

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The Synoptic Gospels I

Introduction

1. **Definition:** In the 18th century, a German Bible scholar named J.J. Griesbach coined the phrase, “Synoptic Gospels,” based on the Greek word “synopsis,” which means “seeing together.” He chose this word to describe the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, because there are incredible similarities in how they present the life and ministry of Jesus. As D.A. Carson notes, “These similarities, which involve structure, content, and tone, are evident even to the casual reader. They serve not only to bind the first three gospels together but also to separate them from the Gospel of John” (Carson, 77). These three gospels contain many of the same stories and teachings from Jesus’ life and ministry.
 - a. **Example:** Jesus heals a paralytic. For other examples, see chart from Wayne House (p. 5).
 - **Matthew 9:6** – “But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he then said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.”
 - **Mark 2:10-11** – “But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic—“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.”
 - **Luke 5:24** – “But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the man who was paralyzed—“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home.”
2. **Synoptic Problem:** While it’s easy to see that Matthew, Mark, and Luke contain very similar material, it has also been observed that they contain differences (not contradictions). Therefore, these similarities and differences have led scholars to wonder if each of the writers borrowed information from one other (i.e., interdependence), while adding a bit of their own material. For example, was Luke reading Matthew’s work when he was writing his Gospel? If so, did Luke see the need to add additional information that Matthew didn’t include? The idea that some Gospel writers used material from the others is undisputed. Beale writes, “There are simply too many textual similarities (vocabulary, syntactical arrangement of words, order of events, etc.) between the texts” (Beale, 37-38). However, since it doesn’t make logical sense that all three Gospels were written simultaneously, the question becomes, who borrowed from whom? Could one Gospel be the source for the others, including John? Did the writers consult other written sources that we no longer have? In the eighteenth century, Griesbach coined the phrase “the synoptic problem” to describe the difficulty of tracking how and where the Gospel writers sourced their information. This issue has actually been studied since the

second century, where Irenaeus of Lyons attempted to account for the unity and diversity represented in the four Gospels, what's called, "the harmony of the gospels" (Kruger, 581).

a. **Theories of Composition**

- **Augustinian Hypothesis:** In the fourth century, Augustine (AD 354-430) proposed that Mark used Matthew, and Luke used both of them. In academic circles, this hypothesis is known as "Markan Priority." A strong piece of evidence is that Mark is the shortest work, meaning that the others sought to add more to what was previously written. When it comes to the order of events, Matthew and Luke never disagree with Mark, showing that Mark was guiding them. Also, Mark uses awkward and primitive grammar (Beale, 39). Thus, Markan priority is the most popular view among New Testament scholars.
- **Two-Gospel Hypothesis:** In the eighteenth century, Griesbach proposed a "Two-Gospel" hypothesis. He suggested that Augustine was wrong, and that Matthew was the earliest. Luke borrowed from Matthew, and Mark borrowed from both of them. In academic circles, this hypothesis is known as "Matthean priority." If the best scholars believe Mark was first, why is Matthew displayed first in Scripture? Possibly because Matthew was one of the twelve disciples, and he begins his Gospel with the earliest material, a genealogy. In fact, the "Western tradition" among Latin manuscripts uses the order: Matthew-John-Luke-Mark, giving prominence to the two apostles.
- **Two-Source Hypothesis:** In the nineteenth century, C.H. Weisse and H. J. Holtzmann theorized that Mark was first, and that Matthew and Luke utilized another source called "Q." The "Q" source (German, "die Quelle" means "the source") was thought to be an early written account of Jesus' teachings, sayings, and activities, mainly based on oral tradition and eye-witness testimony. We might picture Q as a collection of informal journal entries. According to Carson, "The two-source theory has been appropriately dethroned from the status of being an 'assured result of scholarship.' Nevertheless, properly nuanced, it remains the best general explanation of the data" (Carson, 95).
- **Four-Source Hypothesis:** In 1940, B.H. Streeter theorized the existence of two other sources: M (material particular to Matthew); L (material particular to Luke). Therefore, the earliest sources were Mark, Q, M, and L. However, scholars see little evidence for actual documents called M and L. Most likely, such material came from Matthew and Luke's own research.

- b. **Conclusion:** While many theories exist as to how the Gospels were composed, the bottom line is that God ordained for these four Gospels to be written and accepted by the early church and preserved throughout history as authentic Christian Scripture.

