

Narratives I: Telling the Old, Old Story

Supplemental Materials

The two exercises offered in this file focus on using K. Aland's Gospel synopsis as a tool for discerning the editorial activity of Gospel authors. Specifically, these two samples examine the story of the jailing of John the Baptist and the story of the transfiguration of Jesus. In accordance with the presentation in chapter seven of the textbook, both examples operate from the two-document hypothesis, assuming Markan priority.

We could just as legitimately begin from Matthean priority and conduct the analysis from the two-Gospel hypothesis, if we liked. Users of this material who prefer that approach are more than encouraged to try it out on these same two pericopes. The principle considerations involved remain constant between the two approaches, but because of the difference in starting points, the results would be different as well.

Section one analyzes Luke 3:19-20 (and 21-22), in order to get a grasp on the subtext of one Luke's apparent concerns for his first-century audience.

Section two does a similar analysis of Matthew 17:1-9 for a similar purpose regarding Matthew's concerns.

Both presentations constitute examples of redaction criticism. They attempt to read the messages of individual Gospel authors at least partly from the way they have selected, arranged and adapted their materials.

Besides giving some additional experience in the principles of redaction criticism, the exercises will also give some further opportunity to practice finding one's way around in the *Synopsis* and in using it to good effect.

As usual, these exercises are only samples of a vast array of possible applications. Likewise, even the studies carried out here are subject to criticism. They are not presented as the complete word on either of the two texts, let alone the last word on them!

I. Luke 3:19-20 and Parallels (the Jailing of John)

The following example proceeds according to the two-document hypothesis, that is, on the assumption of Markan priority. It could start from other assumptions (Matthean priority, for example), and the results would likely be different.

Remember: the issues of *selectivity*, *arrangement* and *adaptation* apply both on the level of whole pericopes as well as on the level of the internal units, phrases and words constituting a pericope.

A. Selection

Consult index one (at the back of Aland, *Synopsis*), and try answering the following questions. Also, try ignoring the answers, provided in the square brackets, until you have come up with your own answer.

1. Which pericope deals with Luke 3:19-20, with Luke as its “lead” gospel?
[Pericope §17; note that the reference in Luke’s column is in bold type.]
2. Which of the four gospels have “selected” this story?
[All three Synoptics, but not John.]

B. Arrangement

Now use index one to get the larger, *macrostructure* perspective on the relative placement of the pericope. See what you can determine on your own, before you consult the suggestions below.

1. Matthew and Mark place this story near the end of Jesus’ Galilean ministry, before the turning point at Caesarea Philippi and his last journey toward Jerusalem (pericope §144).
2. Luke, however, moves it forward (from where Mark has it) to a place between John the Baptist’s preaching and the baptism of Jesus. Compare index one for the context of pericope §17.

C. Adaptation

Compare Luke’s *microstructure* with Mark’s (keeping an eye on Matthew’s in the process).

1. Luke omits the details leading to John’s death—in fact he omits John’s death altogether.
2. Luke merely summarizes what John said to Herod (“rebuked” ἐλεγχόμενος). [Notice that Matthew omits Mark’s “because he had married her”; perhaps Matthew’s audience already knows this.]

3. Luke summarily broadens the cause for John's rebuke beyond the incestuous marriage ("because of all the evil things Herod had done").
4. Luke drastically downplays John's role in Jesus' baptism (Lk 3:21-22): John himself is not even mentioned, and Jesus' baptism is put into the passive voice without specifying the agent (contrast Mk 1:9).
5. In other words, if Luke's Gospel were the only one we had—that is, if we did not know the story of Jesus' baptism from any other source than Luke's version—we would probably not know that John baptized Jesus. How could he have? He was already in jail!

