



A Narrative Approach
to Matthew, Mark,
Luke, and John

The Gospels as Stories

Jeannine K. Brown

The Gospels as Stories

A Narrative Approach
to Matthew, Mark,
Luke, and John

Jeannine K. Brown

B
Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Contents

Figures	ix
Preface	xi
Abbreviations	xiii

Part 1 Introduction 1

1. The Turn to Gospels as Stories: *Narrative Criticism in Gospel Studies* 3

Part 2 Plot and Plotting 21

2. The Selection, Sequence, and Shape of the Story 23
3. Narrative Plotting in the Gospel of Luke 43

Part 3 Character and Characterization 63

4. The People in the Story 65
5. Matthew's Characterization of the Disciples 85

Part 4 Intertextuality 105

6. The Stories behind the Story 107
7. Intertextuality in John: *Passover Lamb and Creation's Renewal* 127

Part 5 Narrative Theology 145

- 8. How a Story Theologizes 147
- 9. The God of Mark's Gospel 165

Part 6 Conclusion 181

- 10. The Ongoing Power of the Gospels as Stories 183

Recommended Resources 187

Glossary 191

Scripture Index 197

Subject Index 205

Part One

Introduction

All narrative begins for me with listening. When I read, I listen.
When I write, I listen—for silence, inflection, rhythm, rest.

Toni Morrison, *The Measure of Our Lives*

For me the Gospel of Mark is not a resource to be mined for
historical nuggets or Christological jewels; it is the ground on
which we walk.

Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Mark's Jesus*

1

The Turn to Gospels as Stories

Narrative Criticism in Gospel Studies

We “get” stories. We are drawn into their plotlines. We identify deeply with their characters. We are captivated by their settings. And we intuitively understand what a story is “doing”—what themes it communicates, what morals it highlights, what other stories it evokes or undermines. Neurobiologists suggest that story is hardwired into us; we make sense of our reality by interpreting it and retelling it as story.

So wouldn’t coming to the Gospels in the New Testament be a relatively straightforward task? They are, after all, stories. They may be more than stories, but they certainly are not less.

Yet for all our comfort level with stories, we often do strange and odd things with the Gospels. In church contexts we chop them into very small pieces (single verses or individual episodes) and turn them into allegories for our own experiences. In the guild of biblical studies we have done things just as strange—at least if we consider that early church communities would have received and experienced a Gospel in its entirety, with large segments being read aloud in church gatherings.¹ We should

1. Justin Martyr, in about 156 CE, wrote that in church gatherings on Sunday, “the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the Prophets are read, as long as there is time.” Saint Justin Martyr and Thomas B. Falls, *The First Apology, The Second Apology, Dialogue with Trypho, Exhortation to the Greeks, Discourse to the Greeks, The Monarchy or The Rule of God*, The

certainly recognize that the Gospel traditions predated the writing of the Gospels, and these traditions would have circulated as individual stories—a key tenet of **form criticism**.² Yet the Gospel writers brought together these traditions in thoughtful and distinctive ways, and the early church would have experienced Mark’s Gospel, for example, as a unified work—as a story.

Such a holistic, storied reading is the focus of **narrative criticism**, a particular interpretive method used in Gospel studies. In this chapter, I describe narrative criticism as it has emerged over the last forty years or so, offering in the process a description of this method as well as its evolution into an eclectic and adaptable approach to reading the Gospels as stories.

Reading the Gospels: The Turn toward Narrative

To get a feel for how the Gospel narratives have been read by both church and academy, I’ll illustrate with the fairy tale “The Princess and the Pea.”

The Princess and the Pea

Once upon a time there was a prince who wanted to marry a princess; but she would have to be a real princess. He travelled all over the world to find one, but nowhere could he get what he wanted. There were princesses enough, but it was difficult to find out whether they were real ones. There was always something about them that was not as it should be. So he came home again and was sad, for he would have liked very much to have a real princess.

One evening a terrible storm came on; there was thunder and lightning, and the rain poured down in torrents. Suddenly a knocking was heard at the city gate, and the old king went to open it.