The Gospel According to Matthew

1. **Authorship:** The longstanding tradition is that the Gospel of Matthew was written by the apostle Matthew (Levi). According to Scripture, Matthew was a Jewish tax collector working for the Roman Empire. Therefore, even though he was a Jew, he was hated and despised for over-taxing his fellow

countrymen and making lavish profits, all the while being protected by the Romans. However, on a particular occasion, Jesus saw Matthew "sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him" (Matt. 9:9). From that point forward, Matthew was a faithful follower of Jesus and one of the twelve disciples. According to Goodspeed, the words of Matthew 13:52 – "*Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.*" – serves as an autobiographical note, as Matthew is possibly pointing to the sort of notetaking or secretarial skills of his trade that he is now using to serve Jesus. Therefore, just as an accountant majors on accuracy, order, and detail, so does Matthew in writing his Gospel (Kruger, 30). As a means of authenticating Matthew's authorship, he includes "a unique emphasis on taxation (Matt. 9:9; 10:3; 17:24-27)" suggesting that its author was familiar with tax trade" (Beale, 40). Furthermore, early church fathers and ancient writings attribute this Gospel to the apostle Matthew, including the *Didache*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, Ignatius, Papias, Irenaeus, Origen, and Eusebius. Some believe that Matthew wrote from Antioch, a Greek city, because the Gospel is written in the Greek language rather than Hebrew. However, it has also been noted that since Matthew contains several untranslated Aramaic phrases (e.g., 27:46, "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*"), the Gospel could have been written completely in Aramaic and shortly thereafter translated into Greek.

2. **Date:** Most conservative scholars believe that Matthew was written in the AD 60s. Since Matthew records Jesus' prophetic words concerning the future destruction of the temple (24:1-22), it would reason that the Gospel was written prior to AD 70. Another clue is how Matthew includes certain temple practices that were apparently in operation as he wrote (e.g., leaving your gift at the altar, paying the temple tax, swearing by the altar, etc.) (Kruger, 31).
3. **Audience:** Scholars have noted how Matthew's Gospel is filled with references to Judaism, indicating that it was primarily written to Jews. Beginning with a messianic genealogy, it continues to reference themes, words, and stories from the Old Testament, which a non-Jewish audience would find difficult to relate. For example, in the birth narrative, Matthew writes, "*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel,' (which means, God with us)*" (1:22-23). Also, Matthew continues to point out Old Testament prophecies that Jesus fulfilled.

In the third century, Origen described Matthew and his Gospel by saying, "Once a tax collector, but later an apostle of Jesus Christ; he published it for those who came to faith from Judaism" (Kruger, 30). Furthermore, Matthew doesn't take time to explain Jewish customs (e.g., ceremonial cleansings, Passover, etc.), which indicates his readers understood these activities.

4. **Purposes:** According to Kruger, Matthew's purpose is threefold – (1) To prove that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah, the fulfillment of God's promise in the Old Testament to redeem sinners by sending a unique Savior from Israel; (2) To show that Jesus brings forgiveness and heart renewal to those who believe, enabling them to understand and keep the Law; (3) To show how Jesus assembled a community of believers (i.e., the church) and commissioned them to take the gospel to the nations, all through his continued presence and power as he reigns over creation (Kruger, 32).
5. **Structure**

- a. **Five Blocks of Teaching:** Following the infancy narratives and call to ministry, it's been noted that Matthew organizes his material in five specific sections: (1) The Sermon on the Mount, 5-7; Missionary Discourse, 10; Parable Discourse, 13; Church Discourse, 18; and Eschatological Discourse, 24-25. At the end of each of these five sections, Matthew records a similar phrase, "*When Jesus finished these sayings (7:28)...instructions (11:1)...parables (13:53)...sayings (19:1)...sayings (26:1).*" (Guthrie, 39-40). The Gospel closes with Jesus' death, burial, resurrection, commission, and ascension, proving that he is the suffering servant of Israel (Isa. 53), and is now reigning as Savior and Lord (Dan 7). Some have suggested that this five-fold structure reflects the Pentateuch, a "new law" as it were.

6. Message and Theology

- a. **Jesus – God with Us:** Not only does Matthew begin with a genealogy to show Jesus' messianic lineage through Abraham and David, but Kidd notes that the first verse literally reads, "*A book of genesis,*" indicating that God has arrived to begin a new start with his people through Jesus (Kruger, 30). Fulfilling God's prophecy to Abraham (Gen. 12), the entire world will be blessed through his messianic descendent, Jesus. Mary's virgin conception is the means for allowing Jesus to be born as God incarnate in human flesh, which is why Jesus is given the name Immanuel, "*God with us*" (1:23). As God in human flesh, Jesus would live a perfect life and die a sacrificial death, bringing salvation to those who believe.
- b. **Jesus – Prophet, Priest, and King:** Matthew reveals how Jesus is the ultimate prophet, priest, and king, the three Old Testament offices that brought people to God and instituted his rule over them. These themes are outlined in Matthew 12.
- **Priest:** In 12:6, Jesus is "*greater than the temple,*" indicating that he is the ultimate priest serving in the temple, where he offers his own "blood of the covenant...for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28), becoming the person/place where people meet with God.
 - **Prophet:** In 12:41, Jesus states that "*something greater than Jonah is here,*" indicating that he is the ultimate prophet, the One who is proclaiming God's truth and calling for the nations to repent and be saved.
 - **King:** In 12:42, Jesus declares, "*something greater than Solomon is here,*" indicating that he is the true King of Kings, the One who will lead and rule over God's people – now and forever. Jesus describes his second coming as one of "*glory,*" where he will "*sit on his glorious throne*" (25:31). Jesus is honored as king by the magi (2:1-12), and teaches throughout the Gospel about the Kingdom of God, where he rules. His miracles verify that he controls all things, and has overcome evil, sin, and death.
- c. **Jesus – the True Israel:** Although Israel has failed to obey God and be a light to the nations, Jesus is the "true Israel," the One God will use to save the world. Such truth is illustrated in Jesus's exile from Egypt (2:13-15); Jesus crossing the Jordan at his baptism (3:13-17); Jesus resisting three temptations (4:1-11).

