

The Narratological Fabric of the Gospels

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Probably no one will dispute that the gospels are stories. That justifies, in fact necessitates the questions: What are the characteristics of early Christian story (*histoire*), narrating (*narration*) and narrative (*récit*) in the gospels? In what follows these questions will be considered in two steps: 1. What are the gospels? What were the methodological questions that predominantly shaped analysis of the gospels in the 20th century? and 2. What constitutes narratology's urgent contribution to analysis of the gospels? What do the gospels tell, and how do they tell it?

My thesis is that narratology's set of instruments is outstandingly well suited to unpack the structural moments, characteristics, and specifics of early Christian gospel narratives. This in turn demonstrates the urgent need for the application of these instruments to gospel study.

1. What Are the Gospels?

The problem we face in analyzing the gospels is the fact that the term 'gospel' on the one hand describes a certain content, namely the Good News of Jesus as the Christ, but on the other hand it represents a literary genre, that of the four canonical gospels. This essay focuses on the question of the narratological constitutiva of the genre 'gospel'. As far as scholarship is concerned, the analysis of the genre 'gospel' was strongly shaped by the methods of genre-, source-, tradition-, and redaction criticism, as will be briefly summarized below.

As regards form or genre criticism: The genre 'gospel' was regarded for nearly a century as the sole original genre that Christianity had contributed to ancient literature.¹ In recent times this consensus has been shaken; in particular, the close relationship of the genre 'gospel' to the genre 'biography' has been convincingly demonstrated. A new consensus is emerging. The ancient biography was a new genre derived, at the latest from the

¹ Cf. Dormeyer (1993:4 *passim*).

first century BCE onwards, from those of historiography and encomium and had already ceased development in the third century CE. It can be shown that the gospels are marked by essential factors constitutive of the genre of ancient biography²:

- The centering of the narrative on a principal person who is presented as a solidly established character with a predetermined fate.
- A three-part structure: prehistory, public activity, and death of the protagonist.³
- And numerous recurring *topoi*, some of which I will address in the course of my remarks.

The essential Christian writings in the genre ‘biography’ are the four canonical gospels (according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). The belonging of the gospels to the ancient genre of biography yields a frame of reference within which the specific narrative form of the gospels and their literary significance within ancient narrative literature can be determined.

Concerning *source criticism*: The debate (especially since the Enlightenment) over the question of the literary dependence of the gospels reached a certain conclusion in the form of the so-called Two Source Theory, which has enjoyed a broad consensus. According to this theory, the Gospel according to Mark is the initial text of the biblical gospels, insofar as it is the oldest gospel and was available to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke as a written source. In addition, these two gospels used a second source, which has been lost and can only be secondarily reconstructed: The Sayings Source Q, probably in written form, and oral, so-called special traditions that scholarship calls Special Material. That is one primary reason why the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are about one-third longer than the Gospel according to Mark.

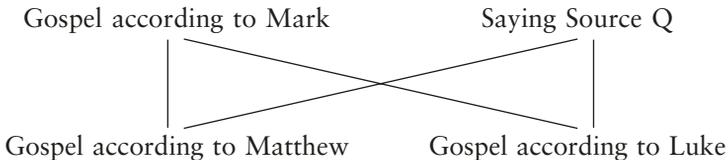


Figure 1: The Two-Source-Theory

² For this and what follows see especially Dormeyer (1999); Frickenschmidt (1997); Burridge (1992).

³ From the point of view of narratology it is relevant that the biographies are not always told in this ‘order’ of events (prehistory, public activity, and death); cf. examples from Frickenschmidt (1997:351).

The Gospel according to Luke also belongs to a two-part work, together with the Acts of the Apostles, which in a whole series of episodes describes the spread of the message of Jesus as Messiah, through his disciples (especially Peter and Paul), as far as Rome. The Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke are called ‘synoptic’, because they all follow the framework of the Gospel according to Mark and thus can easily be read in parallel and compared.