D. If We Attempt to Find an Explanation for These Phenomena, What Do We Get?

1. Possibly they reflect Luke's attempt to draw a clear line between the end of the old era (to which John belongs) and the beginning of the new era (initiated with the baptismal anointing of Jesus). John simply prepares people for the new era. Compare Acts 10:37-38, where, according to Peter's explanation to Cornelius, we hear that "what happened in Judea began in Galilee *after* the baptism that John preached."
2. Or possibly Luke wished to produce a more satisfactory literary structure, whereby the careers of John and Jesus are clarified and paralleled, but kept cleanly separate:
 - both have a prophetic call
 - both have a ministry in fulfillment of Scripture
 - both preach to all classes of society
 - both fall foul of Herod
 - both meet similar ultimate fates
 - both their birth narratives are told in close parallel (see index one again)

If that is the case, then the question immediately arises why their interpersonal connection should be sacrificed like this for mere literary fussiness.

3. Perhaps the explanation is associated with the situation reflected in Acts 19:1-7, where there is confusion between the "spiritless" baptism of John the Baptist and the "Spirit"-baptism of genuine Christianity. Thus, here at 3:19-22, Luke may remove John from any apparent association with the bestowal of the Spirit, so that in connection with Acts 19, he can forestall among his readers any misunderstanding about the role and authority of John vis-à-vis Jesus. (Compare the exaggerated emphasis on this in the Fourth Gospel: John 1:19-34.)

E. Relate the Results to the Larger Issues Luke Deals with in the Gospel.

The question comes down to how any of these (or other) explanations—or even some mix of them—would fit into a more general perception of Luke's intentions, purposes and audience. All the time, however, we keep well in mind that whatever the true explanation is, it is precisely what the inspiring Spirit wanted it to be. In this case, the answer may be that Luke's concern to clarify the relation of John and Jesus is part of a

larger strategy to foster further integration of the Gentiles and Jews within the church, in addition to correcting what he perceives as mistaken veneration of John's legacy.

F. What Then, Finally, Can We Learn from Such a Study?

What can be applied from it in a constructive and edifying (Spirit-led) way to the modern congregation? Perhaps nothing at all! If no one today confuses John's and Jesus' baptisms (Acts 19 having done its work well), then the hypothetical Lukan purpose for designing 3:19-22 the way he did is no longer relevant, though it once was. Still, it would stunningly show how vitally involved with the concrete life of the contemporary church the Scripture is. Much of Scripture, of course, is specifically applicable to us today, and perhaps all of it is applicable in some generalized way.

Nonetheless, this text reminds us that there are some scriptural concerns that do not speak directly to the modern situation, just as there are also many modern questions not directly addressed in Scripture. But even if it does not apply in a direct way today, this text—as handled by Luke—does indeed illustrate how much more information and perspective lies there, ready to be discerned through the use of the synopsis.

We simply cannot do full justice to Gospel texts if we disregard the way they interrelate with each other, Gospel to Gospel. And no tool helps us to “read” these interrelationships and their implications better than does Aland's *Synopsis*.

II. Matthew 17:1-9 and Parallels (the Transfiguration)

(Pericope §161; parallels Mk 9:2-10, Lk 9:28-36)

Matthew 17:1-9, the story of the transfiguration, is indeed a narrative, though not a saying or parable. It is a narrative of a miraculous event, though not a miracle story in the usual sense of “miracle.” It is more an epiphany or appearance story, and is probably aimed at identifying Jesus. Some people would call it a “legend,” because it goes beyond normal human experience (not because it did not happen; unfortunately, the word “legend” is unnecessarily inflammatory in this connection).

Let us analyze this pericope in Aland’s *Synopsis* as we did the previous text about John’s jailing. Once again, we proceed on the assumption of Markan priority.

Selectivity

The story occurs in all three Synoptic Gospels, but not in John; thus it is part of the “triple tradition.”

Arrangement

Index one quickly reveals that in Matthew, as in both the other Synoptic Gospels, the story of the Transfiguration follows Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus’ warning not to reveal his identity to the crowds, his prediction of his coming death and his call to cross-bearing discipleship. Likewise, it is followed by Jesus’ warning not to say anything about this vision until after the resurrection, a discussion of Elijah’s coming (omitted in Luke), the healing of a boy and a second prediction of Jesus’ coming death.

