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# Why the Narrative Shape of the Gospels Matters

Rikk Watts

## Sound Bites and Aphorisms

**S**ound bites work because they capture a striking thought in a memorable way. For this reason—and in spite of their modern-media-attuned name—they are not a new phenomenon. The ancients called them aphorisms, or “delimitations.” Not quite as sparkling, but it meant the same thing: a short saying that definitively captured the essence of something. Your average first-century urbanite knew scores of them: “marry well,” “pick your time,” “a cost to every commitment,” “nothing to excess,” and so on.

Jesus, too, commonly spoke in such ways, and although surely not the first to do so, he was among the most adept. One recalls such classics as “love your neighbour as yourself,” “blessed are the poor in spirit,” “I have come not to call the righteous but sinners,” “the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath,” and the justly famous golden rule: “do to others what you would have them do to you.” It is unsurprising, therefore, that many Christians’ knowledge of Jesus consists largely of an amalgam of such sayings along with a few stand-out stories (e.g., multiplication of the loaves and fish, turning water into wine, the woman caught in adultery), all bracketed by the annually celebrated events of Christmas and Easter. But as a moment’s reflection reminds us, these sayings and stories are in fact drawn from the four Gospels, which, as is now increasingly recognized, are carefully constructed and highly textured narratives.

## The Narrative Structure of the Synoptics: Mark and Peter

The first three Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—share not only many of the same sayings and stories but follow much the same order. Hence the title “Synoptics” (“with the one eye”); that is, they share the one overall perspective. At the same time, Matthew and Luke have substantial additions of sometimes similar and at other times unique materials. One thinks here of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount and Luke’s unique parables such as the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. And these additions are not merely cosmetic; they have their own structural integrity. For example, Matthew’s bracketing his collection of five major discourses with an opening declaration of life-giving blessings (Matt. 5–7) and concluding dreadful curses (Matt. 23–25) seems deliberately to echo Deuteronomy’s climactic offer of life or death (Deut. 27–30). That they turn on Israel’s response to Jesus (cf. Matt. 13) implies that it is he, not Torah, who now stands at the centre of, and thus defines, Israel’s relationship to God. Similarly, Luke expands Mark’s much smaller central “journey” section from essentially two chapters (Mark 8:22–10:52) to almost nine (Luke 9:51–19:27, some four and half times as much). His additional cluster of famous parables vividly illustrates both the astonishing breadth—no one is *a priori* excluded—and nature of Jesus’s grace-full summons to discipleship.

Now it is widely agreed that the best account of these phenomena—similar content, order, and additions—is that Matthew



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and Luke worked from Mark. This raises an interesting question: why would Matthew, one of the Twelve and to whom early tradition ascribes his own collection of Aramaic Jesus-sayings, follow Mark, who was not a disciple, and do so in Greek?

In my view, the simplest and most convincing explanation is that Matthew knew that behind Mark stood Peter. There are several good reasons for going in this direction. First, although Mark's Gospel is formally anonymous, it is difficult to believe it would have been accepted by the earliest Christians without their knowing its author. It is also highly unlikely that it would be the new owners' first book. Literate and reasonably well-off,<sup>1</sup> they probably already owned several other volumes, even if Mark was their first "gospel." In practical terms, the moment they had more than one book in their libraries they would have used external tags to distinguish them; no one wanted to unroll a scroll every time he or she needed to identify the author and the title of the work. Consequently, Mark's name would have most likely been physically associated with his Gospel from the very beginning.

And here we encounter another oddity: why only the single name "Mark"? As is often pointed out, "Mark" was one of the most common "given names" in the empire. Furthermore, since given names, that is *praenomina*, were only used by intimates, common practice adopted additional identifiers. Known as *cognomen*, they would include a patronym, and hence, by way of illustration, we would expect something more like the three-part Marcus Antonius Lavianus. That we have only "Mark" suggests that he was so well and intimately known to his audience that no additional identification was either warranted or appropriate. This makes good sense when we consider the small numbers of early Christians—perhaps 6,500 by the time Mark wrote<sup>2</sup>—few of whom could write, and even less of whom had the community standing and wherewithal to produce this kind of work. Just as a simple "Paul" sufficed to identify him to his read-

ers, so too "Mark." In this new, relatively close-knit family of "brothers and sisters" in Christ, most people knew exactly who both men were.

