

A Time to Tell
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The literary analysis of biblical narratives, especially the gospels, has been a ripe area of exploration. Significant studies have been made of the use of geographical placement and movement, of the ways in which scenes are linked to build a cumulative meaning of a narrative, and most particularly of characters and the way those characters are developed and the role they play in the narrative construction. There has not been as much attention to the issue of the role that narrative time, and its various uses, play in the development of the narratives.

What has made this particularly intriguing is the attention that Paul Ricoeur has paid to the special role that time plays in narrative construction. In his magisterial three volume work, *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur has explored the special relationship that time has in the very essence of narratives, whether historical narratives or fictive narratives.¹ Ricoeur's work, together with Gerard Genette's discussion in *Narrative Discourse*, provide the primary starting points for this exploration of the use of time in the gospel narratives.^{2,3}

As part of a more extensive examination of the various ways that the evangelist's use time in the construction of the gospel narratives, I would like here to begin with a very modest exploration: a comparison of how two very different gospels, Mark and John, use time to invoke a particular control over the reading or meaning of the gospels. It is my opening thesis that the use of time is essential to the very nature and meaning of the gospels, and that a close examination of the use of time will help clarify the very different rhetorical purposes of the gospels.

Background Issues

The entire concept of the narrative use of time is very complex, and thus much must remain outside the scope of this exploratory paper. I will limit myself to a few central components of the narrative use of time as perhaps most important for the comparison between the gospels.

Certainly time itself is crucial for emplotment. Events must develop over time in a narrative, and the meaning of events is often found in the way that they interrelate over the course of time. But how does a narrator use time as a mechanism for the art of storytelling? What are some of the key variables? We need to at least pay attention to the following variables, using terms primarily used by Genette:

The first element to pay attention to is order. In a very straightforward narrative, events might be sequenced in exactly the order in which they occur in the narrative world -- that is the narrative follows the timeline of the narrative world. But events in the narrative world may be ordered or sequenced differently in the narrative itself. Past events can be inserted into a narrative to recapitulate or explain a current event, or prior events can be told before they occur. For instance, while we hear of John the Baptist's arrest in Mark 1:14, the evangelist waits until Mark 6 to actually fully describe the arrest and subsequent execution of John as a means of

linking this event more fully to the question of whether Jesus is Elijah or perhaps John *redivivus*. Such anachronies disrupt the simple temporal flow of a narrative, but often do so in order to amplify particular connections or linkages between events.

These anachronies generally fall into two broad categories: analepses and prolepses. Analepsis, as the example of John the Baptist's arrest suggest, can be used to fill in more fully an event that was simply sketched before, or it could be simply a reference back to a previous event - a recalling analepsis - that might provide narrative coherence. Some analepses might actually recall an event outside of the scope of the narrative, in which case it is heterodiegetic.

A prolepsis anticipates a future event. Usually prolepses in biblical narratives are predictive and not fully explanatory or anticipating accounts; as, for instance, Jesus' own predications of his death and resurrection in Mark 8:31, 9:31 and 10:32. Thus, rather than leaping forward to tell the future story, these prolepses in Mark function more as prophetic predictions which help guide the reader into anticipating directions in the narrative, but still leave the development of the narrative open to surprising developments.

Anachronies can be found either coming from the narrator or in the voice of one of the character, and thus there is often a fairly significant variation in the importance of these anachronies on the control of the story and its interpretation.

A second important element of the use of time in narration is that of duration. By this we mean the relative relationship between time in the narrative world and the time of narration. All stories speed up and slow down at various points. Speeding up a narrative often means skipping over significant periods of time, or treating them in a very cursory fashion. Slowing down a narrative is accomplished by expanding the description of an event so that, relative to the narrative world, more "reading time" is given to this event than to others. A common mechanism for slowing down time would be the use of speech or dialogue, while events told solely by the narrator will often be more sketchily described.

A third element in the narrative's use of time is the relationship of the narrator's time to the narrative time. Most narratives, almost by definition, place the time of the narrative world before the narrator - the narrator relates an event which has happened, usually in past time. Thus there is, except in some modern novels and autobiographical narratives, some sense of a "historic" verisimilitude, usually achieved by the narrator's use of some form of the past tense to describe the story: "John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness... and all the people of the Judean country and Jerusalem went out to him..." But the narrator can be specific about his or her time of narration, and gain more or less distance from the narrative itself. Thus the narrator often can establish a point of view relative to the time of the narration: the narrator can almost merge with the time of story world, or can remain always above and beyond that narrated world by specific temporal comments that remind the reader of this distance.