It was a princess standing out there in front of the gate. But, good gracious! What a sight the rain and the wind had made her look. The water

Fathers of the Church, vol. 6 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 67.

2. Bolded terms are defined in a glossary at the end of the book.

ran down from her hair and clothes; it ran down into the toes of her shoes and out again at the heels. And yet she said that she was a real princess.

Well, we'll soon find that out, thought the old queen. But she said nothing, went into the bedroom, took all the bedding off the bedstead, and laid a pea on the bottom; then she took twenty mattresses and laid them on the pea, and then twenty eider-down beds on top of the mattresses.

On this the princess had to lie all night. In the morning she was asked how she had slept.

"Oh, very badly!" said she. "I have scarcely closed my eyes all night. Heaven only knows what was in the bed, but I was lying on something hard, so that I am black and blue all over my body. It's horrible!"

Now they knew that she was a real princess because she had felt the pea right through the twenty mattresses and the twenty eider-down beds.

Nobody but a real princess could be as sensitive as that.

So the prince took her for his wife, for now he knew that he had a real princess; and the pea was put in the museum, where it may still be seen, if no one has stolen it.

There, that is a true story.

This is the original version of the story written by its author, Hans Christian Andersen, in 1835. Let's imagine, however, that we had this original telling of the story with two other versions on either side of it, without any notation about the date or origin of each.

<i>Princess and the Pea</i> (picture book)	"The Princess and the Pea" (as recorded above)	<i>Once upon a Mattress</i> (musical)
---	---	--

The first telling of the story is in storybook form with pictures, as well as a few more significant internal differences from the one recited above: (1) goose feathers instead of eiderdown, and (2) "if no one has stolen it" as the concluding line (i.e., missing the affirmation of its truth as a story).³ The second telling is the one recorded above. The third version

3. "The Princess and the Pea," Reading A-Z, accessed July 27, 2019, <https://www.readinga-z.com/book.php?id=1945>.

is the musical *Once upon a Mattress*, which includes, among other additions, thirteen other supposed princesses who have been tested to see if they really are princesses before the main character appears—named in this version as Princess Winnifred the Woebegone.

Three versions, side by side, with no explicit indications of which came first. What might we do in response to this interesting mix of expressions of a single story?

Well, if we were like Gospels scholars of the nineteenth century, we might focus our attention on the historical question of which one came first and which others were derived from it. In this case, we might notice that the language of “eiderdown” is more obscure than the “goose feathers” of the storybook version and the “soft downy mattresses” of the musical. An eider is a large duck found in northern coastal regions, making this referent more (geographically) specific than “goose feathers” or “downy.” We might then surmise that the middle of these versions was the original, with the others being derivative, since that very specific detail of “eiderdown” has been made more transferrable to other contexts in the first and third versions. In this historical work, we would be doing **source criticism**, a methodology used by Gospels scholars to determine which **Synoptic Gospel**—Matthew, Mark, or Luke—came first, with the conclusion usually drawn that Mark was written first and that Matthew and Luke used Mark as they wrote their stories of Jesus.⁴

Say we then decided to look at each of the differences between the story presumed to be written first (the middle example above) and the other two renderings. In this comparison of versions, we might note that pictures were added in the storybook, which could give us insight into the purposes and audience of that version: children in a stage of early reading ability. To gauge what was added in the musical, we could note the shift from an unnamed princess in the original to a named princess—Princess Winnifred the Woebegone. And this rather whimsical name could indicate the comedic purposes of the musical version. This kind of comparative study is what in Gospels scholarship has been called **redaction criticism**, an approach that saw its heyday in the latter part of the twentieth century. Redaction criticism has been used to highlight the specific audience and purposes of Matthew and

4. Given the distinctiveness of John’s Gospel from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is not usually considered to have a direct literary (compositional) relationship with the Synoptic Gospels.

