

The Literary Context of the Gospels

Literary Context in the Gospels

- “The place of a given pericope in the context of any one of the gospels”
 - Where the evangelists chose to put the deeds and teachings of Jesus
- The 2 major concerns for the modern reader concerning Literary Context are to help the reader understand:
 1. A given saying or narrative in its present form
 2. The nature of the composition of the Gospels as wholes
 - Thus, to interpret any one of the Gospels itself
 - Not just isolated facts about the life of Jesus
- Interpreting individual pericopes requires thinking horizontally & vertically

Think Horizontally

- When studying a pericope in any one gospel, it is usually helpful to be aware of its parallels in the other gospels
 - *Caution: The purpose of this exercise is not to “fill in the gaps” with details from the other gospels
 - Rather, it is to see the distinctives in each gospel
 - Thus, flushing out the purpose of the Evangelist’s crafting
 - Ex. “The desolating sacrilege” in Matt. 24:15-16; Mark 13:14; Luke 21:20-21 (see Fee, p. 143)
 - This helps bring awareness of the different kinds of contexts in which the same or similar material lived in the ongoing church
 - Ex. Jesus’ Lament over Jerusalem (see Fee, p. 143-144)
 - Ex. Beatitudes (see Fee, p. 144)
- A Synopsis is a good tool for this kind of study
 - “A presentation of the gospels in parallel columns”

Think Vertically

- An awareness of both historical contexts of the Gospels
 - That of Jesus & that of the Evangelists
 - *Caution: The purpose here is NOT to try to discover the historical Jesus
 - The Gospels in their present form are the word of God to us
 - NOT our reconstructions of Jesus’ life
- It is an awareness that many of the gospel materials owe their present context to the Evangelists
 - And that good interpretation may require appreciating a given saying first in its original historical context as proper prelude to understanding that same word in its present canonical context

Example: Matt. 20:1-16

- The parable of the workers in the vineyard
- What does this mean in the context of *Matthew*
- Thinking horizontally
 - On either side of this text Matthew parallels Mark very closely (Matt. 19:1-30; 20:17-34; cf. Mark 10:1-52)
 - Note “Many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Matt. 19:30; Mark 10:31), is then repeated in reverse order in 20:16.
 - Thus, the immediate context in Matthew is the reversal of order between first and last
- The parable itself ends with the landowner justifying his generosity
 - Thus, Jesus is saying that pay in the kingdom of God is based on grace, not merit
 - The *original context* of the parable is probably Jesus’ own acceptance of “sinners”
 - Since the Pharisees would have seen themselves as bearing the “burden of the work” and thought themselves deserving of more reward/pay
 - Thus, Jesus is showing that God is generous and gracious, and He freely accepts ‘sinner’ just as He does the ‘righteous’
- How does the parable function in Matthew in light of this?
 - The point of the parable is the same
 - But the context is that of discipleship, not justifying Jesus’ actions
 - Those who have forsaken everything to follow Jesus are the last who will be first
 - In contrast to the Jewish leaders (a point that Matthew repeats frequently)
- Sometimes thinking vertically will reveal that the same point is being made at both levels
 - But we cannot know that for sure until we do the work

Interpreting the Gospels as a Whole

- When considering how the Evangelists composed their gospels, there are 3 principles to be considered:
 1. Selectivity: The Evangelists selected the material that suited their purposes
 2. Arrangement: The Evangelists arranged the material they selected to suit their purposes
 3. Adaptation: The Evangelists adapted the material to suit their needs, without changing its meaning
- *This process happens in preaching all the time

Example: John 4:44

- “For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown.”
- In John, set while ministering in Jerusalem
- In the Synoptics, set while ministering in Nazareth (Matt. 13:57; Mark 6:4; Luke 4:24)
- For John, the point is *theological* in nature
 - Because to the Jewish mind, the Messiah’s true home was Jerusalem
- For the Synoptic authors, the point is more about His role as a prophet

Example: The Cursing of the Fig Tree

- Mark 11:12-14, 20-25; Matt. 21:18-22
- Mark's telling is for its symbolic theological significance
 - Notice the pronouncement upon Judaism when Jesus cleanses the Temple (Mark 11:15-19)
- Matthew's telling is focused on faith
 - Thus, he places the cursing and withering together
- Remember the Holy Spirit is inspiring them both to use the material as they do
 - And both meanings can be drawn from the original context

Example: Mark's Opening Chapters (Fee, p. 147.3-148)