One final comment about the use of time in narratives relates to the sense of historicity. Ricoeur makes the point that historical time tends to be reported primarily as simple past, while fictive time frequently takes place in some sense of the present. Obviously these are mixed in many narratives, and certainly in the gospels. If the overarching perspective of narrative tends to "historical" in its use of the simple past to capture the overall temporal perspective, most narratives break from that when dialogue is introduced, and at other particularly important points in the narrative. The use of the present tense, or even the imperfect, often creates more of a sense of fictive immediacy. Thus we are often confronted with a mix of "historic" time and "fictive" times. While Ricoeur is very concerned to analyze the difference between historical narratives and fictional narratives, it seems more useful simply to recognize that within

narratives – regardless of their purported relationship to reality – there is a mixture of the use of a “historic” voice and a “fictive” voice, and that the various use of these voices is important in analyzing what the narrative is attempting to do.

Using these starting points drawn from Genette and Ricoeur, I would like to examine briefly the way Mark and John use time in the construction of their gospel narratives, and then draw back from those two examples and see if this examination of the use of time is significant for how we read the two gospels.

The Gospel of Mark

Mark’s gospel is noteworthy for its rapid pace and emphasis on “events.” In general we can say that “eventness” is the key element in any story: for a series of statements to be a story, there must be some action which moves the story forward: either to cause the characters to change, the scene to change, or in some other way to move the plot forward toward a resolution. In Mark the story is developed with a rapid-fire sequence of events, often simply following one another in a paratygmatic construction. So, for instance, the very opening of the gospel gives some sense of this rapid succession of events:

- John appears, baptizing in the wilderness
- Jesus is baptized by John
- God speaks to Jesus from Heaven
- Jesus is driven into the wilderness to be tested
- Jesus begins to preach
- Jesus calls 4 disciples in two successive units
- Jesus and the 4 disciples go to Capernaum where he begins teaching

This quick cluster of events comprises simply the first 20 verses of Mark, and with almost dizzying speed Jesus is introduced, takes shape as God’s son, is tested, and then begins to create a following.

Looking at Mark’s use of narrative time, then, the first point must be to note that the rapid sequence of event units, which follow one another with little or no narrative commentary, is a significant aspect of Mark’s temporal construction, especially in the opening chapters. The events themselves, in Mark, comprise the core essence of the story. This can be amplified a bit by the tendency to use words that emphasize the rapid succession of events: *ευθως*, or *παλιν*. Thus narrative time is collapsed around the rapid sequence of events.

The rapid sequence of events is amplified by the movement from location to location, thus linking smaller narrative units with travel or a scene change, and a potential abbreviation—by its implied lapse but without further narration—of time. John appears in the wilderness region, to which people from Jerusalem and Judea travel. Jesus travels from Nazareth to the wilderness to be baptized, and then is cast out (even further) into the wilderness. He then returns to Galilee, where he moves along the seaside, and then to Capernaum. While in Capernaum he moves from into the synagogue, and then to the Simon’s house, and then retreats out to the desert region. Each one of these shifts in scene is sudden, and serves as a transitional moment in the story.

Thus the narrator seems concerned throughout much of the gospel to move the reader through a series of events which happen sequentially and with little attempt at obvious linkage. Time is focused on a series of events, and time between events is not related, the movement between geographical locations or scenes are the transitional mechanism by which time between event units is shortened.

Using the descriptive terms related to narrative time introduced earlier, we can say that in general there is little intervention of the narrator in the order of events. Narrative order in the gospel is, for the most part, quite paratactic with little anachrony. When an anachrony is introduced it is usually for the internal purpose of either explaining a feature, as in the case of John the Baptist's death, or more usually to provide a stronger sense of the internal coherence of the narrative itself. Norman Peterson has done a wonderful job of noting all the features of plotting in Mark's gospel, and summarizes the various analepses and prolepses in the gospel.⁴ But what is noteworthy is the minor nature of most of these anachronies, and how they generally serve only to help reinforce the ongoingness of the narrative – with the exception of the major heterodiegetic predictions of chapter 13 and 16:7.