Luke when compared to their “redaction” or editing of their source, the Gospel of Mark.⁵

What do you notice about these various methods applied to “The Princess and the Pea”? What might become apparent is that these historical questions and methods have not yet addressed the stories themselves, although redaction criticism has begun to identify some of the more unique purposes of each telling (e.g., the comedic flavor of *Once upon a Mattress*). So, you might wonder, why not just study each story on its own terms? Doesn’t this seem like an obvious place to start?

The answer outside of our analogy—in the history of Gospels research—is both yes and no. Yes, because in this research there was ongoing interest in the Gospels at the level of the whole book. Examples include the comparison of the Gospels to the genre of Greco-Roman biography as well as attention given to the Gospels as wholes in later forms of redaction criticism (sometimes called **composition criticism**).⁶ And no, because attending to the Gospels as wholes had often been neglected in the history of the church and not only in New Testament scholarship of the past few hundred years. There has been a marked preference often given to the smaller parts of a Gospel rather than to their overarching stories.

Return with me for a moment to “The Princess and the Pea” analogy. I’ve suggested what historical approaches within scholarship, like source criticism and redaction criticism, might have looked like if this story, like the Gospels, would have shown up in multiple anonymous and undated renderings. How might this same analogy help to explain the ways the Gospels have been handled in the church, both ancient and contemporary? We can summarize some of these approaches under the rubrics of **amalgamating** (harmonizing), **atomizing** (dissecting), and **allegorizing**. Each of these ignored the narrative character of the Gospels in some significant way.

It is easy to imagine how the three renderings of “The Princess and the Pea” could be amalgamated. What better way to avoid losing any part of

5. I might also point out the importance of form criticism in the study of the Gospels, a method that has highlighted the individual Gospel units (pericopes), and specifically what they were (their genre) and how they functioned for Jesus’ followers in the early oral period of Gospel transmission.

6. These biographies (Greek *bioi* or Latin *vitae*) were “a discrete but flexible genre that developed over the several centuries either side of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.” Richard Burridge, “Gospels: Genre,” in *DJG*, 335–42, here 337.

these different rehearsals than to merge together all their various plot and formal details? The naming of the princess (Winnifred the Woebegone) only adds to the story, providing a richer, fuller telling, right? And certainly adding pictures helps the reader see what the original story was doing. Yet what to do with competing elements? Can you have a musical and a storybook at the same time? Would the goose feathers be added to the eiderdown for a doubly soft set of mattresses? Or would it create two sets of mattresses for two different princesses (one unnamed and one named) and so essentially change the plotline?

The amalgamation or harmonization of the four Gospels happened quite soon in the history of their interpretation. Tatian's *Diatessaron* ("harmony of the four"; ca. 170 CE) was an early example of such amalgamating—a tendency the church has continued to foster to the present. As with our analogous "harmonized" fairy tale, so too the Gospels present some difficulties for a coherent harmony. What do we do with differences in the ordering and details of, say, Peter's three denials of Jesus? Trying to account for these minor differences, there have been harmonies (amalgamations) produced that portray Peter denying Jesus six times, sometimes even nine times—in spite of the affirmation in each of the four Gospels that Peter denied Jesus just three times. At the risk of stating the obvious, the New Testament canon includes four portraits of Jesus and not a single amalgam, so we lose something by reconstructing a harmonized story we haven't been given.

A second approach that became commonplace in the church's use of the Gospels involves atomizing the text—taking its smaller pieces and treating them as stand-alone units. Whether individual sayings of Jesus (often at the verse level) or shorter passages (called **pericopes**), these now abstracted units were treated as fairly autonomous and free floating. They might then be combined easily with similar "pearls of wisdom" derived from another Gospel (potentially for amalgamation, as noted above) or from any other part of the Bible, for that matter. In this way, the narrative coherence of a single Gospel was often obscured. To illustrate via our analogy, what if a reader pulled out a single line of "The Princess and the Pea" in an attempt to let it speak on its own? For example,

"There was always something about them [other princesses] that was not as it should be."

Or,

“Nobody but a real princess could be as sensitive as that.”