Our fullest early evidence as to Mark's identity comes from Papias (c. A.D. 125). He records John the Elder's claim (c. A.D. 90) that Mark was Peter's younger associate who recorded accurately all of Peter's various teachings about Jesus and compiled them into a single work. There is no particular reason to doubt this, and the only New Testament figure that fits the bill is John Mark, his given names again being all that was needed. A bilingual Hellenist—John being his Hebrew name and Mark his Greek one (cf. Saul/Paul)—he was a relative of the wealthy Cyprian landowner Barnabas (Col. 4:10; Acts 4:36). John Mark's well-to-do family also occupied a significant place in the early Christian communities, first in Jerusalem and later in Antioch. His mother's substantial house provided a focal gathering point for believers in Jerusalem. It was the first port of call for a recently escaped Peter (Acts 12:12–16), who when later writing from Rome described Mark as "my son" (1 Pet. 5:13). Mark also joined his uncle Barnabas and Paul in an early missionary tour from Antioch (Acts 12:25; 13:1–3). And in spite of a falling out during that journey (Acts 13:13; 15:36–39), Mark later worked very closely with Paul (Col. 4:10; Philem. 24), even being summoned to assist him in his last imprisonment and also in Rome (2 Tim. 4:11).

This being so, John Mark was well placed to write his Gospel. The great bulk of his eye-witness material would have come through his regular contact with Peter, while his mother's women friends provided the information for which they are explicitly named: the events surrounding the empty tomb (Mark 15:40–16:8). Additionally, some of Mark's insights into Jesus's significance may well have come from Paul, to whom Jesus also later appeared (1 Cor. 15:8). In effect, Matthew is not following Mark but the Peter whose teaching Mark preserves.

So why, then, does Matthew follow Peter? The most likely reason is Peter's priority. Not only does Peter appear first in all the lists of the Twelve, but only Matthew specifically mentions Jesus's authoritative declaration, "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18<sup>3</sup>). Remembering that for the New Testament it is the presence of the Spirit that marks out the church as God's people, Peter was indeed the first to attest to the new creational outpouring of the eschatological Spirit to the Jews at Pentecost (Acts 2:22–39), and to witness to that same outpouring upon Gentiles (Acts 10:36–43). That Luke, even with his Pauline bona fides, also follows Mark is therefore no surprise.

**Mark's Narrative Structure:  
Mark, Peter, and Jesus**

This brings us to one of the central concerns of this essay: what are we to make of Mark's narrative outline? Although the Gospel was once regarded as a fairly straightforward and unpolished account, its theological and literary sophistication is now widely recognized. I argued some twenty-five years ago that Mark was structured around Israel's most prominent eschatological expectation: the fulfillment of Isaiah's hope of a new exodus from exile (Isa. 40–66; cf. Isa. 40:3 in Mark 1:2–3).<sup>4</sup> Although a matter of some debate among Markan specialists, this proposal strikes me as the most natural explanation.<sup>5</sup> Just as Israel's defining exodus experience consisted of God's coming to his people, his performance of mighty deeds of deliverance, a journey in which he brought an uncomprehending Israel to the promised land, and an arrival ultimately in Jerusalem, so too Isaiah's prophecy of the return from exile. He declared that God would come to his people (40:1–11), perform mighty deeds of deliverance against the strongman Babylon (e.g., chap. 49), and lead his "blind" and uncomprehending people along a way they did not know (42:16) back to Jerusalem. But in a stunningly unexpected development, this new exodus would be effected through the suffering and death of God's mysterious servant (52:13–53:12).

This is essentially what we find in Mark. After announcing God's personal coming in Christ (1:1–15),<sup>6</sup> he emphasizes Jesus's mighty deeds of deliverance (taking up almost half of 1:16–8:21) and recounts his leading his twelve "blind" disciples along a way they did not understand (8:22–10:52) to Jerusalem (11:1–16:8), all the while couching Jesus's redemptive suffering in terms of Isaiah's servant.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Mark's heavy reliance on the second half of Isaiah is entirely consistent with reconstructions of the triennial readings of Scripture in first-century synagogues. Of the prophetic texts chosen to accompany weekly readings of Torah, two-thirds come from Isaiah, and two-thirds of those come from chapters 40–66. There is little question that Isaiah was by far the most influential prophetic work in first-century Israel's understanding of its future hope.

This leads to perhaps the most intriguing question we have asked so far: who first thought of telling the story of Jesus and his gospel according to the pattern of Isaiah's new exodus? Many scholars assume it was Mark. But this strikes me as unlikely. First, if it were true, then surely we would have heard much more of Mark as one of the apostolic church's foremost and creative theologians. But we do not. Even within the New Testament he is hardly a major figure. Second, if Mark's material came largely from Peter, how likely is it, over the long decades in which Peter preached Christ from Jerusalem to Rome, that he himself never thought about how the gospel related to Israel's Scriptural narrative and prophetic hopes? Indeed, putting it this way reveals just how easily Jesus himself is marginalized. If we can imagine Mark, and before him Peter, reflecting on such

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matters, why not Jesus himself? After all, if anyone seems capable of such it is surely Jesus whose genius, striking creativity, sheer weight of personal presence, and presumption of divine authority quite dwarfs that of both Peter and Mark, as they would be the first to readily affirm. It is inconceivable that such a Jesus did not himself have a clear idea of how his good news related to Israel's past and hoped-for future. Mark's use of Isaiah's new exodus paradigm to explain Jesus and his gospel almost certainly goes back, through Peter, to Jesus himself.