The source-critical location of the Gospel according to John was far more complicated. Here, for a long time, the dominant opinion was that the fourth Gospel was unacquainted with the synoptic gospels, and therefore could not have made use of them as sources. Affinities in individual traditions were explained as the result of oral transmission. This consensus has been increasingly called into question, but a preliminary conclusion to the discussion is not yet in sight.⁴

As regards the history of oral tradition or tradition criticism: In addition, the question of the traditions redacted in the gospels and their (sub)genres was and is of central importance for gospel analysis. Among the liveliest questions here are: Which traditions can be traced to the historical Jesus? and: What are the religious-historical contexts to which individual early Christian traditions can be traced? and finally: How were these modified in the course of their transmission?

Concerning *redaction criticism*: Beginning with the individual traditions, analysis culminates in the question of the compositional principles of the gospels, or the redactional reworking of the material by the authors of the gospels. This question is, for the most part, considered under the aspects of history and theology. On the basis of synoptic comparisons, word statistics, and tradition-critical hypotheses, scholars have been attempting to demonstrate the specific, fundamental historical and theological tendencies in the individual gospels and in their reworking of their materials and traditions.

In gospels research, narrative-analytical categories have already entered the picture but have not yet become standard in the gospel interpretation,⁵ as an analysis of voice(s) in the individual synoptic gospels, questions of mood (showing, telling, focalization), the distinction between story time and narrative time, the sequential ordering, duration or rhythm, and frequency of the narrative. In addition, at the level of story, to date scarcely any narrative-analytical categories in gospel exegesis—such as the question of events and their hierarchizing (e.g., meta-events, à la Lotman),⁶ or the

⁴ This is the reason why I leave the Gospel according to John aside in this paper.

⁵ Cf., for example, Merenlahti (2002). They have scarcely gained any foothold to date in German-language gospel research; for the state of scholarship cf. Eisen (2005).

⁶ Cf. Eisen (2003:155–166).

characterization of the figures in the narrated world—have been applied. In this paper I will essay some aspects of an exemplary narratological analysis of the gospels.⁷

2. Aspects of the Narratological Fabric of the Gospels

In a first step I will now describe aspects of narrating—narrating in the sense of Genettes *narration*—of the Gospel according to Luke, which together with the Acts of the Apostles constitutes a two-part literary work, and in what follows is called the *Corpus Lucanum* (2.1). In a second step I will present observations on the story (*histoire*) of the gospels and the narrative (*récit*) (2.2).

2.1 The Narrating of the Corpus Lucanum

Both biblical books, the Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, have been written by the same author who has been called Luke in the tradition.⁸ The Lucan two-part work or *Corpus Lucanum* not only constitutes the most extensive story about Jesus and his disciples; in comparison with the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, it also has the greatest degree of complexity in its narrating.

The Gospel according to Luke begins with a prologue (Luke 1:1–4), which in terms of narrative analysis can be called a narrator's commentary that, here, exercises a *mediating* or *connective function*.⁹ The explicit narrator, who nevertheless remains anonymous, comments his narrative in 'I' form. He speaks as extradiegetic narrator to his extradiegetic narratee explicitly and by name, Theophilus:

Seeing that many others have undertaken to draw up accounts of the events that have taken place among us, exactly as these were handed down to us by those who from the outset were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word; I in my turn, after carefully going over the whole story from the beginning, have decided to write an ordered account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may learn how reliable the word is that you have received (Luke 1:1–4).

⁷ For a more comprehensive narratological analysis of the gospels and the Acts of the Apostles see Eisen (2005).

⁸ The question of authorship must be kept open because the original manuscripts do not give indications for the author. The attribution to Luke, the physician and companion of Paul, occurred only in the second century and is based on a complex reconstruction of biblical passages; cf. Schnelle (2002:284–288).

⁹ In what follows I am using the scheme of narrative functions developed by Nünning (1996).