Finding the choicest parts of the story for quotation and possible application results in the quoted line being extracted from its original and storied purposes and potentially turned into something quite foreign to its contextual meaning. How different is this atomizing from what has been done with the Gospels, often with troubling exegetical consequences? For example, Jesus’ words in Matthew, “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (10:34), could be used as license for Christian violence.⁷ To take another example, “His blood is on us and on our children!” (Matt. 27:25) has sometimes been marshaled to indict all Jewish people for Jesus’ death.⁸ Wrestling lines or brief stories from their narrative context (and, I should add, their historical setting) can mold these snippets into what we prefer them to say. They easily take on a life of their own.

A third way that the church appropriated the Gospels in their smaller parts was by allegorizing them. In allegorization, a reader mines an individual pericope for its storied details, heard to speak now within the reader’s own context. Going back to our fairy tale, here’s a whimsical example of allegorizing: *If you’re a poor sleeper and female, then you might be a princess!* Allegorizing has been a long-standing practice within the history of biblical interpretation. For instance, church leaders as diverse as Origen, Venerable Bede, and Martin Luther saw within the picturesque details of Jesus’ parables references to their own perspectives and concerns. One of the more colorful examples comes from Augustine, who interpreted the innkeeper in the parable of the good Samaritan as the apostle Paul.⁹

Yet it is not just Christians from the past who have tended toward allegorizing. It is easy enough to catch glimpses of allegories in contemporary sermons. Does Jesus’ miraculous power in calming the storm (Luke 8:22–25) translate to Jesus calming the storms of our lives? If this sounds

7. In spite of its use in a context that indicates that loyalty to Jesus might result in *relational* divisions even within families.

8. For ways this second line from Matthew has been given a life of its own, to the detriment of Jewish people across history, see Jeannine K. Brown and Kyle Roberts, *Matthew*, THNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 516–21.

9. For this example and many others, see Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 42–47.

like an obvious meaning of Luke 8, then we've likely been privy to a kind of allegorizing approach. Now, allegorizing does attend, at least in part, to the narratival qualities of a Gospel, since a story from a Gospel is used to address our own story in some way. Where it can stray off course is by downplaying the wider context of the narrative being studied. Luke puts Jesus' power on display in his Gospel (cf. 8:26–56; also 7:1–17), with **Christology** as his primary focus in 8:22–25. Luke seems more interested in answering the question, Who is Jesus? than the question, What can Jesus do for me? Bending the narrative rather quickly toward the second question may move us toward allegorizing.

I've drawn upon a simple fairy tale as an analogy to illustrate various ways the Gospels have been studied and interpreted in the church and in the academy that have not paid adequate attention to their storied form—especially their overarching narrative structures. This leads us to the role and contribution of narrative criticism in the interpretation of the Gospels.

In the 1980s scholars began to place more concerted emphasis on the narrative shaping of the Gospels, a focus that developed into a methodology—narrative criticism. This literary method was adapted from (though not identical to) **narratology**, a method that had developed for the critical analysis of literature in earlier decades. “Narrative criticism,” nomenclature unique to biblical studies, was coined by David Rhoads, an early practitioner of this method.¹⁰ Central and early works that applied narrative criticism to the four Gospels are

- *Mark as Story* (1982) by David Rhoads and Donald Michie
- *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (1983) by Alan Culpepper
- *Matthew as Story* (1986) by Jack Kingsbury
- *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts* (1986) by Robert Tannehill

This narrative turn in the study of the Gospels has been a welcomed development for a number of reasons. Most centrally, it has highlighted the Gospels as wholes—for example, all twenty-four chapters of Luke—rather than dissecting them into their smallest parts. Attention to whole

10. David Rhoads, “Narrative Criticism and the Gospel of Mark,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50 (1982): 411–34, here 412.

books has allowed the storied shape of each Gospel to emerge more clearly. As Terence Donaldson notes, narrative methods tap into something organic in the Gospels themselves: “It needs to be recognized that the turn to narrative is not simply a scholarly fad. Rather, narrative criticism puts us in touch with something that is fundamental to the New Testament as a whole. For before there were Gospels, there was the gospel—the basic proclamation about the saving significance of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. . . . This proclamation . . . is in its essence a narrative.”¹¹

What Is Narrative Criticism?