### John's Narrative Structure and Jesus

But what, then, do we do with John's very differently shaped Gospel?<sup>8</sup> As has long been noted, in his account the temple action comes not at the end but at the beginning, the voice from heaven is missing from Jesus's baptism, and the moment of Jesus's glorification is not the Transfiguration but the cross. Instead of the Synoptics' kingdom of God, John has Jesus repeatedly offering eternal life. There are none of Jesus's characteristic castings out of demons, and the Synoptics' parables and short sayings are replaced with long, complex, and symbol-laden interactions. Jesus spends most of his time in Judea, not Galilee, and all of this not just on one visit to Jerusalem but many, and all focused on a particular selection of major Jewish feasts.

Four main points can be made. First, although formerly regarded as a Hellenistic theological and "spiritual" Gospel, John is now widely recognized as being as thoroughly Jewish and as embedded in Israel's historical narrative as are the Synoptics.<sup>9</sup> For all the universal appeal of his basic symbols—light/darkness, above/below, water/wine—each is emphatically grounded in Israel's unique story.<sup>10</sup>

Second, John's striking references to the "disciple whom Jesus loved," commonly abridged to "the beloved disciple," imply that we are dealing with much more than a simple, straightforward account. Appearing for the first time only at the final Passover, the "beloved disciple" is introduced near

the beginning of John's massively expanded Last Supper account as the one who leans on Jesus's breast (*kolpos*; 13:23). The word occurs elsewhere in John only in his prologue where he describes Jesus's origins: Jesus alone is one with the Father's *kolpos* and the one who has made him known (1:18; cf. 14:8–9). This suggests that just as Jesus's special relationship with the Father enabled him uniquely to reveal the Father, so too "the beloved disciple" and Jesus. This resembles ancient practice whereby a teacher might choose a close disciple to succeed him and to carry on and interpret his teaching.<sup>11</sup> Though "the beloved disciple" was hardly considered by Jesus or himself to be Jesus's successor, the designation at least implies that Jesus granted him unique insight into the significance of his mission and message. If so, introducing "the beloved disciple" at this point in the narrative is particularly fitting. It is his unique insight that informs John's vastly extended account of Jesus's last words (from the Synoptics' few paragraphs to five substantial chapters), which, again in keeping with ancient practice, would be expected to express the very heart and core of Jesus's life's work and message. If this is the appropriate cultural analogy, it explains why John's Gospel looks so different from Peter's account in Mark. His "beloved disciple" has a particular responsibility not just to recount but to interpret Jesus's message, and this is what we see in John.<sup>12</sup>

So, for example, John takes up the Synoptics' new exodus motif and grounds it unequivocally in God's identity as the Creator (1:1–3; as it is in Torah, especially in Isaiah, and implicitly in Mark's accounts of Jesus's creatorly authority to command the sea; cf. John's creatorly "logos"). Whereas Mark's identification of Jesus with Yahweh assumes familiarity with Israel's Scriptures, and he offers only a few scattered hints that Jesus saw himself as replacing Israel's temple (e.g., 12:10; 13:2; 15:38), John begins with an unambiguous statement that Jesus was God's new exodus presence tabernacled among his people (1:14–18) and describes Jesus throughout using Yahweh's famous

“I Am” self-identification (4:26; 6:20, 41, 48; etc.). The eternal life implicit in Mark’s proclamation of the kingdom of God (see 9:43; 10:17, 30) becomes overt in John since this is what life in the eschatological Spirit necessarily means (repeatedly—1:4; 3:15, 36; 4:14; etc.). Whereas Mark concentrates on Isaiah’s great prophetic hope, John, taking a more overarching historical perspective, structures his Gospel around several of Israel’s great Jerusalem feasts (especially Passover and importantly Tabernacles, but also Sabbath and Dedication). In this way John shows how Jesus’s offer of eternal life and the indwelling Paraclete is grounded in Israel’s foundational historical experience of God’s covenantal redemptive faithfulness, a God who comes in order that his life-giving presence might dwell among his people. In bringing the hopes enshrined in these Jerusalem temple-based feasts to fulfillment, Jesus replaces both of them with his own final new feast—his Supper—and the Jerusalem temple with a new eschatological one of Spirit-indwelt believers through whom the Father and the Son are now specially present to the world at large.

Third, given the likely wide circulation of Mark’s Gospel by the time John wrote, it is very probable that a significant number of John’s hearers and readers were already familiar with it. This would explain why John appears at various points to assume Mark.<sup>13</sup> He is not at all abandoning or seeking to replace Mark but simply expecting his unique insights to be heard in the light of what his readers and hearers might already know of Jesus through Mark from Peter.