The examples of both analepsis and prolepsis are for the most part internal to the narrative world. The analepses tend to reinforce some sense of narrative development. For instance, in 8:19 and 8:20, Jesus refers back to the feeding of the 5,000 and 4,000, but it is used primarily to accentuate the lack of understanding in the present moment of the disciples. Similarly the prolepses tend to fall into four categories. First, there are instances where a future event is anticipated, as in the preparation of a boat in which Jesus very shortly embarks. Secondly, there are generalized anticipations of a coming kingdom, as when Jesus talks about the future possibility of forgiveness (3:28, 4:12) or the growth of the kingdom (4:26–32). Thirdly, there are remarkable prophetic anticipations of the passion, as in his threefold prediction of death, and the proleptic reference to Judas as the betrayer. These predictive statements about the passion remain homodiegetic in that they point to a completion within the narrated story, and they thus provide a tension in the story that drives the narrative to the end.

There is a fourth use of prolepsis, and that is found primarily in chapter 13, although also to the angel's statement in 16:7 – these are heterodiegetic predictions that point beyond the narrative. Thus Jesus talks about the destruction of the temple, of times of trouble, and of future persecutions. And the angel instructs the women to tell the disciples to go to Galilee to await Jesus there. These are never fulfilled in the narrative and leave the resolution of the narrative in the air, awaiting some future completion.

It is perhaps not unimportant that the primary mechanism Mark uses to introduce both predictions of the passion and the heterodiegetic predictions is in the discourse of characters, most notably Jesus. Jesus predicts in his own voice his coming passion, he preaches the long prediction in chapter 13, and the angel points forward to Galilee in chapter 16. Thus the primary perspective for the coming future is from the point of view of Jesus, not the narrator.

As might be expected, Mark does provide variations on the duration of events. That is to say that the narrated time is expanded at certain points and thus the speed of the progression is temporarily slowed. Clearly this happens most extensively when speech or dialogue intrudes

into rapid succession of events. Actual reported speech slows the narration and opens a narrated moment of time when the speed of events comes closer to the time of reading. Some of this can be seen vividly by Mark's use of verbs. Generally the rapid succession of events and scene changes is told with a simple sequence of aorist verbs. For instance, in Mark 1:16 ff, we see a rapid sequence of events:

Jesus saw Simon and Andrew

Jesus spoke to them

They followed him

He saw James and John

He called them

They went out following him.

The main verbs in this rapid sequence are simply aorists which is richly suited for this rapid sequence. But when the narrative time slows, Mark often shifts to the use of the imperfect tense, often an inceptive imperfect to introduce a scene, or the present tense. So, for instance, immediately following the sequence indicated above, in Mk 1:21 the narrator slows the process down just a bit by shifting to imperfect and present tenses thus signalling that some extended duration was taking place: Jesus enters into Capernaum, and began teaching, and the crowds were being amazed. Similarly chapter 2 opens up just such a more extended narrative space. There is a scene shift which is accomplished with the normal rapid sequence of aorists: Jesus has entered again into Capernaum, and it is reported he was in the house. But then Jesus began to speak (imperfect ἐλάλει) and then the story slows even further with the story of the paralytic being told in present tense: they come bringing a paralytic, Jesus says, he knows what they are debating among themselves and he says..., etc. Precisely the same kind of narrative slowing takes place in chapter 4 with the introduction of the parable of the sower (introduced by an inceptive imperfect, "he began to teach them in parables and was saying to them..."), followed by a relatively brief story of the sower told in aorists, and then his explanation is slowed again with present tenses ("and he says to them ...").

What is the temporal point of view of the narrator? Although the narrator clearly stands beyond the time of the narrative world, as the general "historic" perspective clearly would suggest, still the narrator generally keeps himself/herself as much as possible within the confines of the story world. So, while reporting in past time, there is no commentary by the narrator. And by reverting to present tense in the slowing down of the narrative, the narrator actually assumes the time of the narrated time. Certainly the narrator relates the events from a perspective that has some control (as the very existence of anachronies suggests), yet the narrator betrays no external perspective other than the "historic" reference point. The future is anticipated from the perspective of the speakers (e.g Jesus and the angel), not in the narrator's own voice. Jesus and the angel, for instance, have their own credibility, but it is internal to the story world, not coming from an external perspective. In this way, the narrative tension is maintained: the story has to proceed in the actual sequence of events as they unfold, without commentary. Even as the story ends, with everyone running away and no evidence of a visible Jesus, the narrator allows this narrative tension to remain.