In broadest terms, narrative criticism (NC) attends to the literary and storied qualities of a biblical narrative, like a Gospel.¹² This “storied” analysis is accompanied by a focus on the final form of the text rather than emphasis on issues of the text’s production, which is characteristic of methods like source and redaction criticisms. By focusing on the final form, and so the entire story line, the interpreter attends to key storied elements that contribute to reading a Gospel with a wide-angle lens—following its narrative contours from beginning to end. Narrative features, such as story and discourse levels and the implied author and reader, have been key elements of NC that assist in reading the Gospels as stories.

Two Levels of the Narrative

An interpretive device regularly used in NC comes from Seymour Chatman’s configuration of two narrative levels.¹³ Chatman identifies these two as the story level and the discourse level. The **story level** consists of elements that most readers easily notice as they read a narrative: the settings, events, and characters that make up the plot. Since the Gospels center on

11. Terence L. Donaldson, “The Vindicated Son: A Narrative Approach to Matthean Christology,” in *Contours of Christology in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 100–121, here 104.

12. For a detailed discussion of this method, see Jeannine K. Brown, “Narrative Criticism,” in *DJG*, 619–24.

13. Seymour B. Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978).

Jesus, it is the course of his life and interactions with his disciples, opponents, and the many who benefit from his public ministry that capture our attention (fig. 1.1).

Turning our focus toward the **discourse level** requires more of the wide-angle lens already mentioned, since the discourse is the author’s (or narrator’s) way of shaping the story elements to communicate key messages with the Gospel’s audience. For narrative critics, the discourse level (alternately called the narrative’s *rhetoric* by Rhoads and Michie) consists of various literary devices that organize the story’s plot elements and orient the reader to the author’s purposes. These include point of view, narration, event **sequencing** and **pacing**, **characterization**, irony, and a variety of structural patterns (fig. 1.2).

For example, in John’s Gospel, irony is used to infuse various plot elements with symbolic meaning. Jesus offers living water to a Samaritan woman (John 4:13–14) and to all who come to him (7:37–38). Yet at his most vulnerable moment, Jesus cries out that he himself is thirsty (19:28). Another example involves John’s repeated use of the language of Jesus being “lifted up” (Greek *hypsōō*), a term that can indicate spatial elevation: Jesus will be lifted up on a cross to die. But the term can also mean to be exalted to a place of honor.¹⁴ John plays on both senses of the word to show how Jesus’ death will ironically be his exaltation (3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34).

Figure 1.1

A Narrative’s Story Level: The “What” of the Story

Settings	Characters	Plot
Temporal: When?	Protagonist: The Lead Character Antagonist(s): Character(s) Who Oppose the Protagonist	Gospels: Episodes and Sayings
Locative: Where?	Character Types:*	Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Resolution

* These five types are explored by James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 123–25.

14. BDAG, 1045.

An interesting example of sequencing and pacing occurs in Jesus’ early Galilean ministry narrated in Matthew 4:17–9:38. After Jesus calls his first disciples (4:18–22), Matthew provides a summary statement of Jesus’ Galilean ministry of healing, preaching, and teaching—all in the service of God’s kingdom (4:23). The evangelist virtually repeats this summary at the conclusion of this section (9:35) to signal that what comes between these “bookends” (also called an *inclusio*) gives flesh to this healing and teaching ministry. And this is just what we see in Matthew 5–9: Jesus teaches about the kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) and then heals and performs other miracles as he embodies the kingdom’s arrival (Matt. 8–9). Additionally, Matthew’s sequencing of an extended sermon prior to narration of Jesus’ healing activity functions to slow down the narrative to a “real time” pace. His pacing in the Sermon on the Mount (and the subsequent major discourses—five in all) invites the reader to hear Jesus’ teachings as spoken quite directly to them (and not just to the storied audiences of disciples and crowds).¹⁵