Finally, as with Mark and Peter, we might also ask who first thought of interpreting Jesus in the light of Israel’s feasts? Again, given the prominence of Israel’s feasts in shaping the nation’s identity, the Synoptics’ account of Jesus’s deliberate decision to heal on the Sabbath, his manner of entry into Jerusalem that evokes the Feast of Dedication, and his interpreting his death in the light of Passover, it seems highly likely that this interpretative lens also derives from Jesus. That is, the unique insights of John’s

Gospel come, via the “beloved disciple,” from Jesus himself—as the “beloved” title would lead us to expect.

To sum up, we have four Gospels representing two over-arching perspectives—the Synoptics’ Isaianic new exodus, and John’s coming of the promised new creational, new exodus presence of God among his now Spirit-indwelt people-temple to which Israel’s several feasts testified—both of which go back to Jesus. There are at least four critically important outcomes.

### Reading the Gospels

Beginning with the most obvious, as good readers have always known, a work’s literary structure plays a key role in guiding the interpretation of its individual units. However, on the view argued here, the Gospels’ narrative structure is not merely “literary” but inherently biblical-theological. So, for example, in the light of Mark’s new exodus pattern, his Transfiguration is far more than an isolated moment of spiritual insight. Its location “on the way” and its being replete with glory, talk of tabernacles, a descending cloud, and God’s voice (Mark 9:1–8) suggests that Mark intends it to evoke Sinai. And it is precisely this background that sets Mark’s account in stark contrast to the original. Moses and Elijah speak not with a hidden God but with Jesus who is not only in plain view but, be it noted, fully radiant in his own divine splendour long before the heavenly cloud appears. That there are no extended instructions for a new tabernacle implies that we no longer need one. This is because, as John will later clarify, Jesus himself is already God’s very presence “tabernacled” among us (John 1:14; cf. Isa. 40:3 and Mal. 3:1 in Mark 1:2–3).

Similarly, instead of the Ten Commandments (plus many others), the voice from heaven utters only one: “This is my beloved son, listen to him” (Mark 9:7). In addition to giving the divine imprimatur to Jesus’s preceding passion prediction and his consequent summons to cross-bearing discipleship (Mark 8:31, 34–38), it also implicitly reveals the true significance of



the subsequent and largest block of contiguous teaching in Mark (9:30–10:52). Jesus’s teaching now constitutes our new Torah, the way of the Lord’s wisdom. And this teaching is that the purity God requires is no longer a matter of observing food laws (Mark 7) but of following Jesus in his self-giving, expressed especially through how we treat others and particularly the least (Mark 9:33–10:45; cf. Matt. 7:12).

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One of Luke’s unique contributions is his extended account of Jesus’s birth. Clearly echoing the Greek Old Testament (LXX)—itself intended as a direct counter-narrative to Alexander’s Hellenization project<sup>14</sup>—it is designed to inform his Gentile readers that Jesus’s “exodus” story (see Luke 9:31) is the climax of the one true God’s alternative to the classical (Greek) world’s understanding of reality and human existence. If, as one expects, he was aware of what his second volume, Acts, would later argue, Luke implies that humanity finds its meaning and fulfillment in neither Athens nor Rome but Jerusalem’s radically different “grammar of life.”<sup>15</sup> Then, as briefly noted above, he underlines the

point by taking Mark’s “journey along the way” and vastly expanding it to show who Mark’s “least” include: the lost, women, sinners, prodigals, and outsiders such as Zacchaeus, Samaritans, and Gentiles. Jesus, playing a new David to John the Baptist’s Samuel, is similarly escorted by a ragtag and joyful band of all comers (1 Sam. 22:2)—a mixed multitude (Exod. 12:38), if one likes—on his “exodus” way to Jerusalem (see Luke 9:15–19:27). Over against the humanly “wise” Plato’s static and rigidly stratified *Republic*, the dynamic

Jesus community is indiscriminate of race, gender, and social status, testifying to the fact that this God is the God of a radically different and inclusive new humanity (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26–31; Gal. 3:28).

The same exodus paradigm informs Matthew’s previously mentioned bracketing of his additional five discourses with Deuteronomy’s climactic “blessing-curse” contrast. Assuming Mark’s basic new exodus pattern, he takes up and expands the idea that Jesus’s teaching is the new Torah for the new people of God. While retaining Mark’s Transfiguration, Matthew makes the point at the outset by presenting his unique Sermon on the Mount discourse as a new Sinai at the very beginning of Jesus’s ministry but now with Jesus’s teaching *in situ*. And again the differences speak volumes. In the first exodus the mountain was fenced off, with no one, on pain of death, permitted to approach (Exod. 19:12–14). Only a select few and above all Moses ascended into the mysterious cloud. Here with Jesus, there is no fence, no dark and veiling cloud, and, contrary to Gregory of Nazianzus’s Athenian philosophical vision,<sup>16</sup> no “Mosaic” spiritual elitism. Any who wish can ascend the mountain to Jesus, look on the face of God in his Christ, and hear his clear and accessible word (cf. Deut. 30:10–14). Instead of beginning with severe warnings, we are met instead with congratulations. Jesus’s opening “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matt. 5:3)—that is, those who know they do not have the spiritual resources in and of themselves to attain righteousness—stands in stark contrast to those who claim that only the spiritually enlightened, divinely born elite can ascend the mount of true wisdom.<sup>17</sup>