The Gospel of John

The narrative use of time in the Fourth Gospel is very different. The gospel begins with a prologue which establishes a narrative point of view well outside of the narrative world of the gospel – it begins with the beginning of time, and then traces in schematic form the story of Jesus' incarnation and rejection. But ultimately even this is framed in terms of a completed vision of God's glory and the reception of grace. This perspective at the outset is one of overview and preview. One might choose to exclude the prologue from the narrative itself, as Culpepper does, but the prologue is a powerful voice of the narrator at the beginning, indicating already the point of view of the entire narrative to follow.

The narrative structure of John is not focused primarily on events, as the gospel of Mark was, but instead is focused on discourse: either extended monologues by Jesus, or extended dialogues between Jesus and his interlocutors. Still, there is a sequence of events that makes this gospel also an emplotted one. The time element in the structure of events becomes clear in the very beginning of the gospel, when the narrator links up a sequence by means of "the next day" and "the next day," and finally the first major sign is introduced with "the third day" – an anachronism itself since there have been more than two "days" presented before this "third day." But these time markers at the very least signal that a chronological sequence is important to the emplotment of the gospel.

Another significant way in which time is important in the gospel's construction of the plot is the repeated reference to the festivals, the cultic calendar of the Jews. Thus chapter 2 begins with Passover, and each major unit in the gospel is marked by either a Passover, a Tabernacles, a "feast of the Jews," or a Hanukkah reference. These festivals are also the occasion for a geographical movement, so that Jesus moves back and forth from Galilee to Judea, and especially to Jerusalem and the temple, around the occasions of festivals, and thus major transitions are located in terms of both cultic time and cultic space.

But having said that John is concerned to incorporate time as an important feature in the narrative, and certainly the structure of the story develops over a period of time and shows a growing tension between Jesus and his opponents, the "Jews," the Fourth Gospel displays a remarkable freedom from a consistent story line. There is an extensive pattern of narrative analepses and prolepses, many of which are homodiegetic (e.g. internal to the story world), and many that are heterodiegetic (e.g. external to the story world). Culpepper has extensively explored this area, and I will only touch on a few key issues.⁵

The use of homodiegetic analepses and prolepses are used primarily to provide linkages in the story world, and these frequently occur on the lips of the narrator. For instance, John frequently intrudes with "completing" or "anticipating" statements that link previous or future narrative units to a current unit: In 11:2, the narrator informs the reader that Mary, the sister of Lazarus, is the one who anointed Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. This does not occur until later, 12:1–8, but this anticipation links these stories together. Similarly the narrator informs the reader as early as 6:71, and again at 12:4, that Judas Iscariot would betray Jesus, anticipating the passion. And later in the story, at the beginning of the dinner scene, the narrator informs the reader that the devil had already put the thought of betrayal into Judas' heart. An example of a narrative analepsis is found in 4:45, where the crowds welcome him because they

had seen what he had done at the festival, thus linking the reception in Galilee to chapter 2, when Jesus was in Jerusalem.

Heterodiegetic and homodiegetic prolepses occur extensively on the mouth of Jesus, giving him the character of a prophet. The extensive anticipation of the Passion, often in terms of his “coming hour” or the fact that he would be “lifted up,” serve as a continual thread throughout the gospel. Some of the most notable examples of heterodiegetic prolepses in the Farewell Discourse, where Jesus anticipates the coming of the Paraclete, the promise to go and prepare a place, etc. In these statements Jesus points to a time outside the narrative which is confidently promised. Some heterodiegetic statements are eschatological, as when he speaks of the coming judgment (i.e. 5:25–29, 6:40), but many point to the future activity of God within the community of the faithful.