Figure 1.2

A Narrative’s Discourse Level: The “How” of the Story

Themes	Sequencing of Episodes	Point of View
<i>Simple Repetition</i> E.g., “repentance” in Luke/Acts	<i>Simple Linear Sequencing</i> E.g., the sequence of seven signs in John 2–11	<i>Assessing Characters in Light of the Authorial Perspective</i> E.g., Pharisees’ (untrue) accusation of Jesus in Mark 3:22
<i>Clustering</i> E.g., work and Sabbath in John 5	<i>Story Clusters</i> E.g., healings and miracles in Matthew 8–9	<i>Listening for Authorized Character Voices in the Story</i> E.g., John the Baptist’s authorized voice in Luke 3:7–18
<i>Strategic Placement</i> E.g., preaching on Isaiah 61 to inaugurate Jesus’ ministry to the margins (Luke 4:14–30)	<i>Intercalation</i> (ABA pattern, sandwiching of one episode within another) E.g., cursing of fig tree episode (Mark 11:12–14, 19–25) surrounding clearing of the temple (11:15–18)	<i>Listening for Direct Authorial Assessments</i> E.g., the young Jesus as full of wisdom in Luke 2:40

15. Jeannine K. Brown, “Direct Engagement of the Reader in Matthew’s Discourses: Rhetorical Techniques and Scholarly Consensus,” *NTS* 51 (2005): 19–35. See chap. 2 for more on the issue of narrative pacing.

Themes	Sequencing of Episodes	Point of View
Inclusio or Bookend E.g., Jesus as “God with us”/“with you” (Matt. 1:23; 28:20)	Interchange (ABABABAB type pattern) E.g., alternating comparison of scenes involving John the Baptist and Jesus in Luke 1–2	Listening for Other Authorized Commentary, Especially from the Jewish Scriptures E.g., Matthew’s commentary in Isaiah citation about Jesus as Servant of the Lord (Matt. 12:18–21; cf. Isa. 42:1–4)

To illustrate the connection between the story and discourse levels of a Gospel, we could refer to the “what” and the “how” of the narrative. If the story level illuminates the “what” of the story (e.g., events), the discourse level focuses on “how” the story is told via rhetoric and stylistics. The discourse level involves the ways “the implied author uses characters, settings, plot, and rhetoric to communicate meaning.”¹⁶ And even if these levels are not at every turn fully distinguishable, they provide an insightful interpretive lens for hearing what an author is communicating.

The Implied Author and Reader

Discussion of the discourse level points us toward another narrative-critical issue—namely, how to conceive of authorship from a narrative-critical perspective. In NC the concept of the **implied author** provides an important construct for interpreting any narrative. The implied author remains distinct from the empirical author of a narrative and may be defined as the author presupposed by the narrative itself. As such, the implied author is a textually derived construct.

A contemporary example might help for distinguishing the flesh-and-blood (empirical) author from the implied author of a text. Let’s say you pick up a novel by an author you know nothing about. Presumably, you can read that novel and understand the story and its themes without researching the author. As you read, you may become curious about the author and search out biographical information. This information may even provide further insight into the significance of what you’ve read. Yet you will be able to understand the narrative you’ve read even if you lack

16. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “Narrative Criticism: How Does the Story Mean?,” in *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Janice C. Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 23–49, here 47.

this authorial information. (It does help greatly to know the general setting in which a book is written; e.g., a two-hundred-year-old novel may require certain additional reading strategies as compared to a contemporary novel.) The reason you can understand the novel is because you have discerned (whether you are fully aware of it or not) the implied author as you've read the novel—the author who has been communicating with you throughout the story.

Now suppose you read something quite different from that same author—say, a letter from the author to her daughter. While written by the same empirical author, the implied author of this letter could be quite distinct from the implied author of the novel. In fact, when reading the novel, you may have had no inkling that the author is a mother. Yet now, reading this personal letter, you find yourself aware of a *quite different writing persona*—that is, a distinct implied author. The implied author of the letter may seem quite warm and personable in ways not evident in the novel. The same empirical author will almost by necessity bring a different implied author to each of her compositions.

