



The Bible as Literature

Gospel Anecdotes

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Mark 5: 21–43 Mark 10: 46–52

What sort of literature are the Gospels? People who first read them or heard them read would probably have identified them as biographies, quite a popular genre of literature in the period when the Gospels were written. People were familiar with biographies of famous people – kings and generals, philosophers and poets. They weren't much like the biographies people write today. For one thing, they were much shorter, and they were interested in different things: for example, character, yes, but personality, no. Usually they meant to be instructive. They wanted their readers to admire and imitate their heroes or to appreciate their philosophy, if they were teachers. They also wanted to entertain but most of all to educate.

But the biography was a host genre. In other words its component parts fell into other categories of literary form and one of these was the anecdote. Some biographies were little more than a collection of anecdotes about their subject, with something about their early life at the beginning and something about their death at the end. By anecdote I mean a story that is short and to the point, recounting a single episode and complete in itself. We're all familiar with anecdotes, but you may think of them as rather trivial stories told for amusement. But they can be serious and significant. Sometimes the best way to get across something about a person's character is tell of a striking episode in which they showed kindness or insensitivity or arrogance or whatever. Ancient biographers tended not to describe the characters of their subjects: they told stories about them in which their characters emerged. Especially in the case of philosophers, anecdotes might end with a witty saying or a piece of sound advice. They could be put to many uses.

Similarly the Gospels. They have some extended narratives, especially at the beginning and the end, and they include a lot of sayings of Jesus, but much of what they tell us about Jesus takes the form of anecdotes, like the three we heard in our readings this evening. They all came from Mark's Gospel because I think, among the evangelists, Mark is really the master of the anecdote. John is a very skilled storyteller and he has some brilliantly told anecdotes, but he especially likes longer narratives. Mark is the master of the short anecdote and he must have developed that skill in oral storytelling.

Mark's anecdotes are typically very short, and to appreciate them we have to learn to read them well, not to rush over them, but to let our imaginations enter the stories. The stories are spare; there's not much redundancy in them. But very often Mark gives us just one or two vivid details that are enough to stimulate us to picture the scene. Take the well-known story of Jesus stilling the storm. The disciples are out in the boat on the sea of Galilee, and the storm blows up suddenly. The waves are already swamping the boat. The disciples are panicking. But Jesus, Mark tells us, was sound asleep with his head on a cushion in the stern of the boat. Immediately we see the whole scene. Matthew and Luke, who take over this story from Mark but abbreviate it, as they usually did, just say that Jesus was asleep. That's all we need to get the point of the story, but it doesn't appeal to our visual imagination in the way that Mark's account, with just a very few more words, does so well. Matthew and Luke abbreviate Mark, because they have so much more stuff to cram into their Gospels, and we can be very glad that they do give us all that other stuff. But for the anecdotes they take from Mark, read Mark.

We heard Mark's story of the healing of blind Bartimaeus. I like it because, unusually, Mark has told it from the perspective of Bartimaeus. He puts us readers in the shoes of the beggar. Because he is blind, we hear what goes on, we don't see anything. He's at the roadside behind the crowd, but he hears someone say that Jesus is there, and so he shouts as loud as he can to get Jesus' attention. People tell him to keep quiet, but Jesus hears him, hears the kind of insistent cry for help that Jesus can never ignore. So he calls for Bartimaeus and the message is passed through the crowd to reach Bartimaeus. And here we get the little gem of detail that brings the scene to life. In his eagerness Bartimaeus throws aside his cloak, jumps up and makes his way to Jesus.

Mostly in Mark's anecdotes we watch what's happening from the perspective of the disciples who are looking on. I don't think it's an accident that in this story, where Mark skilfully gives us the point of view of the character who meets Jesus that character has a name. Most of the many people who appear in these little episodes are anonymous. So why is Bartimaeus named? Surely it's because Bartimaeus himself (and note that at the end of the story Mark tells us that he became a disciple of Jesus) first told the story. He surely told it over and over to anyone who would listen. And so we get it from his perspective. Another rare case of a named minor character is Jairus, in our first reading. It's not so obvious that we get Jairus's perspective here – especially as Mark here makes one of his literary sandwiches by placing another little story in the middle of Jairus's. The story may not be very obviously told from Jairus's perspective, but at least we could read it that way. In that other story, about the woman with a chronic haemorrhage, we actually get her point of view and something of Jesus's too, which is very rare in the Gospels.