This prologue of the Gospel according to Luke has *metanarrative functions*. The narrative process itself is the major subject from a number of points of view. There is its relation to the ‘many’ who have already undertaken to write of the events (Luke 1:1). The narrator thus adopts an explicit relationship to the praxis of production in Christian groups and distinguishes his own undertaking from them in positive fashion. As his sources he names the proclamation of those who from the beginning have been eyewitnesses and servants of the word (Luke 1:2).

From what follows, we learn how the undertaking of the narrator of the two-part work differs from that of the ‘many’—namely, the extent of his story and the method of his narrative. The narrator emphasizes that he has pursued everything carefully from the beginning (Luke 1:3). The combination of his ‘after carefully going over the whole story’ and ‘from the beginning’, indicates that the narrator, in contrast to his predecessors, has really researched *all* that have happened, that means the prehistory of Jesus’ activity as well as its post-history, after Jesus’ ascension into heaven (both is missing in the Gospel according to Mark, in the Gospel according to Matthew the ascension is not narrated). That also indicates the extent of his undertaking, which in fact surpasses not only the Gospel according to Mark but also the Gospel according to Matthew in the number of events narrated. In any case, the narrator begins in very detailed fashion with the circumstances of Jesus Christ’s conception and birth (Luke 1–2), and ends in a second book, the Acts of the Apostles, with the spread of the message, through Paul, as far as Rome (Acts 28). So, the narrator of the *Corpus Lucanum* goes far beyond the events narrated in the Gospel according to Mark and Matthew.

In addition, the narrator emphasizes that he has written everything ‘in ordered account’ (Luke 1:3). I want to note here that the narrator, despite these announcements, also makes use of the narrative methods of pro- and analepsis. Overall, the spectrum of possibilities for shaping the order, the duration and pace, and the frequency within the narrative is exhausted.

The message to the narratee of the narrative, Theophilus, is clear: The narrator is in every respect superior to those who have previously attempted this. To summarize: The narrator introduces his narrative,

- first, it is more comprehensive
- second, it is told from the very beginning
- third, it is more precise
- and fourth, it is told in order.

In this way the narrative voice orders its narrative within a larger literary context, which it evaluates and in contrast to which it wishes to show its own method as superior.

In the prologue to the second book, the Acts of the Apostles, the narrator again speaks explicitly to his narratee, Theophilus:

In my first book, Theophilus, I dealt with everything Jesus had done and taught from the beginning until the day he gave his instructions to the apostles he had chosen through the Holy Spirit, and was taken up to heaven (Acts 1:1–2).

Both prologues fulfill an *appellative function*, in that they speak to a narratee by name (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). The purpose of the undertaking, namely in relation to the explicit narratee, is also named in this context. The narrator addresses him directly in the second person singular and challenges him to recognize the ‘reliability of the word’ (Luke 1:4). Thus the expected attitude of receptivity is named. In this way the readers are drawn into the narrative process, with corresponding instructions for their behavior.

The renewed address to his narratee at the beginning of the second book has here moreover a *phatic function*: the appellation serves to stabilize the channel of communication between narrator and narratee. At the same time, the program and authority of the narrator of the first book are recalled. The story of the first book is summarily told in a brief analepsis. Simultaneously, with the renewed address to the narratee, a close tie is established between the first and the second book.

A further narratologically interesting phenomenon arises in the second book: The extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator of the *Corpus Lucanum* becomes in the Acts of the Apostles suddenly a homodiegetic narrator in the so-called ‘we’ passages (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–25; 21:1–18; 27:1; 28:16). Here he leaps, quite without introduction, into the action and, as a companion of Paul, becomes an eyewitness to the events by himself. The primarily extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrative voice suddenly and without warning becomes homodiegetic, that is, a figure in the story. The extent of these passages, in comparison to the whole length of the Acts of the Apostles or, indeed, of the two-part work, is small; there are only four such brief narrative passages. Moreover, they are spread over thirteen chapters.

