

INTRODUCTION TO SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

In the Old Testament the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles duplicate the historical narrative yet offer differing perspectives. The same is true of the Gospels. Each is unique in perspective and purpose. Each covers the same 3½ year period of time. Each focuses on one person: Jesus the Messiah. When Scripture repeats itself it does so with the purpose of emphasizing the major significance of the account or teaching being covered. While there were other gospel accounts written it is important for us to realize that God in His sovereignty has preserved these for us.

It is interesting to consider that Acts is also an historical narrative which continues the account and theme of the Gospels. In Acts, as well as the Gospels, the account of Jesus is continued and the message of the Gospel is continually rejected by Israel, the very people to whom the message and promise was originally intended. One applicable theme of the Gospels and Acts, often neglected, is the tracing of the negative reaction to the Gospel and what it teaches about how people respond to God and how God still moves to draw people to Himself.

From Halley (page 517ff):

Four Authors:

- Matthew: tax collector, disciple of Jesus
- Mark: unknown occupation, companion of Peter and Paul, was in Rome with Luke between 61 ad 63 A.D. (Colossians 4:10,14), his gospel contains what he had heard and witnessed with Peter
- Luke: physician, companion of Paul, his gospel contains what he heard Paul preach from one end of the Roman Empire to the other, was in Rome with Mark between 61 and 63 A.D. (Colossians 4:10,14)
- John: a fisherman, was a disciple of Jesus

Four Audiences:

- Matthew: the church in Jerusalem
- Mark: the church in Rome
- Luke: Theophilus (high official in the Roman government?) - same initial recipient as for Acts
- John: the church in Ephesus

Four Perspectives:

- Matthew: writing for Jewish Christians presents, **Jesus the Messiah**, who fulfills the Old Testament prophecies
- Mark: stresses action rather than teaching. He presents **Jesus the Wonderful**, who rejection, suffering, and death were an essential part of His mission
- Luke: presents **Jesus the Son of Man**, who brings salvation by identifying with humanity in all its weakness. He heals the sick and seeks out those rejected by society
- John: shows **Jesus the Son of God**. He begins with Jesus' pre-existence and focuses on the unity between Jesus and God, His Father

English Standard Version: Reading the Gospels and Acts (page 1811):

Though the Gospels are historical writings, they are not always presented in a strict chronology, since some of their scenes are organized topically. For example, Mark 2:1-3:6 reports five controversies in a row that Matthew spreads out over chapters 8-12.

Even though the Gospels each offer varying accounts, they all share the view that Jesus is the promised Messiah, uniquely related to God to bring His promise and salvation. The Synoptics tell the story of Jesus from the earth up, gradually depicting how one can see His unique relationship

with the Father. Mark starts with John the Baptist, while Matthew and Luke start with Jesus' unique birth. John, however, tells the account very much from heaven down. He starts with the preincarnate Word becoming flesh. His presentation of Jesus as Son of God is more direct and explicit. The Synoptics allow the reader to gradually see this idea, much in the manner people come to realize gradually who Jesus is. This difference in how the story unfolds does not represent a conflicting account of Jesus, but simply a distinct perspective on how to highlight who He is and what He has done.

Acts chronicles the expansion of Jesus' newly formed community from Jerusalem to Rome. Here God and Jesus are the key figures, directing the action through the Spirit, with the key human figures being Peter, Stephen, Philip, and Paul. Acts is not a defense of Paul, as many argue, but is a defense of what Paul's ministry to the Gentiles represents: the realization of God's promise to reconcile all people groups to Himself and to one another through Jesus.

THE "SYNOPTIC PROBLEM"

Halley (page 519):

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called Synoptic Gospels (or simply the Synoptics) because they give the same general view (synopsis) of Christ's life and record, to some extent, the same things. The similarities between the Synoptics have led scholars to wonder how the three Gospels came to be so similar in some places, yet so different in others. Did the authors burrow from one another, or did they perhaps use a common source that we no longer have? These and similar questions are commonly referred to as "the synoptic problem."

Some think that Mark's was the earliest of the Gospels, that Matthew expanded on Mark's Gospel, and that Luke made use of both Matthew's and Mark's Gospels. Others think that Matthew wrote first and that Mark put together an abridged edition of Matthew's Gospel.

But it is not necessary to think that Matthew, Mark, and Luke quoted from, or in any way made use of, each other's Gospels. The events of Jesus' life and His sayings were repeated orally for years by the apostles and others and were in common circulation among Christians. They were the substance of the daily preaching of the apostles.