It's mainly because of these short anecdotes, in which Jesus is always meeting different people, that the Gospels have, considering their length, such very large castes of characters. Mark, the shortest, has no less than seventy individual characters, not counting the crowds and the groups. But even more interesting is the very wide range of kinds of people. If we just stick to the people who feature in these anecdotes, there are wealthy people like Jairus, there are Pharisees and tax collectors, fishermen, farmers and lots of the ordinary people who composed the great mass of the population, male and female. But what is especially notable is how many of the people Jesus encounters in these stories are from the bottom of the social scale: the destitute, the chronically sick and the seriously disabled who couldn't work and usually had to survive by begging (like Bartimaeus), and the outcasts – the lepers, the unmanageably mad and the notoriously bad. In this respect

the Gospels could not be more different from the other biographies we have from the ancient world, which move in the world of the elite and often display the contempt for the common people that was normal among the rich and powerful. We usually only meet non-elite persons as individuals if they work for the elite and come into their stories. Otherwise the common people are merely the anonymous mob, despised and feared.

In the example of Bartimaeus, the contrast is stark. A blind beggar who appears in his own story and, moreover, has a name! I doubt there is anyone comparable in the whole of ancient historical literature. The anecdotes in the Gospels do not just function to glorify or characterize Jesus: they are also the stories of all sorts of people who meet Jesus, many of them the kinds of people we hardly ever find as individuals in other historical literature of their time.

I may have given the impression so far that these Gospel anecdotes are all miracle stories. Many of them are, but there plenty of other kinds of encounters between Jesus and other individuals. There are people who ask him questions, sometimes sincere people with good questions about what to do with their lives, sometimes hostile people who try to put him on the spot or entrap him. Most often people come to Jesus, seeking healing or answers, but sometimes Jesus takes the initiative, as in the stories in which he calls people to become his disciples. And, of course, there are stories of Jesus the teacher in conversation with his disciples – short conversations recounted to make a specific point (otherwise we can't call them anecdotes).

Almost always there is a real encounter between Jesus and another person and it's the encounter that makes a difference – so that after this single episode that person is in a different place in their lives from where they were before they met Jesus. That need for a real encounter explains why so often Jesus asks for faith if he is to heal someone. He doesn't just go around dispensing miraculous medicine. We can see this in that very unusual case of the woman with the chronic haemorrhage. She doesn't really want to have to meet Jesus because she's ashamed or afraid to: she is one of those people whose ailment made her ritually impure, like a leper, and could pass on the impurity on to others. So she hopes she can hide in the crowd and get healed just by touching Jesus' robe. Actually she does, and Jesus could have left it at that. He insists that she identify herself, not because he wants to embarrass her, but because he wants the healing to have that personal dimension. It's important she hears him address her as 'daughter' and hear the words that give more than physical healing: 'your faith has made you well; go in peace.'

So what, in general, do the anecdotes do for us? They are probably the main way we get to know Jesus (at least in the first three Gospels). The Gospels don't tell us in so many words what sort of person Jesus was. They tell us what he said and did and how he related to people and (we shouldn't forget) to God. Most readers of the Gospels get a strong impression of Jesus as a person and the anecdotes have a lot to do with that. In the healing miracles we see above all Jesus' compassion and concern. He doesn't work miracles for show. Indeed, he's constantly telling people not to go round telling everyone about their healing. The way the story of Jairus's daughter ends is an interesting example. After the drama of resuscitation, it ends on a note that seems almost bathetic: 'he told them to give her something to eat'. But it leaves us knowing that Jesus cared about her. He wasn't making a religious point. The real religious point is that this was God's love flowing out of Jesus for the healing of humanity.

But the Jesus of these anecdotes not only feels compassion. He also gets angry. Why does Mark say that when Jesus meets a leper he's angry. Why should it be anger that motivates his healing act in this case? Surely it's his anger at the way human lives can be ravaged by disease. When some Pharisees object to his healing on the Sabbath, he is both angry and sad. He gets angry with the disciples even when they mean well – when they don't want him disturbed by the people bringing their children to him to bless. We feel his disappointment when the rich man – a man who drew his warm affection – cannot rise to the challenge of costly discipleship. And then there is Jesus the skilful debater. The way he parries his enemies' attempts to stump him or entrap him is brilliant. These religious experts and intellectuals always get as good as they give – and often more.

So we get to know Jesus in the anecdotes, but I think the Gospel writers hope we shall do more than that. They hope that we will meet Jesus. The anecdotes are told so that we can enter them and be there. They invite us to get involved as all these very different people encounter Jesus and Jesus relates to them in the very different ways that are appropriate to each of them. There is healing, there is deliverance, there is challenge, there are answers to questions, there are hard sayings and gentle ones. There are any number of ways that Jesus meets us when we let these stories of Jesus meet the stories of our own lives and make a difference.