

A Guide to Interpreting the Gospels



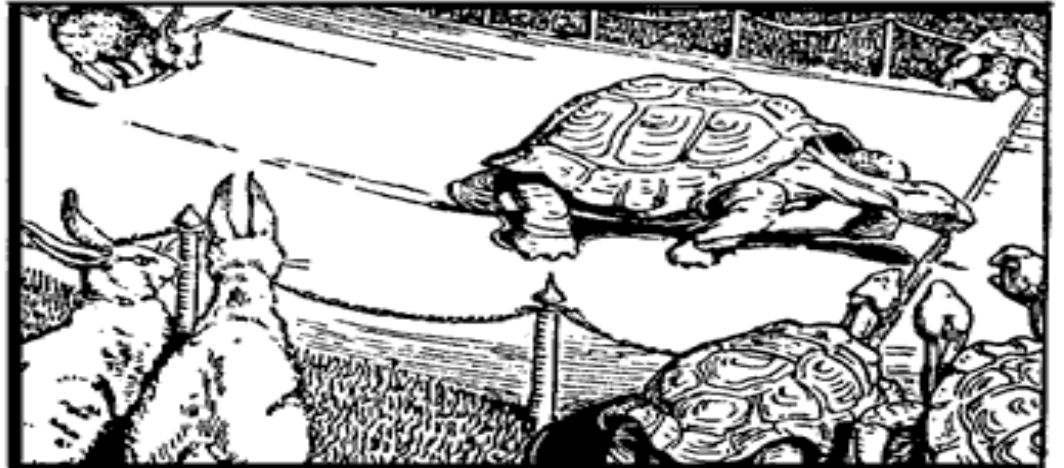
Parallels for Interpretation?

- Epistles are similar in many ways to modern letters
- Gospels are different from many modern writings
 - Not modern history books
 - Not novels
 - Not newspaper articles
 - Not letters or memoranda



Fables?

Do we merely interpret the Gospels by searching for the “moral of the story”?



Keys to Interpretation

- Genres within the Gospel genre
 - Didactic (teaching) material
 - should be interpreted using the same principles applied in the interpretation of epistles
 - seek to discover the meaning intended for the original audience
 - bridge the gap between the first century social context and our context (e.g. John 13:14; Luke 9:23)
 - Parables
 - to be discussed later
 - Narrative
 - key is to interpret the pericope in light of the purpose of the book



Practical Steps toward Correct Interpretation: *Reading Vertically*

- Read the entire book without an extended break asking the questions typical of an investigative reporter:
 - Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?
- Seek to understand how individual pericopes relate to the purposes of the Gospel as a whole
 - Testimonies to Jesus (who is Jesus?)
 - Manuals of discipleship (what should a disciple be like?)



Primary Purpose of Gospels

- John: “believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and by believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:30-31)
- Mark: “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God” (Mark 1:1)
- Matthew: “Son of David, Son of Abraham, Immanuel” (Matthew 1:1-25)
- Luke: Virgin born Son of the Most High who will reign from the throne of David over an eternal kingdom



Secondary Purpose of the Gospels

- “Follow me” (Matt 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 10:38; 16:24; 19:21)
- Jewish notions of discipleship
- “Imitators of us and the Lord” (1 Thess 1:6)
- “Christ . . . Left you an example, so that you should follow in His steps” (1 Peter 2:21)



Steps in Vertical Reading

- Examine themes in the Heading, Introduction, Conclusion, and Programmatic Statement (Mark 1:1; Matt 1:1; Mark 1:1-13; John 1:1-18; Matt 1:21-23)
- Examine repeated themes, titles, phrases, and theological emphases (Mark 1:22,27; 2:10; 3:15; 6:7; 11:28,29,33; 13:34)
- Examine editorial comments that interpret the significance of the event (John 2:11; 13:1-3)



- Note the response of the original witnesses to an event
- Look for possible connections between narrative and discourse material in the immediate context (John 9; Mark 7:31-37; 8:18, 22-26)
- Carefully examine all OT quotations and allusions (Matt 2:20; 17:5)
- Consider the significance of events against the background of OT theology and first-century Jewish theology (Mark 6:45-52; Job 9; Mark 1:40-45)



- Look for possible connections between events and didactic material in the immediate context (e.g. John 9:1-35 + 35-41)
- Carefully examine all OT allusions recognizing that brief OT allusions often refer to the broader context of the passage
- Consider the significance of events against the background of OT teaching and first-century Jewish theology (Mark 6:45-52; Job 9:8; compare Mt. 2:20b & Ex. 4:19; Mt. 5:1 & Ex. 19:3)



- Consider the possible “parabolic significance” of events (Mark 11:12-21)
- Consider the arrangement of the pericope in the movement of the narrative
 - Does the arrangement suggest that one narrative is to be interpreted in light of the other?
 - does the narrative bear a thematic connection to what precedes or follows
 - is the narrative “bracketed” by two descriptions of the same event? (Mark 5:21-43; 11:12-21)



Practical Steps toward a Correct Interpretation: *Reading Horizontally*

- Locate parallel accounts in the Gospels
- Examine similarities and differences and mark differences with a highlighter
- Consider whether the unique elements of a particular Gospel highlight theological emphases of that Gospel
- Test the hypothesis regarding theological emphases by determining whether that same emphasis is reflected in other passages in that particular Gospel