So how does the concept of the implied author help us interpret an almost two-thousand-year-old Gospel? First, it proves helpful because each of the four Gospel compositions are anonymous. Although associated with particular persons in their titles and in church tradition, they originally almost certainly circulated without titles (which were probably added to distinguish one from the other: “According to Matthew,” “According to Mark,” etc.). While we may trust these early titles and traditions, it is not necessary to reconstruct the empirical Matthew to understand the Gospel associated with his name. If it were, then anyone hearing or reading this Gospel apart from that association would be doomed to misunderstand it.

Second, a Gospel's internal cues provide us with plenty of assistance for understanding the author's communicative purposes. For example, the implied author of Mark begins his Gospel with an Old Testament composite to illuminate who Jesus is in relation to Israel's hopes (Mark 1:2–3). The author cites Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3, with an allusion to Exodus 23:20, to provide an opening frame to his story of Jesus. With these Old Testament texts, the implied author communicates the “coming presence” of Israel's God as well as Israel's lack of covenantal loyalty, so that both promise and warning are signaled from these scriptural

connections.¹⁷ This same implied author of Mark's Gospel portrays the disciples as hard-hearted and lacking understanding—a portrayal that functions to press the reader toward greater insight about Jesus' mission and toward fidelity to him.

Corresponding to the implied author, NC also highlights the concept of the **implied reader**. For some narrative critics, the implied reader, like the implied author, is a textually derived construct—namely, the reader presupposed in the text. For example, in his narrative work on John's Gospel, R. Alan Culpepper understands the implied reader as “defined by the text as the one who performs all the mental moves required to enter into the narrative world and respond to it as the implied author intends.”¹⁸ Others who practice a narrative approach also include in their definition what empirical readers inevitably contribute to textual meaning, so that the implied reader is some combination of textual cues and the different ways real readers respond to those cues.¹⁹

These two concepts—the implied author and the implied reader—offer a reading strategy for a Gospel, with the goal of understanding its communicative intention. In NC this goal might be often referred to as approximating the response of the implied reader. For instance, if we can understand the kind of disciple Luke, as implied author, is shaping through his narrative, then we might actively choose to live out that vision of discipleship. Let's say we come to a (partial) sketch of the implied reader of Luke as *someone who participates in God's reign by following Jesus and renouncing preoccupation with status to instead embrace those who are on the margins of society*. Living out the communicative intention of Luke will then involve participating in the kingdom in these ways.²⁰

The Evolution of Narrative Criticism

A significant strength of NC as a methodology has been its ability to adapt and change in response to critiques. For example, since its inception NC

17. Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 87.

18. R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 7.

19. E.g., David Howell, *Matthew's Inclusive Story: A Study in the Narrative Rhetoric of the First Gospel*, JSNTSup 42 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 210–11.

20. Brown, “Narrative Criticism,” 621.

has broadened in scope to acknowledge and address the importance of historical realities in the reading of the Gospels. Early on, practitioners of NC made it a practice to bracket out historical concerns. This choice was an intentional divergence from the various criticisms that had focused on historical questions of a Gospel's production (source criticism), its prewritten forms (form criticism), and the editing done by its author to meet the needs of its particular audience (redaction criticism). As this bracketing of historical questions received substantive critique, narrative critics like Mark Allan Powell responded by affirming the importance of sociohistorical information for understanding the Gospels as stories. According to Powell, rather than being a blank slate, the implied reader has the linguistic and contextual knowledge that the implied author expects his reader to know.²¹ This makes great sense, since the Gospels themselves are "cultural products."²²

So while NC brackets out questions of composition history, it does recognize the importance of the sociohistorical contexts of the storied features of a Gospel. For instance, understanding Jesus' reference to a child as he responds to the disciples' question about kingdom greatness (Matt. 18:1–4) should take into account the relative lack of status of children in the first-century Greco-Roman world. Jesus is critiquing the disciples' preoccupation with status by teaching that the kingdom should not be understood in terms of status acquisition and social ranking.²³

Let's think through another example of the adaptability of NC. An ongoing critique of the method has been that it takes categories from narratology that were developed to analyze modern fiction and applies them to the Gospels—ancient compositions that claim historicity (Luke 1:1–4). To assess this critique, it is helpful to notice that the primary differences between fictional narratives and historical ones have less to do with their formal features (e.g., plot, characterization) and more to do with different *stances* of author and audience toward the narrative. The

21. Mark Allan Powell, "Expected and Unexpected Readings of Matthew: What the Reader Knows," *AsTJ* 48 (1993): 31–51, here 32.