Also, we must not forget that in Jesus' day, people were not exposed to endless streams of words and images from the media and other forms of communication. Stories such as those about Jesus' life were much more likely to get lodged in people's memory, perhaps even down to the exact words.

At the same time, it is likely that, from the beginning, many of these things were written down, some perhaps in a mere fragmentary way, others in more complete form. And when Matthew, Mark, and Luke wrote their Gospels, they chose that which suited their purposes from the fund of knowledge, both oral and written, that was in general circulation among Christians. Besides, Matthew had been an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry, Mark had heard Peter tell the stories again and again, and Luke did a great deal of careful research and must have spoken at length with eyewitnesses.

Markan Priority

Wikipedia:

Markan priority is the hypothesis that the Gospel of Mark was the first written of the three Synoptic Gospels, and that the two other synoptic evangelists, Matthew and Luke, used Mark's Gospel as

one of their sources. The theory of Markan priority is today accepted by the majority of New Testament scholars who also hold that Matthew and Luke used a lost source of Jesus' sayings called Q. Their conclusion is largely based upon an analysis of the language and content relationship between the various books. The understanding that Mark was the first of the canonical gospels and that it served as a source for Matthew and Luke is foundational to modern critical scholarship.

Q Source Document

Wikipedia:

The Q source (also Q document or Q) is a hypothetical written source for the Gospel of Matthew and Gospel of Luke. Q (short for the German *Quelle*, or "source") is defined as the "common" material found in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark. This ancient text supposedly contained thelogia or quotations from Jesus.

Along with Markan priority, Q was identified by 1900, and it is one of the foundations of modern gospel scholarship. B. H. Streeter formulated a widely accepted view of Q: that it was a written document (not an oral tradition) composed in Greek; that almost all of its contents appear in Matthew, in Luke, or in both; and that Luke more often preserves the original order of the text than Matthew. In the two-source hypothesis, Matthew and Luke both used Mark and Q as sources. Some scholars have postulated that Q is actually a plurality of sources, some written and some oral. Others have attempted to determine the stages in which Q was composed.

The existence of Q has sometimes been challenged. The existence of a highly treasured dominical document, being omitted from all the early Church catalogs and going unmentioned by all the fathers of the early Church, remains one of the great conundrums of modern Biblical scholarship. Despite challenges, the two source hypothesis retains wide support. (see handout: Synoptic Source Hypotheses)

The Two-Source Hypothesis

Wikipedia:

The Two-Source Hypothesis is an explanation for the synoptic problem, the pattern of similarities and differences between the three Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It posits that the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke were based on the Gospel of Mark and a lost, hypothetical collection of sayings of Jesus, called Q.

The two-source hypothesis emerged in the 19th century. B. H. Streeter definitively stated the case in 1924, adding that two other sources, referred to as M and L, lie behind the material in Matthew and Luke respectively. The strengths of the hypothesis are its explanatory power regarding the shared and non-shared material in the three gospels; its weaknesses lie in the exceptions to those patterns, and in the hypothetical nature of its proposed collection of Jesus-sayings. Later scholars have advanced numerous elaborations and variations on the basic hypothesis, and even completely alternative hypotheses. Nevertheless, the 2SH commands the support of most biblical critics from all continents and denominations. When Streeter's two additional sources, M and L, are taken into account, this hypothesis is sometimes referred to as the Four Document Hypothesis.

HARMONY OF THE GOSPELS

See Halley chart beginning on page 520 for a comparison of material covered in the Gospels.

RESOURCES

Gromacki, Robert C. *New Testament Survey*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1978

Halley, Henry H. *Halley's Bible Handbook*, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Zondervan Publishing House

Horton, David, General Editor. *The Portable Seminary*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Bethany House Publishers, 2006

Nelson's Quick Reference - Bible Maps And Charts, Nashville, Tennessee; Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1994

While some may wonder at the level of scholasticism displayed by quoting from Wikipedia, I found their explanation to be concise and helpful and so it is bravely included here.

As general resources I've relied on my class notes from various professors at Biola University (especially those of Dr. Curtis Mitchell), Western Conservative Baptist Seminary (WCBS), and Talbot Seminary as well as notes shared with me by Annie Kartoizian.

Additional reference material has come from the study Bibles of the English Standard Version, New American Standard Version, and The New Living Translation.

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