

# GOSPEL AND NARRATIVE

**Dr Kenneth J. McLean and Japhet Vegogo**

*Ken McLean has been a visiting lecturer to Newton Theological College in Papua New Guinea since 2000. Prior to that, he was Professor and Pro-Vice-Chancellor at the University of Technology, Lae. Besides having a PhD in Applied Physics, Ken earned an Australian College of Theology MTh. Japhet Vegogo graduated with a diploma from Newton Theological College in 2005. He is with the Anglican church in Wanigela, Popondetta, Oro Province, and is an ordained deacon.*

## INTRODUCTION

One of the interesting features of the Bible is that it makes use of stories or narratives about events and people to convey its message<sup>1</sup>. In the New Testament, the narrative form is used to record the life of Jesus, and the history of the early church, and this provides the basis for the church's theology. One of the more-recent developments in biblical scholarship is concerned with understanding the nature and effectiveness of these narrative accounts.<sup>2</sup> Questions are being asked as to the characteristics of the narrative form itself, to what extent it represents historical facts, and its effectiveness in transmitting the message to the reader, when compared with prescriptive statements that set out orthodox belief in very precise and clear language.

The purpose of this article is to make a preliminary investigation into the main features of the narrative form in the New Testament, and then to compare their effectiveness in transmitting religious concepts with that of prescriptive statements. In order to restrict the scope of the article, it will focus on some

---

<sup>1</sup> Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, "Torah as Narrative and Narrative as Torah", in *Old Testament Interpretation: Past, Present, and Future*, James Luther Mays, et al, eds, Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1995, has a good discussion of the use of narratives in the Hebrew scriptures.

<sup>2</sup> A good summary, with many references related to the New Testament, may be found in George Stroup, "Theology of Narrative or Narrative Theology?", in *Theology Today* 47-4 (1991).

aspects of the life of Jesus, and will only use a few examples to illustrate the principles involved.<sup>3</sup>

### **SOME FEATURES OF NARRATIVE**

Fundamental to a narrative is the actual historical events it seeks to describe, which, in our example, is the life of Jesus. The four gospel writers had access to a whole range of stories about Jesus, which were part of the oral tradition, worship ritual of the early church, or in document form, such as Q, or Mark's gospel. Each author stood outside the events to be recorded, and formed an opinion of their significance, then selected material, and structured the narrative so as to convey the message intended. All four gospel writers chose to set their story in narrative form, and used various literary techniques to convey their message. The resulting narrative, while based on an historical event, is not an objective report, but is written with a very clear purpose and message for the reader.

The narrative covering the life of Jesus is made up of a number of shorter narratives. Each of these shorter narratives has a beginning and ending. In some instances, the boundaries are structural, as in the Sermon on the Mount,<sup>4</sup> which begins with Jesus' going up the mountain, and ends with Him coming down. Here, Matthew has clearly collected all the wise sayings of Jesus, and placed them within these boundaries. In the Sermon on the Mount, the structure appears to invite the reader to compare this with the Law given on Mount Sinai. The detailed teaching of Jesus either expands on, or contradicts, the Laws of Moses, so it is clear that Matthew is saying that the teachings of Jesus are replacing the law, given at Mount Sinai, by a new law. In other instances, the boundaries are not so clearly defined, and it is up to the reader to define its scope.

In biblical narratives, the characters are generally portrayed through their outward appearances, and there are very few instances where their inner life

---

<sup>3</sup> This article is inspired by the Major Report, *Gospel as Narrative and Narrative as Gospel*, by Japhet Vegogo, seminarian, Newton Theological College, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> See Matt 5-8.

and thoughts are described. Sometimes, the New Testament narrators convey their message regarding Jesus by making a direct comment, “He had compassion on the crowd”, or by the remark of a spectator, when people were amazed, and asked, “What kind of man is this?”, or the Roman guard, who said, “Truly, this is the Son of God”. On other occasions, Jesus’ character is inferred from His discourses, actions, and conduct. Sometimes, this indirect method can convey a positive message, as when Jesus shows concern for the disadvantaged, the sick, and social outcasts, but the author can also achieve a level of ambiguity, as when Peter lacked faith trying to walk on the water<sup>5</sup>. If the writer wanted to make the story dramatic, or the teaching authoritative, he allowed Jesus to speak for Himself.<sup>6</sup>

Hence, the writer, who uses the narrative form, seeks to convey his message to the reader, by making a careful selection of the material, by structuring this material into meaningful groupings, and by using various literary techniques.

### **WHY NARRATIVE?**

Prose narrative is one of the oldest methods of religious communication, and there are a number of reasons why this is so. Firstly, it provides a very easy means of remembering. In addition, because narratives are set in a time frame, given a definite location, and use characters that often assume some authority, the story is given a feeling of truth and reality. Stories are irresistibly persuasive.