Perhaps the most interesting anachronisms, though, occur when the narrator proleptically anticipates the future understanding of the disciples. So, for instance, at the conclusion of the Temple incident, the narrator informs the reader that they disciples in the story time misunderstood Jesus about the raising of a new temple, but that after he was raised from the dead they understood his words—that is that the new temple is Jesus himself. Similar instances where the narrator is clearly heterodiegetic in his proleptic statements occur at 12:16 and 20:9. Here the narrator betrays a clear point of view, that of subsequent to the story and interpreting the story from the future event of the glorification of Jesus. The narrated events, then, are always to be interpreted from a completed perspective: this is begun in the prologue, and is underlined with frequent anachronistic statements by the narrator and Jesus throughout the gospel.

As with Mark, the general narrative perspective is a “historic” one, in that the narrator relates the events as past events with simple transitions usually in the aorist. So Jesus was in Cana and his mother was there, and that is the occasion for the transformation of water to wine. This is reported as past fact. Similarly following the temple incident, the narrator of John tells us that Nicodemus came to Jesus and spoke with him, again a simple past time depiction.

But John also brings the story into a more immediate “presentness” with the use of extended dialogue and the narrational use of the present tense to bring a sense of immediacy and focus on the dialogues. So, for instance, in the Nicodemus story, after a series of aoristic transitions that set the stage, Nicodemus is reported by the narrator to “say” – to Jesus (present tense), thus slowing the narrative down. Of course the direct discourse itself tends to be in the present tense, as Ricoeur notes that discourse tends to be, hence its “fictive” quality. But the important thing is that narrator often uses that “presentness” even in the narration (as for instance, another example, when John “sees” Jesus and “says”: “behold, the lamb of God...”(1:29). The Fourth Evangelist is not consistent in the narrational use of time, shifting between aorist and present, and the narrator at times contributes to the “slowing down” of the narrated time not only by extended direct discourse, but by adopting a discourse like attitude to the events that being related.

The fact that the narrator introduces anachronies in the narration, and that the narrator often anticipates the “slowing down” of narratives which are primarily accomplished by direct discourse, already suggests that the point of the view of the narrator is complicated and tends to

be almost identical with the risen Jesus. Thus, not only does the narrator see the significance of events from the perspective of the “glorified Jesus,” this point of view

What Does a Comparison Yield?

It is clear that Mark and John have very different ways of constructing time in their respective gospels. The question is whether these time constructions are significant when we approach the central meaning of the gospels. If the use of time is essential to the quality and nature of narratives, as Ricoeur suggests, then the use of time is not simply an adornment, but participates in the fundamental nature of the various gospel narratives. I would suggest that these different uses of time are critical features in the “meaning” of the gospels, and here offer only some initial conclusions about this.

Mark’s narrative structure is noted for its relatively infrequent use of anachronisms. The reader is, for the most, only allowed to engage the story as it unfolds, with little or no advance word of where the plot will go. The few prolepses in the story tend to be vague and, while anticipating the Passion, never reveal much about the coming crisis. And certainly they do not point much beyond the story world; the proleptic statements tend to be internal to the narrative world and keep the reader grounded in the unfolding story. The narrator, thus, adopts a point of view within the story world itself. Mark’s gospel, then, seems to be constructed around a use of time that encourages the reader to become involved in the unfolding events, to be unsure of the future, and to mentally participate in the tension even as the disciples are participating in the unfolding drama of learning who this Jesus is. The emphasis on events seems to drive the gospel forward, only occasionally slowed down by direct discourse.

John’s gospel, on the other hand, is designed to keep the reader external to the narrative world. The prologue, with its “cosmic” point of view and time references that go well outside of the story world – in fact outside of historical time – frame the reader’s perspective from the beginning. The narrator adds to this perspective with asides that are external to the story world and meant to frame the entire story in light of Jesus’ glorification. Jesus’ own dialogues, which by their frequency and length dominate the story, also point forward and back outside the story world – either to a time when he was “with the Father” or will go back to the Father. The narrative is, then, always meant to be read critically. It is not so much internalized as a basis for proof that Jesus is the unique Word of God.

This paper is, obviously, just an initial exploration of the way that narrative time influences the reading of a gospel. It is suggestive, I think, for further exploration of all the gospels.

1. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
2. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca: University of Cornell Press, 1980).

3. See also: Mieke Bal, *Narratology*, 2nd ed.(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Pres, 1978).
4. Norman Peterson, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).
5. R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).