John, in bracketing Jesus’s public ministry with his cleansing of the temple (John 2:13–22) and the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11:1–53), points to the one temple that matters: human beings, made in God’s image to be his incarnational presence through the Spirit. This is why John, in his greatly extended Last Supper account, says so little about what some will later call the

Eucharist and so much about the Paraclete-Spirit. First, in replacing the Synoptics' words of institution with the foot-washing, he shows that participating at the meal counts for nothing unless Jesus's followers embrace the model of servanthood exemplified by his death (John 13:8). Second, just as it was the Presence and not sacrifice that made the temple the temple, it is the indwelling "eternal life"-giving Spirit—not transmuted bread and wine—that constitutes the new people of God (one can hardly miss the irony that it is outsiders who, misunderstanding Jesus's symbolism, take his words concretely; 6:52–58).<sup>18</sup>

### Jesus and Christianity: The Climax of Israel's Story

Second, the essential Jewishness of the Gospels' narrative frameworks is inescapable and essential to a correct understanding of who Jesus is. I recently heard of some South American Christians who questioned the relevance of the Old Testament; after all, it was Israel's story, not theirs. Since they believed that God had been active among them in their history (citing, quite mistakenly I would argue, Paul's appeal to the "unknown God" in Acts 17),<sup>19</sup> why could they not substitute their past for Israel's? Clearly, this is not the view of Jesus and the New Testament authors. Israel's Scriptures remained divinely authoritative even when writing in Greek to Gentile congregations in the Graeco-Roman world. This is precisely because it was uniquely Israel's counter-narrative (see the comment on the LXX above) into which Gentile believers were grafted and without which they had no salvation (Rom. 11:13–24; cf. "our ancestors" in 1 Cor. 10:1).

Now, this is hardly a uniquely South American problem. Even though the post-apostolic church repudiated Marcion's second-century rejection of the Old Testament and its God,<sup>20</sup> nevertheless in some ways Marcion actually won. Throughout much of the church's history, Israel's Scriptures have been marginalized whether through sheer ignorance, sugges-

tions implicit or explicit that Jesus is kinder and more loving than the God of the Old Testament, or in the undermining of those Scriptures' integrity by treating them primarily as a moral or allegorical resource in the service of later and, it is thereby implied, more sophisticated theological concerns and reflection. Indeed, how different are we when we make free to dispense with divine Scripture's way of doing theology for our own (more on this below)? It speaks for itself that even with all of the biblical resources at our disposal, few modern Christians could give a coherent account of the overall "narrative" of the book of Isaiah, by far the most influential prophetic writing for Jesus and the writers of the New Testament.

On the contrary, the Gospels' assumption of Israel's Scriptural narrative is vital to appreciating their astonishingly high Christology. John's individual "I Am" sayings and his "the logos who was God" introduction have long been recognized as expressing Jesus's deity, albeit often dismissed as later theological innovation. But recognizing the Synoptics' new exodus pattern shows that the identification of Jesus with Yahweh was there from the beginning. The two key texts (Isa. 40:3 and Mal. 3:1)—*and* the narratives they presuppose—with which Mark begins his gospel (1:2–3) speak not of the coming of the Messiah but of Yahweh himself. That is, long before Peter's celebrated confession of Jesus as Israel's Messianic king (8:29), Mark's opening editorial comment declares Jesus to be, however mysteriously, the very presence of Yahweh himself among us. Similarly, in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Jesus's repeated "I say unto you" (5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44) astonishingly equates his authority to that of the Torah he quotes, and therefore of God himself. Little wonder that for Matthew the experience of God's covenantal blessing or curse now turns on how one responds to Jesus. Even so, it is equally clear that Jesus and God engage as two persons; a reality that later trinitarian articulations were rightly keen to preserve (cf. Paul's God and Lord in 1 Cor. 8:6).