22. The term comes from Joel Green, *Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 19. P. Merenlahti and R. Hakola go further to argue that narrative analysis should be an integral part of historical study (and vice versa). Merenlahti and Hakola, "Reconceiving Narrative Criticism," in *Characterization in the Gospels: Reconceiving Narrative Criticism*, ed. D. Rhoads and K. Syreeni, JSNTSup 184 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 13–48, here 48.

23. Brown and Roberts, *Matthieu*, 166–67.

author of a narrative claiming some level of historicity functions as the guarantor of the truth of the narrative.²⁴ And the audience of a historical narrative will attempt to fill in the inevitable gaps in the story with historical information rather than with fictional material. For instance, the violent actions of the character of King Herod in Matthew 2 can be helpfully understood in light of what we know from other primary sources about this Rome-appointed king ruling over the Jewish people. Josephus, for example, corroborates and fills out a portrait of Herod as a despotic ruler, sometimes acting violently toward those he perceived as rivals or threats to his reign.²⁵

In response to the critique of the use of modern narrative categories in NC, narrative critics have sought to determine the formal features of ancient narratives to expand their understanding of the Gospels. For example, when studying characterization in any particular Gospel, it is valuable to determine the parameters, tendencies, and techniques of ancient characterization more broadly. Are characters fairly dynamic or more static in narratives that are essentially contemporaneous with the Gospels? And how do these characters function? There is evidence that characters could serve a representative role—as types of various qualities or ethical categories. We will explore these questions and ideas in chapter 3, but my point here is to note that ancient narrative practices can inform and expand our understanding of the Gospels as stories. Modern categories derived from the analysis of fiction are not inappropriate starting points for analysis, and these can be augmented by the study of first-century conventions.

All in all, NC has proved to be an adaptable methodology and finds itself at home in conversation with a variety of other methods for Gospel study, including such diverse reading strategies as historical criticism, feminist criticism, postcolonial criticism, and theological interpretation.²⁶ Eclectic approaches often include NC as a way to attend to the subtle and complex storied features of a Gospel while also bringing other interpretive lenses to Gospel study.

24. Merenlahti and Hakola, “Reconceiving Narrative Criticism,” 34–35.

25. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 16.11.1–8. For examples of Roman rulers who used despotic power to protect their reigns, see Eugene Eung-Chun Park, “Rachel’s Cry for Her Children: Matthew’s Treatment of the Infanticide by Herod,” *CBQ* 75 (2013): 473–85, here 476–77.

26. For some specific examples, see Brown, “Narrative Criticism,” 623.

Gospels as Stories: Diving Deeper

Now that we have surveyed some of the key ways scholarship and the church have read the Gospels and have introduced NC as a beneficial and developing methodology, we turn to an exploration of the particulars of narrative analysis. The rest of this book is organized by chapter pairs, alternating theory and practice. As subsequent chapters (2, 4, 6, 8) give a detailed account of various key facets of narrative analysis, they will be accompanied by a chapter that fleshes out these methodological areas of analysis in one of the four Gospels. The methodological chapters include plotting (chap. 2), characterization (chap. 4), intertextuality (chap. 6), and narrative theology (chap. 8). I explore how each of these might contribute to a narrative reading of the Gospels and help to illuminate their central themes and purposes. In the alternating chapters, I illustrate these theoretical categories by exploring narrative plotting in Luke (chap. 3), the disciples as character group in Matthew (chap. 5), intertextuality in John (chap. 7), and the narrative theology of Mark (chap. 9).

By focusing on Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in each of four discrete chapters, we'll be able to see more clearly how these four storytellers develop complex and compelling portraits of Jesus the Messiah in the interest of captivating and transforming their readers.