. Luke's Gospel is also a story of stories, whose source is, no doubt, Paul. Then there is the Gospel of John whose Greek is the most simplistic of the NT and is reflected in the letters as well as the Gospel, which is a collection of different stories

than those found in the Synoptic Gospels. Each Gospel is a story of stories, each of which may be studied as a pericope or literary unit, making Bible study a study of stories, which is the easiest literary genre to understand. The collection of lessons that follow this lesson under *Storycraft and Bible Study* will introduce the reader to a method of Bible study in which the book being studied is considered from the art of story craft. The reader will find this discipline one of the most enjoyable methods of doing Bible study. With the method the reader him or herself can enter into the stories, make the story his or her own story, and then themselves become storytellers of the greatest and most wonderful story ever told.

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