At the same time, Mark very soon thereafter (1:11) presents the Spirit-indwelt Jesus as faithful Israel—God’s true son (cf. Exod. 4:22; begotten by God, Deut. 32:18)—and Israel’s fully human messianic Davidic king and Isaiah’s faithful servant (Ps 2:7 and Isa. 42:1; and especially Isa. 53:4–12 in Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:45; 14:24). For Mark, Jesus is, simultaneously, both Yahweh among us *and* true son Israel and Messianic servant. But the fact that Mark’s first identification (1:2–3) precedes the second (e.g., 1:11) suggests that it is Jesus’s divine identity that enables him to be faithful Israel-son and Messianic servant (cf. Isa. 59:15b–21). From this perspective, John’s “only begotten” (1:18) appears less an ontological statement of metaphysical “essence,” divine origins, or the inner workings of the Trinity, than straightforward biblical language describing Israel whereby Jesus now takes up Israel’s role as God’s true heir and faithful agent (cf. “beget” in Deut. 32:18; Isa. 1:2; Ps 2:7; and “only begotten” in Heb. 11:7 although Abraham had other children). Preserving this critical Old Testament and hence Synoptic/Johannine distinction between language about Yahweh and language about Israel could have helped later Christians avoid some of the difficulties that bedeviled their grappling with Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity and in particular how Jesus could be both God and son.

The point is that Mark’s much earlier Christology gives nothing away to John. And if Mark does not, then neither does Peter, and inexorably nor does Jesus himself. Taking the Jewishness of the Gospels’ narrative structure seriously leads us to a high Christology that begins with Jesus himself. After all, what first-century merely human Jew would ever imagine rewriting Passover around himself, let alone command a storm, walk on water, forgive sins, and presume to set his words on the same level as or even over against Torah (Mark 14:22–25; 4:39–41; 6:47–52; 2:7–12; and 7:14–15; cf. Matt. 5:21, 27, etc.)? If the human Jesus, in these instances of exercising divine prerogatives,

is acting with any kind of self-aware intentionality, then it necessarily follows that he must have thought of himself, however difficult it might be for us to comprehend, in divine terms.

### **Interpreting Israel’s Scriptures Christianly**

Third, the Gospels’ two basic narrative frames are essential to our understanding of how the New Testament authors, and ultimately Jesus himself, understood and interpreted the “Old Testament.” Far from being a source in which the mysteriously hidden eternal Logos had now to be spiritually discerned behind the fleshly Old Testament, Israel’s Scriptures, when read in their own right as the eternal Word of the one true God (i.e., Israel’s Yahweh), provide on their plain surface the very basis for recognizing Jesus as that very same God’s presence among us. It is precisely because Jesus’s defeat of the strongman, forgiveness of sins, control of the sea, and compassionate provision of food in the desert are all key features of Yahweh’s actions in Isaiah (Isa. 49:24 in Mark 3:27; Isa. 43:25 in Mark 2:7; and Isa. 44:27; 49:10; 50:2; 51:9–11, 14 in Mark 4:39–41; 6:34–52) that Mark (followed by Matthew and Luke) can make his stupendous claims as to Jesus’s identity (Isa. 40:3 in Mark 1:2–3).

It is, it seems, less a case of finding Jesus concealed in the Old Testament than seeing Israel’s God, Yahweh, finally and fully revealed himself in Jesus in the New Testament, as Jesus himself declares in John 14:8–9. This is why Paul with astonishing aplomb can re-write the Shema, identifying Jesus as the Lord (1 Cor. 8:6). One might note here that the confession “Jesus is Lord” begins not with the church but with the very words, deeds, and therefore self-identification of Jesus himself.

To return to the point of this paragraph, if the New Testament is our final authority, and since its normative content cannot be separated from how it interprets Israel’s Scriptures, then I suggest it is imperative that we comprehensively



reassess the later church's long use of Hellenistic philosophy's "allegory" and "typology," both of which, frankly, have little in common with how the Synoptics, John's Gospel, and, ultimately, the Lord Jesus himself read Scripture.<sup>21</sup> If neither the Lord Jesus nor those who knew him best ever indulged in finding himself (or the Logos) under every spreading tree and on every high place of Scripture, then most likely neither does the Spirit and nor should we.

### **Toward a Genuinely Christian Theology**

Finally, given the above, and not least because the Gospels' two narrative frameworks derive from Jesus himself, surely they ought to be central to any articulation of a truly Christian theology.<sup>22</sup> Now, it is not as if we know nothing of these kinds of narrative patterns. Many of us recognize them, at least to some extent. We may even find them informative and inspiring. The problem is, when it comes to doing our theology, we effectively ignore them. I find it deeply ironic and profoundly disturbing that while we stoutly affirm Jesus's deity and hence the authority of his sayings, many of us see no contradiction in simply ignoring his mindset, that is, his commitment to Israel's narratively shaped theology as normative for the people of God. Perhaps we regard it as too Jewish, too particular, incompatible with our churchly tradition, or insufficiently universal or philosophical. For whatever reason, Jesus's mindset is simply not given anywhere near the kind of respect we give his sayings. As a result, the Gospels, and Scripture itself, effectively become a quarry from which we mine isolated truths in the interests of serving our own more sophisticated (and effective?) theological edifices.