However, the narrator achieves some major narrative effects by this. Firstly, the narrator shows that he took part in the events and in so far was an eyewitness. But whether this is authentic or not—a question that can never be answered with absolute certainty—this pretended eyewitness has the effect of giving the narrator additional authority. In the prologue to the gospel the narrator primarily formulated the authority of an historian (*histor*) for himself, and has demonstrated it in his narrative. Now, though still subordinated, the authority of an eyewitness is added to this as the narrative nears its end. This hierarchy corresponds to ancient convention, which gave great value on both authorities but greater value to the report

of the *histor* than to that of the eyewitnesses.¹⁰ Our narrator, however, claims both authorities for himself.¹¹

It remains striking that the narrator in the ‘we’ passages is no more identifiable as a figure than in the prologue and in the other parts of the narrative. The Narrator appears in this ‘we’ as an anonymous companion, his primary characteristic being that he accompanies Paul on some of his journeys. That is the prime function of this ‘we’: it replaces the narrator in the diegesis. As a figure, he experiences the events as an eyewitness and thus lays claim to the authority of one who has seen something personally.

This procedure was very successful. Even today this narrative is received in this way, namely as an authentic eyewitness account. With Genette, we can also call this narrative procedure ‘metalepsis’.¹²

2.2 Observations on the Story (*histoire*) and the Narrative (*récit*) of the Synoptic Gospels

The basic story of the Gospel according to Mark is expanded by the Gospels of Matthew and of Luke. I want to show more clearly how this is done at the beginning and end of the narrative.

Both the Gospels of Matthew and of Luke tell events around Jesus’ birth and infancy, something lacking in the Gospel according to Mark. The Gospel according to Mark opens with the sentence: ‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God’ (Mark 1:1). However, that is the main information the Gospel according to Mark gives about the origins of its protagonist. It is different with the Gospels of Matthew and of Luke: Each of them is preceded by a fairly extensive story of birth and infancy. In these infancy narratives we encounter various literary *topoi* from ancient biographies,¹³ such as genealogies, and in the case of very prominent people also the circumstances of their conception and birth, for example in the case of Alexander the Great and Augustus.¹⁴ Further *topoi* are giftedness of the twelve-year-old protagonist, temptation stories,

¹⁰ Cf. Scholes/Kellogg (1966:242–248).

¹¹ And let it be said parenthetically that it was regarded as honorable among Hellenistic historians if an historian like Odysseus had borne ‘the spray and swell of the waves’ (Homer, *Odyssee* XII:219), still more: it should be an inescapable duty for every historian truly deserving of the name. Against this background it is not surprising that the ‘we’ narrator in the Acts of the Apostles is used primarily in narratives of sea voyages.

¹² See Cornils (2004).

¹³ Frickenschmidt (1997:210–350) offers an exhaustive list of the *topoi* of ancient biographies, with abundant textual examples.

¹⁴ Plutarch, *Alexander* 2f; Suetonius, *Augustus* 94; in both, a divine begetting is narrated. This aspect then begins to be positively rampant in the biographical novels (see Ps.-Kallisthenes, *Historia Alexandri Magni* 12, or: Philostratos, *Vita Apollonii* 1,4–5; cf. further Frickenschmidt 1997:243–244; 253–255).

character-summaries, etc. Many of these *topoi* appear in the birth and infancy narratives in the gospels as well as in ancient biographies.