The second reason is that understanding narrative requires a different kind of mental effort from that required in understanding prescriptive statements. Narrative provokes the reader to think about the meaning of the passage, opens up a much wider range of possibilities, and allows the reader to relate to his/her own experience and inner needs. In this sense, it represents an open system, which means there are a range of possible meanings within the framework of the narrative. A good example of this is given by the parable of

---

<sup>5</sup> Matt 14:28-31.

<sup>6</sup> Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*, Minneapolis MN: Fortune Press, 2001, gives a very good account of these literary methods used in the Bible.

the Good Samaritan<sup>7</sup>. The prescriptive statement is, “Love your neighbour as you love yourself”. This now needs to be contrasted with the parable itself, which is just a simple narrative story. It conveys the message in a much more effective and memorable way than the bland prescriptive statement, and encourages readers to become divergent in their thinking, and allows them to personalise the message.

Finally, the narrative approach encourages the reader to study the final form of the documents, and not be concerned with historical-critical analysis, source and form criticism, redaction criticism, and others. It accepts the account as given in the Bible and seeks to understand the literary structure of the book and the message conveyed. The narrative approach does not exclude the use of other methods of analysis but they are of secondary importance.

### **NARRATIVE AND PRESCRIPTIVE STATEMENTS**

An appreciation of the narrative form of communication can be made by comparing it with prescriptive statements, examples of which include the Athanasian and the Nicene Creeds, church catechisms, and confession statements of churches and mission organisations. In this case, the message to be conveyed depends on the meaning of words used, and the sentence construction. Hence, in prescriptive statements, the purpose of the statement is convergent, which means that it is directed to one precise meaning, and no other is acceptable. For example, one purpose of the Nicene Creed is to define the doctrine of the Trinity. This is essentially a closed system of belief, because any variation from it is regarded as heresy. On the other hand, narratives do not use precise language, and the meaning relies on the story, its structure, and literary methods used, and, consequently, it has a range of meanings, within certain boundaries. A prescriptive statement is basically a closed system, and there is no room for the development of new ideas. Narrative, however, may be thought of as an open system, in that it invites comment and interpretation.

---

<sup>7</sup> Luke 10:25.

Important prescriptive statements cannot be adequately understood outside the narrative. For example, “Jesus is Lord” is a prescriptive statement, but it can only be understood in the context of Jesus’ birth, earthly life, death, and resurrection. More-extensive prescriptive statements, and especially those that form the doctrinal basis of the church, are based on the narrative stories of the Bible, but a human element is also superimposed, which seeks to reconcile the scattered biblical concepts, in order to forge them into a coherent and rational statement. They first arose as the result of differences of opinion within the church, and they are important for individual churches and groups, as they define who they are, and what is required to be an orthodox member.

### **THE MESSAGE**

One of the important issues, raised about the value of narrative, concerns its effectiveness in conveying the gospel message. If the discussion is restricted to New Testament narratives, then the following observations are important.

If traditional Christian assumptions are accepted, then the fundamental basis of the gospel is the person, life, and work of Jesus. The four gospel accounts are based on that event, and what is significant about them is that they are recorded in narrative form. This is very powerful, as it conveys the character of Jesus, and places Him in an historical situation, involving place and time, and this helps to make Him more real, and His message credible. The things that happen in His life are important, especially the manner of His birth, acts of love during His life, and then His death and resurrection.

The meaning of His life is contained within the framework of the narrative, and this is determined by the writer’s selection of material, its arrangement, and the literary methods employed. Each writer seeks to convey his understanding. For example, John says that his account is written “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that, by believing, you may have life in His name” (John 20:31), and Luke and Mark give similar reasons.<sup>8</sup> Hence, the meaning of these events is conveyed in the way the narrative story is presented. The primitive gospel is contained in these

---

<sup>8</sup> See Luke 1:4 and Mark 1:1.

narratives, but, because of the nature of narrative, the general meaning is clear, but there is also room for some flexibility of understanding.

A more complex theological structure comes from the writings of people like Paul. It is significant that he does not add much to the narrative story, and is mainly concerned with further interpretation. This process of interpretation continued in the early church, as it sought to define more clearly the gospel message, and culminated in the 4th century, with the prescriptive statements contained in the Nicene Creed.

## CONCLUSION

In the New Testament, narrative accounts of the life of Jesus and the early church provide the basis of belief. It is shown that the narrative stories are written to convey a message, and each writer does this by carefully selecting his material, arranging it in order to enhance the message, and using various literary methods. Narratives are open systems, as they encourage the readers to think for themselves, and this leads to divergent understanding. In addition, they help the reader to relate to the message at a personal level, and touches things within that are of deep spiritual concern. This may be contrasted with prescriptive statements, which are closed systems, and which lead to a common belief, but leave little room for flexibility, and are unrelated to human experience and spiritual needs.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Amit, Yairah, *Reading Biblical Narratives*, Minneapolis MN: Fortune Press, 2001.
- Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn, "Torah as Narrative and Narrative as Torah", in *Old Testament Interpretation: Past, Present, and Future*, James Luther Mays, et al, eds, Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1995.
- Stroup, George, "Theology of Narrative or Narrative Theology?", in *Theology Today* 47-4 (1991).