Adaptation

1. Matthew’s editorial touches (i.e., “redactions”) to Mark’s version

As you work through this material, try to distinguish between “merely” stylistic redactions and genuinely theological redactions.

v. 1 adds “his brother”
 omits τὸν “the” before Ἰάκωβον “James”

(These first two may be related, since Mark’s including τὸν before “James” and omitting it before “John” implies that James and John have a closer relationship with each other than either does with Peter. [This is an example of the so-called Granville-Sharp rule; cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, pp. 270ff.] This may be what Matthew indicates with the phrase “his brother.”)

 omits μόνους “by themselves” (redundant with “apart”?)
 alters μετὰ “with” to μεθ’ “with”

v. 2 adds “and his face shone like the sun” (cf. Ex 34:29, 35)
 replaces “glistening, intensely white” with “white as light”

	omits	reference to the fuller bleaching a garment
v. 3	adds	“behold”
	replaces	“Elijah with Moses” with “Moses and Elijah” (cf. however, Mk 9:5 and Lk 9:30, 33)
	simplifies	“and they were talking” with a participial clause
	changes	συλλαλοῦντες τῷ Ἰησοῦ “speaking to Jesus together” to συλλαλοῦντες μετ’ αὐτοῦ “speaking with him together”
v. 4	replaces	καί “and” with δέ “and”
	replaces	“Master” (=ράββί) with “Lord” (κύριε)
	slight changes	in Peter’s speech (e.g., adds εἰ θέλεις, ὧδε “if you like, here”)
	omits	Mark 9:6 (the disciples’ perplexity)
v. 5	adds	“He was still speaking when lo,”
	slight changes	in wording in Greek
	adds	“bright” (φωτεινή) NOTE: (1) the pun, <i>bright</i> cloud <i>overshadows</i> them; (2) cf. Ex 16:10; 40:34ff on the glory of the Lord in the cloud; (3) cf. 2 Macc 2:8 on the glory and the cloud as God’s direct presence
	replaces	ἐγένετο with ἰδοῦ
	adds	“saying” (NRSV “said”)
	adds	“with whom I am well pleased” NOTE: (1) Matthew 3:17; repeats here the <i>bath qol</i> (voice of God) of the Baptism, which alludes to Psalm 2:7 (the Messianic king) and to Isaiah 42:1 (the Servant who suffers); (2) Deuteronomy 18:15, with respect to the Prophet like Moses who will come: “Listen to him!”
	adds	vv. 6-7 , about the worship of the disciples and the reassurance given them by Jesus. Perhaps a vague reflection of the fear of Aaron and the people, and Moses’ reassurance (Ex 34:30-31); but strong echoes of Daniel’s vision of the angel in Daniel 10 can also be seen here (cf. Mt 17:6-7 with Dan 10:9-12; cf. also 2 Sam 9:6-7 [Mephibosheth before David] and Tobit 12:16-17 [Tobit and son before the angel Raphael]).
v. 8	makes stylistic changes	
	omits	“no longer...with them”
v. 9	replaces	“charges” (διστείλατο) with “commanded” (ἐνετείλατο)
	adjusts the syntax slightly,	perhaps to allude to αἱ ἐντολαί “the commandments”?
	replaces	“what they had seen” ἃ εἶδον with “the vision” τὸ ὄραμα
	omits	Mark 9:10 on the disciples’ puzzlement about the meaning of rising from the dead

What can we conclude from this data?