Strikingly, the birth and infancy narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are told differently: for one thing, in the selection of the events narrated and also in the way the same event is narrated. For example the announcement of Jesus' conception and his birth: The Conception of Jesus is told in the Gospel according to Luke from the point of view of Mary (Luke 1:26–38) and in the Gospel according to Matthew from the point of view of Joseph (Matthew 1:18–25). At all in the Gospel according to Luke it is narrated in dramatic mood: that is in two scenes with psychonarration and direct speech and many details.¹⁵ In the Gospel according to Matthew it is not that dramatically narrated. There are more commentaries of the narrator and the birth of Jesus is only mentioned in single clause in the narrator's account: 'Until she had borne a son' (Matthew 1:25).¹⁶ The Gospel according to Luke in contrast vividly relates the well-known account of the decree that went forth from Caesar Augustus and Jesus' birth in a stable (Luke 2:1–7).¹⁷

¹⁵ 'In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. He went in and said to her, 'Rejoice, so highly favored! The Lord is with you.' She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, but the angel said to her, 'Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favor. Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob for ever and his reign will have no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?' 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you', the angel answered, 'and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God. Know this too: your kinswomen Elizabeth has, in her old age, herself conceived a son, and she whom people called barren is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible for God.' 'I am the handmaid of the Lord', said Mary, 'let what you have said be done to me.' And the angel left her' (Luke 1:26–38).

¹⁶ 'This is how Jesus came to be born. His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph; but before they came to live together she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a man of honor and wanting to spare his publicity, decided to divorce her informally. He had made up his mind to do this when the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins.' Now all this took place to fulfill the words spoken by the Lord through the prophets: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel, a name which means 'God-is-with-us.' When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do: he took his wife to his home and, though he had not had intercourse with her, she gave birth to a son; and he named him Jesus' (Matthew 1:18–25).

¹⁷ 'Now at this time Caesar Augustus issued a decree for a census of the whole world to be taken. This census—the first—took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria, and

The Gospel according to Matthew contains the dramatic narratives of the coming of the Magi from the East, the flight into Egypt, and the slaughter of innocents by King Herod (Matthew 2), all of which are lacking in the Gospel according to Luke. From a narrative-theoretical perspective, then, it is no wonder that in the Christmas story read every year in church, at just this point narratives from the Gospels of Luke and Matthew are combined and read as one.

With Jesus' public activity in Galilee (Matthew 4:12; Luke 4:14), after his baptism (Matthew 3:13–17; Luke 3:21–22) and the temptation story (Matthew 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13), the central section of the gospels begins. Regarding this central section I will only note that it is striking how differently the Gospels of Matthew and Luke treat their primary sources. While Matthew works newer material more generally into the whole, the Gospel according to Luke contains a major insertion within the framework of the Gospel according to Mark, in the form of a travel narrative (Luke 9:51–18:14). Travel narratives, incidentally, are also a *topos* in ancient biographies.¹⁸ Jesus' activity is narrated in all the gospels as a journey through Galilee that ultimately leads to Jerusalem, and so to his death.

It is especially in the central section of the gospels that the so-called passion predictions play an important role. Since more than once in the gospels the future suffering, death, and resurrection of the Son of Man is proleptically narrated by the lips of the reliable protagonist Jesus (Mark 8:31–33; 9:31; 10:32–34; Matthew 16:21–23; 17:12, 22–23; 20:17–19; 26:2; Luke 9:22, 43b–45; 17:25; 18:31–34). The high frequency overall places great weight on the passion narrative. Advance indications of the future fate of the hero are also a *topos* of ancient biographies. For example Plutarch's advance notice of the senseless death of Pelopidas and Marcellus (Plutarch, *Pelopidas* 2), or of Aristides, 'that he, who had at first been beloved, would later, because of his second name, become the object of distaste' (Plutarch, *Aristides* 7). In contrast to the narrator's speech in Plutarch, the so-called passion predictions in the versions in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke are in the form of direct speech on the lips of the Son of God. They thus acquire greater weight; they are both *certain about the future* (Eberhard Lämmert) and at the same time

everyone went to his own town to be registered. So Joseph set out from the town of Nazareth in Galilee and traveled up to Judaea, to the town of David called Bethlehem, since he was of David's House and line, in order to be registered together with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. While they were there the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to a son, her first-born. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them at the inn' (Luke 2:1–7).