Wayne House, "Chronological and Background Charts of the New Testament," p. 93.

Synoptic Parallels

	MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE	JOHN
Preaching of John the Baptist	3:1-2	1:1-8	3:1-20	1:19-28
Baptism of Jesus	3:13-17	1:9-11	3:21-22	
Temptation	4:1-11	1:12-13	4:1-13	
Beginning of Galilee ministry	4:12-17	1:14-15	4:14-15	
Rejection at Nazareth	13:53-58	6:1-6	4:16-30	
Healing of Peter's mother-in-law and others	8:14-17	1:29-34	4:38-41	
Cleansing of a leper	8:1-4	1:40-45	5:12-16	
Healing of the paralytic	9:1-8	2:1-12	5:17-26	
Calling of Levi	9:9-13	2:13-17	5:27-32	
Fasting	9:14-17	2:18-22	5:33-39	
Grain plucking on the Sabbath	12:1-8	2:23-28	6:1-5	
Healing of withered hand	12:9-14	3:1-6	6:6-11	
Choosing of the Twelve	10:1-4	3:13-19	6:12-16	
Parable of the sower	13:1-23	4:1-20	8:4-15	
Jesus' true family	12:46-50	3:31-35	8:19-21	
Calming of a storm	8:23-27	4:35-41	8:22-25	
Healing of demon-possessed man	8:28-34	5:1-20	8:26-39	
Jairus's daughter and woman with hemorrhage	9:18-26	5:21-43	8:40-56	
The Twelve sent out	10:5-15	6:7-13	9:1-6	
John the Baptist beheaded	14:1-12	6:14-29	9:7-9	
Five thousand fed	14:13-21	6:30-44	9:10-17	6:1-14
Peter's confession	16:13-19	8:27-29	9:18-20	
Jesus' foretelling of death and resurrection	16:20-28	8:30-9:1	9:21-27	
Transfiguration	17:1-8	9:2-8	9:28-36	
Casting out of unclean spirit	17:14-18	9:14-27	9:37-43	
Second Prediction of death and resurrection	17:22-23	9:30-32	9:43-45	
"Who is greatest?"	18:1-5	9:33-37	9:46-48	
Jesus and Beelzebub	12:22-30	3:20-27	11:14-23	
Demand for a sign	12:38-42	8:11-12	11:29-32	
Parable of the mustard seed	13:31-32	4:30-32	13:18-19	
Blessing of little children	19:13-15	10:13-16	18:15-17	
Rich young ruler	19:16-30	10:17-31	18:18-30	
Third Prediction of death and resurrection	20:17-19	10:32-34	18:31-34	
Healing of blind Bartimaeus (and another)	20:29-34	10:46-52	18:35-42	
THE FINAL WEEK				
Triumphal entry into Jerusalem	21:1-11	11:1-11	19:28-40	12:12-19
"By what authority . . .?"	21:23-27	11:27-33	20:1-8	
Vineyard and tenants	21:33-46	12:1-12	20:9-19	
"Render to Caesar"	22:15-22	12:13-17	20:20-26	
The resurrection	22:23-33	12:18-27	20:27-40	
David's son	22:41-46	12:35-37	20:41-44	
Sermon on the last days	24:1-36	13:1-32	21:5-33	
Passover plot	26:1-5, 14-16	14:1-2, 10-11	22:1-6	
Preparing of Passover	26:17-20	14:12-17	22:7-14	
Foretelling of betrayal	26:21-25	14:18-21	22:21-23	13:21-30
The Lord's Supper	26:26-30	14:22-26	22:14-20	
Prediction of Peter's denial	26:31-35	14:27-31	22:31-34	13:36-38
Gethsemane	26:36-46	14:32-42	22:39-46	
Arrest of Jesus	26:47-56	14:43-50	22:47-53	18:3-12
Sanhedrin (Peter's denial)	26:57-75	14:53-72	22:54-71	18:13-27
Jesus before Pilate	27:1, 2, 11-14	15:1-5	23:1-5	18:28-38
Sentencing of Jesus	27:15-26	15:6-15	23:17-25	18:39-19:16
Crucifixion, Death, Burial	27:32-61	15:21-47	23:26-56	19:27-42
Resurrection	28:1-8	16:1-8	24:1-12	20:1-10