1. In Jesus' own ministry, this event may reveal Jesus' desire that the disciples have a similar "voice-from-heaven" experience regarding his identity as he himself had at his baptism. Thus, in its original historical context, the transfiguration may have been intended to provide assurances to the disciples of Jesus' identity in the face of increasing opposition to Jesus from the religious authorities. (Note how it follows the "bad news" at Caesarea Philippi.) It may as well have been intended to strengthen Jesus' own resolve to move ahead with the plan that he sacrifice himself in Jerusalem.
2. Matthew, Mark and Luke all allude to the story of Moses, especially as recorded in Exodus 34, in their accounts of the transfiguration: motifs of the "six days" (cf. Ex 24:16; Luke reads "eight days"), the mountain, the cloud, the three companions (cf. Ex 24:1-2), occur in all three accounts. Mark and Luke, however, focus their attentions more on Elijah and on a redemptive "exodus," respectively. Matthew, on the other hand, has such strong and deliberately placed reminiscences of Moses on Sinai that the effect is heightened considerably—and, we presume, intentionally—by his editorial activity. Matthew wants his readers to see a clear correlation between Jesus and Moses; but what is the correlation?
3. Matthew has already been presenting Jesus as the new Moses, or as the Prophet like Moses whose coming Moses himself predicted. For example, in Matthew 5--7, Jesus reinterprets the Law, like a new Moses, and when he is done, he "comes down from the mountain" (Mt 8:1), just like Moses once did.
4. Yet Matthew is also very careful not to identify Jesus with Moses. In the interview between Jesus and the two prophets Moses and Elijah, Jesus clearly plays the leading role and is in fact the one who remains when the others have gone. Moses implicitly gives his blessing on the ministry of Jesus and then recedes into the background. Thus, Jesus is not just a new Moses, but replaces Moses in authority.
5. But Matthew does not permit this veneration of the new Moses to obscure the fact that Jesus is both the divine Messiah and the suffering Messiah. For out of the bright and glorious cloud comes the voice of God, just as at his baptism, saying, "This is my beloved son" (Ps 2:7, the Messiah), "in whom I am well pleased" (Is 42:1, the Suffering Servant). To this is added the command from Deuteronomy 18:15 ("Listen to him!"), which identifies Jesus as the Prophet like Moses, but superseding Moses.
6. Hebrews 3:1-6 teaches explicitly that Christ is superior to Moses. Here in Matthew 17:1-9 the same thing is revealed *just as authoritatively* in the Spirit-guided editorial activity of Matthew.
7. And now, Peter James and John become new prophets, having, like Moses, seen the *vision* of the glory of the Lord on the Mountain.

What does this mean for us today?

1. For Matthew's congregation of Jewish converts to Jesus the Messiah at the end of the first century (this is speculation), there was no greater cultural and religious authority than Moses and the Law. The temple and the city of Jerusalem lay in ruins, and the sacrifices had been discontinued. All that remained to keep Judaism together was the Book of the Law and the Prophets and the synagogues. Thus, when Jews became Christians they faced serious persecution from their Jewish families and communities, from the synagogues and the rabbis (and possibly anti-Jewish pogroms in Antioch). It was a severe temptation for them to desert the church and Christ and to return to the safe world of Moses as the rabbis taught him. Matthew's message therefore stresses not only how Jesus comes as the Prophet like Moses and delivers a new Torah, but how even Moses himself appears and relinquishes to Jesus his role as the first authority in Israel. Jesus is thus now the primary authority for all Jews and for all the world. "This is my beloved suffering son, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to *him!*"
2. For us who are not first-century Jewish believers, the message is the same: there is no other authoritative person to whom we must give our allegiance now. We are to listen to Jesus over the voices of all other principalities, powers and authorities. He is in fact God among us, Emmanuel (Mt 1:23; 28:20). Above all the voices of guilt and legalism, above all the voices of selfishness and wickedness, above all the voices clamoring for our obedience, we hear his Father's voice ("Listen to my son!") and his own ("Rise and have no fear!" v. 7).

This is Matthew's message in the story of the transfiguration. It is the Truth that the Spirit "led him into," as John's Gospel puts it (Jn 16:13). It is part of the inspired message of the NT just as much as are the bare facts of "what actually happened" on that mountain. And, need we say it? Aland's *Synopsis* makes it much more possible to see it than probably any other tool.