¹⁸ See Frickenschmidt (1997:272f).

dramatic in their mood of narration. They contain the central key words of the events to come. In Mark we read:

The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again (Mark 8:31–33).

These prolepses are repeated in the Gospel according to Mark a second and third time (Mark 9:31; 10:32–34). In the third prolepsis, what is to come is narrated more fully than before:

Now we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man is about to be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the pagans, who will mock him and spit at him and scourge him and put him to death; and after three days he will rise again (Mark 10:32–34).

It is not only said that the Son of Man will be handed over to the high priests and scribes and condemned to death, but also details of his being arrested and the event after his death.

In the final part of the whole narrative, in the so called passion narrative—part three in the ancient biography—these announcements are then scenically depicted, for example in the scene of the mocking of Jesus by the soldiers, who put a purple cloak on him and weave a crown of thorns and put it on him, and spit on him (Mark 15:16–20; Matthew 27:27–31; John 19:2–3).

The passion narrative begins with the great crisis in Jerusalem, introduced by the oath of the high priests and the scribes and their decision that Jesus must be put to death (Mark 14:1–2; Matthew 26:1–5; Luke 22:1–2). Oath is a *topos* which is also significant in ancient biographies.¹⁹ And the gospels have in common that in the passion narrative, and thus in the last section of the biography, they throttle back the pace of the narrative. This they also have in common with ancient biographies. While in the central section Jesus' activity, lasting perhaps a year, his words and deeds, are told swiftly, and enriched with summaries. Different in the passion narratives: The few days in Jerusalem before Jesus' execution are narrated in great detail and scene for scene (Mark 14–16; Matthew 21–28; Luke 19:29–24:53).

But in the passion narrative also, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke differ in the dimension of the events they narrate, compared to each other and to Mark. Thus in the Gospel according to Mark the story of encounters with the Risen One is found solely in an external prolepsis that is not given

¹⁹ See Frickenschmidt (1997:317–320).

further narrative elaboration (Mark 16:7). Let me say parenthetically that the Gospel according to Mark with stories of appearances by the Risen One, as it appears in most Bible translations, is source-critical secondary, added by late manuscripts (Mark 16:9–20).

The original Gospel according to Mark ends with the scene in which the women disciples find Jesus' tomb empty (Mark 16:1–8). The women encounter 'a young man in a white robe'—an angel. There follows an external prolepsis, in direct speech by the narrative figure of the angel:

Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you (Mark 16:6f).

The angel's speech is *certain about the future*, since in the narrative world of the Bible angels, as messengers of God, are absolutely reliable figures who make definitive prophecies. At the same time, a proleptical saying of Jesus (Mark 14:28) is resumed, namely, that Jesus is going before them to Galilee. This prolepsis, *certain about the future*, is followed by the closing narrative discourse:

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid (Mark 16:6–8).

The ending of the gospel is thus apparently open, were it not for the words of Jesus and the angel, which demand faith on the part of the implicit narratee. A speech in the mouth of the reliable figure of an angel can at the same time be interpreted as an instruction for reading: Go back to the beginning in Galilee; there the story will start again from the beginning. This open end in the Gospel according to Mark is no longer found in the later written Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Here encounters with the Risen One are narrated scenically.

The resurrection itself is, significantly, not narrated in any gospel as a scene; only its effects are told: the finding of the empty tomb and namely in such a way that Jesus appears to his disciples and thus shows himself as one who has risen from the dead. These are, for example, the scenes everyone is familiar with, such as the one with the two disciples on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, who meet a traveler whom they only later—after his disappearance—identify as the risen Jesus (Luke 24:13–35), or the famous scene with the unbelieving Thomas, who must put his hands into Jesus' wounds in order to believe (John 20:24–29).