This is not a trivial concern. It is now increasingly realized that narrative is inescapably central to our sense of being persons.<sup>23</sup> This should hardly surprise us since persons reveal who they truly are through the particular narratives of what they say and do. At the same time, nar-

ratives school our emotional responses and thereby our characters.<sup>24</sup> The more we indwell them, the more we are shaped by them. If it is the case that God is truly personal, then the way God chose to reveal himself, and how we talk about him, matters a very great deal. Since persons are known through their narratives, and since we ourselves are schooled through the narratives we indwell, the particular narrative shapes that have come down through the Gospels from Jesus himself must surely be utterly fundamental to, and even normative for, any genuine knowing of—and hence imitating the character of—the God who came to us in him. And yet, reflecting on my formal theology classes back in the mid-1980s, I do not recall the narrative shape of the Gospels receiving any attention, let alone serious consideration, as establishing the basic categories for doing a truly Christian theology.

Now, it was not as if those classes did not have their own categories and internal conceptual logic. They simply owed far more to the "left brain" orientation of Hellenistic philosophy than to the "right brain" orientation of Jerusalem's historical-cultural approach.<sup>25</sup> And this too is no trivial matter. Not only does this tendency in how we do theology buy into a way of knowing which the LXX resisted (again, see comment on the LXX above) and which Paul declared was self-confessedly ignorant of Yahweh (see comments on Acts 17 above) but to borrow the characterizations of Iain McGilchrist,<sup>26</sup> while traditional systematics through its narrow focus, abstraction, decontextualization, fixity, and static isolation yields clarity, its perfection comes at the risk of being empty and lifeless. On the other hand, the Gospels' richly textured and deeply personal, culturally embedded narratives yield a world of the individual, the personal, that is characterized by the implicit, room for change, growth, and interconnection. It is fundamentally about incarnation and living beings in a lived world.<sup>27</sup>

This is not to suggest, by way of false dichotomy, that only one alternative is

right. We surely need both. But it is seriously to press the question: which mode of perception ought to have priority? Since the Gospels do in fact reflect the authoritative perspective of the Lord Jesus himself, surely it is his “right-brained,” cultural-historical, narrative-of-Israel-based approach that should stand at the normative heart of Christian identity, theological education and reflection, and discipleship. And of course, what we say of the Gospels can be said of the whole of Scripture itself. Might it not be that the very narrative shape of Scripture is itself a truly inspired declaration about the fundamental nature of reality, human existence, and human knowing?

### **Where To from Here?**

If becoming aware of our failure to take Jesus’s own divinely authoritative perspective seriously is insufficient to cause us to readjust our thinking, there is the added practical difficulty that our isolated sayings and short gospel stories, as good as they are, and even though book-ended by Christmas and Easter, lack the cohesive embeddedness of a lived life in a day-to-day world necessary to effect deep and lasting change. As such, they have very little hope of gaining sufficient traction against all the other pervasive counter-narratives championed by our cultures, our workplaces, our nationalities, our professional training, and so on. Instead of the Gospels radically challenging those counter-narratives, we more often than not attempt to graft Jesus’s sayings into them, with more or less success. We might think that the point of being Christian is to become a good Canadian, Chinese, Australian, and so on. For the New Testament it means instead becoming a child of Abraham, grafted into the Israel of God.

It is little wonder that many Christians today find themselves having such a difficult time living genuinely Christian lives. Called to be citizens of the kingdom of heaven, we have little sense of the larger narrative we are called to indwell and which provides the foundation for and “informs”

our true citizenship. Even the classic formulation—creation, fall, redemption—while at least retaining some semblance of narrative in that it has a beginning, middle, and end, is desperately thin and abstract precisely because it lacks the personal depth, richness, and texture that only cultural and historical particulars can provide. No wonder so many of us are swamped by the constant stream of counter-narratives of other citizenships, whether nationalist (why being Canadian, American, Australian, Chinese, etc., is best) or modernist meta-narrative (why progress, science, education, unbridled capitalism lead to life!).