The *Corpus Lucanum* also goes beyond a scenic narrative of the appearances of the Risen One by reporting a further event. It tells of Jesus' ascension into heaven; in fact, it does so twice, and in very different

versions, once at the end of the gospel (Luke 24:50–53) and again at the beginning of the second book, the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:9–11).²⁰

Narratives of ascension to heaven were also a *topos* found in ancient biographies—only, however, in the case of very important historical figures, such as Caesar and Augustus (Sueton, *Augustus* 100; *Caesar* 88), Moses (Philo, *Vita Mosis* II.291), or Romulus, the founder of the city of Rome (Plutarch, *Romulus* 28).²¹ This also shows the kind of world-historical context in which the Gospel according to Luke places its protagonist.

The *Corpus Lucanum*, as I have said, tells the story of Jesus' ascension twice. The two stories diverge—something that has caused scholars repeatedly to raise the question of the original tradition. But a narrative-critical analysis yields a relatively simple explanation of the differences between the two narratives. The essential differences are clarified by the fact that the ascension story in the Gospel according to Luke has the primary function of leading the readers or hearers out of the story, while in the Acts of the Apostles it serves to lead them into it. The ascension story at the end of the Gospel according to Luke is *silent*:

Then he took them out as far as the outskirts of Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. Now as he blessed them, he withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven (Luke 24:50–51).

The narrator reports Jesus' gesture and blessing. In this way the ascension story in the Gospel according to Luke creates a distance between the figure and the readers or hearers and thus achieves an effect of *closure* as it ends the narrative. Readers and hearers can see the disciples, but they cannot hear them. The narrative is related with external focalization. Jesus' gesture and his disappearing are seen from a distance. The event is viewed from without. In this way the readers and hearers are aided in leaving the narrated world. The lifting of the hands and the report of Jesus' blessing are here an indication of dismissal of the readers and hearers, also, from the story, in the sense of a farewell blessing. In the Acts of the Apostles, by contrast, there is no blessing by Jesus:

As he said this he was lifted up while they looked on, and a cloud took him from their sight. They were still staring into the sky when suddenly two men in white were standing near them and they said, 'Why are you men from Galilee standing here looking into the sky? Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, this same Jesus will come back in the same way as you have seen him go there' (Acts 1:9–11).

²⁰ Cf. Parsons (1987).

²¹ See in detail Frickenschmidt (1997:342–345); Parsons (1987:136 *passim*).

New here are a cloud carrying Jesus out of their sight, the fact of the disciples' no longer seeing Jesus (Acts 1:9), their looking up to heaven, the appearance of two angels (Acts 1:10), and their announcement of Christ's *parousia* (Acts 1:11). In addition, the two narratives differ in their narrative mood. In the Acts of the Apostles it is narrated in dramatic mood, with an internal focalization from the perspective of the disciples. In this way the narratee can follow the event through the eyes of the disciples and is thus brought into the event itself. The internal focalization here has the function, mentioned above, of opening the narrative by drawing the readers and hearers into the story. Here again, as in the annunciation to Mary and the discovery of the empty tomb, the narrator of the gospel according to Luke places the message on the lips of angels, as reliable figures equipped with high authority. With the words 'that Jesus, as he has been taken up from you into heaven, this same Jesus will come back in the same way', the ascension is narrated toward the future. In this way the opening of the narrative points proleptically to the end of the story.²²

3. Conclusion

These are only spotlights on a narratological analysis of the gospels. Let me make three final points.

As regards story: A comparison of the gospels shows that we can observe a progressive tendency within the synoptic gospels to develop a broader and sometimes more detailed scenic style.²³ In classic form criticism there was repeated discussion of the question: What was at the beginning of the tradition, the small form or the extended narrative? One of the most influential exegetes of the twentieth century, Rudolf Bultmann, proposed the thesis that the Markan story of the empty tomb in Mark 16 was a secondary narrative development of the credal formula: 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, [and that] he was buried, [and

²² The prolepsis of the *parousia* of Christ, the Day of the Last Judgement (Act 1:11; 3:20f; 17:31), is external, because it is not told at the end of the story of the Acts of the Apostles. In the *Corpus Lucanum* as a whole we can observe a tendency to tell the story of Jesus from creation to the day of the Last Judgment by means of analepses and prolepses. For example, the genealogy follows Jesus roots to Adam and God (Luke 3:23–38), or Stephen's speech tells the story of Israel from Abraham to the present (Acts 7:2–53).

²³ Thus it is not without reason that the ascension story is added to the *Corpus Lucanum*, or that in the second century apocryphal gospels will give a detailed account of Jesus' descent into hell (Gospel of Nikodemus 17–27; Gospel of Bartholomäus 1:28–35). There is a tendency for the number of narrated events to increase; cf. Klauck (2002:126–128; 133 passim).

that] he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3–4) that is, that narrative development is secondary to the original statement of faith.²⁴ After what I have developed above, this proposal seems to me more persuasive than before. The Apostle Paul handed over the cited credal formula. He wrote one generation earlier than the Gospel according to Mark and he does not mention an empty tomb. Paul continues the credal formula: '[and that] he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time ... Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me' (1 Corinthians 15:5–8). This addresses the question of what was at the beginning of the narrative: it was the experiences of Christians, which were narratively reworked, elaborated, and then were told and retold and expanded.

Evaluation, with regard to the narrating: Within the gospel narratives, that in the *Corpus Lucanum* is more complex than expected. Elsewhere as well, in the gospels the possibilities for narration on various levels, with different degrees of involvement in the narrated events, are fully exploited. The spectrum extends from extradiegetic-heterodiegetic to intradiegetic-homodiegetic narrators, the last of these fully involved in the events.

As regards the narrative: At the level of the narrative itself we can observe a plenitude of narrative phenomena that can be grasped by the methodological instruments of modern narratology. At the level of time and mood we encounter very different phenomena, with differing intensity.²⁵ Only a broadly-conceived and detailed comparison of the gospels can quantify these preliminary observations. In addition, there needs to be a narrative-analytical comparison with ancient biographies. Only then can generally valid conventions for ancient narrative be formulated.

In conclusion, we may say that narrative analysis of texts enriches theology in that it transcends the often dominant and frequently fruitless question of the historicity of the texts. Narrative analysis underscores that these texts are developing narratives that tell the story of Jesus as

²⁴ Bultmann (1921/1995:308–310).

²⁵ Let me also say in advance that the Gospels are written in a simple Greek that cannot compete with high-level Greek. An example of this—relevant for narratological analysis—is the fact that in the New Testament the narrative of words is done primarily through reported speech and in direct speech. Indirect speech is far less frequent than in classical Greek or, most especially, in the Latin authors. In this and other regards the popular or colloquial nature of the language of the Gospels is very evident. Only the Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, that is, the *Corpus Lucanum*, constitute something of an exception; they are written more in an 'educated Greek'. But it is not only the Gospels that have received bad grades from scholars for their language. They share that fate with their companions in the genre, namely certain ancient biographers, for example Cornelius Nepos and Suetonius (cf. Frickenschmidt 1997:32–34).

the Messiah and his effects on the figures of the narrated world. The best thing about this is that the different gospels contain something for different taste, and there is not one authorized narrative, but four of them: the Gospel according to Mark, of Matthew, of Luke and of John. The Gospel according to Mark is certainly the most 'rational' gospel, and is suited to those who do not put much value on an excessive legendary ornamentation.

In addition, in my opinion it is high time that the classic methods of gospel exegesis, which have always been oriented to literary scholarship, be expanded to include narratology in the standard analysis. The time has come, for biblical studies²⁶ as well as for the study of antiquity.²⁷

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²⁶ For New Testament Studies cf. Merenlahti (2002); Marguerat/Bourquin (1999); for Old Testament Studies the narratological analysis is already established, cf. for example Utzschneider/Nitsche (2001:150–186); Bal (1986; 1988a; 1988b).

²⁷ For Classics cf. Schmitz (2002:55–75); de Jong (1989; 1991; 1994; 2001).

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