This became very clear to me recently while leading a tour of the Seven Churches of Revelation. Each of John’s letters deals to some degree or another with the inescapable conflict between the identities of those cities and that of Jesus. John was all too aware that many of the churches in Asia Minor were profoundly vulnerable precisely because in one respect or another they had succumbed to those various counter-narratives. Jesus had been accommodated to their worldview, and to that extent the gospel had been gelded. But as I understand the Gospels, their transforming power lies precisely in the fact that they articulate a lived world that confronts, resists, and challenges Alexander’s Hellenism on every major front. Can I suggest that unless these twin Gospel narratives become unquestionably and unreservedly our grammar of life, we will constantly find ourselves living against the grain. Not of our culture—we find that all too easy to slip into—but of the gospel itself. And all for the simple reason that we “know” our cultural narratives far better and deeper than we allow God’s narrative, as expressed in the Scriptures and climactically and definitively in the Gospels, to school and thereby transform us. It is, it seems to me, imperative that we choose this day whose narrative we will live in and by. And having made that decision, we need to let go of all those other competing stories and bed this one down deep, deep into our hearts and minds. **X**

## Notes

1 Based on Martial's figures, *Epigr.* 1:117 and 13:3, i.e., at a rate of between 140 and 274 lines per denarius, a copy of Mark's 1771 lines at 32 characters per line, cf. P<sup>46</sup>, would cost somewhere between 6.5 and 13 denarii, which, while not cheap, is hardly prohibitive. See further Rikk E. Watts, "How Do You Read? God's Faithful Character as the Primary Lens for the New Testament Use of the Old Testament," in *Essays in Honor of Greg Beale: From Creation to New Creation—Biblical Theology and Exegesis*, edited by Daniel M. Gurtner and Benjamin L. Gladd (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), 216–17.

2 Necessarily involving a degree of conjecture, see the discussion in Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1996), 7.

3 All translations are my own.

4 Later published in *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, WUNT 2.88 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1997; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000).

5 See, e.g., Thorsten Moritz, "Mark, Book of," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 481–82.

6 Both Isa. 40:3 and Mal. 3:1 in Mark 1:2–3 refer to the coming, not of the Messiah, but of Yahweh himself.

7 See Watts, "Mark," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 175–82, 190–92, 203–6, 229–32.

8 The traditional ascription of John to John the apostle, who describes himself as the Beloved Disciple, still seems to me to make the best sense of the data.

9 Especially, John W. Pryor, *John, Evangelist of the Covenant People: The Narrative and Themes of the Fourth Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992).

10 Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

11 Cf. Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:917; and especially Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 401; cf. 137–45; though without accepting the latter's idea of competition between the Beloved Disciple and Peter.

12 I am here leaving aside the question of authorship, though I incline to the view that "the beloved disciple" is the Synoptics' John.

13 Richard Bauckham, "John for Readers of Mark," in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 147–71.

14 Giuseppe Veltri, *Libraries, Translations, and 'Canonical' Texts: The Septuagint, Aquila, and Ben Sira in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Boston: Brill, 2006), 152–53.

15 See Kavin C. Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

16 Cf. Susanna Elm, *Sons of Hellenism, Fathers of the Church: Emperor Julian, Gregory of Nazianzus, and*

*the Vision of Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 213–19.

17 Cf., e.g., Gregory's account of himself over against his opponents and even the Christians in his care, Elm, *Sons*, 218.

18 Compare the similarly literalistic incomprehension of outsiders in, e.g., 2:18–22; 3:4–6; and 4:11–12. Cf. also Ephesians where the much-celebrated unity of God's people is maintained by walking in step with the Spirit, e.g., 4:1–6 in which the meal plays no part.

19 Paul's point is not that the Athenians without realizing it already knew Yahweh, but instead that for all their religiosity (v. 22) they, in their self-confessed "ignorance" (v. 23), neither knew the one in whom they live and move and have their being nor the Jewish story through which he was revealed (vv. 26, 31); see C. K. Rowe, "The Grammar of Life: The Areopagus Speech and Pagan Tradition," *New Testament Studies* 57, no. 1 (2011): 31–50.

20 He considered the God of the Old Testament to be incompatible with the true God revealed in Jesus.

21 On the profound differences, see Watts, "How Do You Read?," 199–201, 204.

22 Even for Paul, see Regent alumnus Ian W. Scott, *Paul's Way of Knowing: Story, Experience, and the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

23 Initially, e.g., Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39, no. 3 (1971): 291–311; Kay Young and Jeffrey L. Saver, "The Neurology of Narrative," *SubStance* 30, no. 1 (2001): 72–84; Jonathan A. Carter, "Telling Times: History, Emplotment, and Truth," *History and Theory* 42 (2003): 1–27.

24 Martha Nussbaum, "Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love," *Ethics* 98, no. 2 (1988): 225–54; cf. N. Wolterstoff, "Living within a Text," in *Faith and Narrative*, ed. K. Yandell (Oxford: Oxford University, 2001), 202–13.

25 This critique is not simply to be equated anachronistically with Adolf von Harnack's recently much-maligned "Hellenization thesis," which was largely concerned with post-apostolic discussion of divine attributes in the context of Hellenistic metaphysics.

26 This problematic left-brain domination is addressed in Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); see the short clip at <https://vimeo.com/31780637>. See also, e.g., Yael Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 48–52.

27 On the ways in which systematic theology systemically ignores, smoothes, and filters the richness and multi-layeredness of the biblical narrative, see John Goldingay, "Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology," in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 123–42.