

The Gospels and the Synoptic Problem

The Literary Relationship of Matthew, Mark, and Luke

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Introduction

The Synoptic Problem is not really a “problem” in the normal sense of the term. It is simply a way to refer to questions and possible explanations about the literary relationships between the first three New Testament Gospels. The word “synoptic” means “with the same eye” or “seeing together.” Matthew, Mark, and Luke present the basic story of Jesus in similar ways, including the order of the material, the stories told, the sayings of Jesus, even using many of the same words in parallel accounts. For this reason they are called the Synoptic Gospels. On the other hand, while the Gospel of John sometimes resembles the other three Gospels, it tells the story of Jesus in significantly different ways, including a different order of events, different perspectives and points of emphasis, and with its own unique vocabulary and style. Those differences can be understood in terms other than literary relationships between the Gospels, which is the reason John is not included in the Synoptic Problem.

To someone who has never studied the Gospels closely, or who has assumed certain logically constructed theories about the nature of Scripture apart from looking at the actual biblical text (*e.g.*, the absolute inerrancy of Scripture), questions about the literary relationship between the Gospels may be unnerving at first. It is easy simply to reject them as so much scholarly speculation and academic conjecture. Yet, these questions arise from the biblical text itself, questions obvious to most anyone who takes the time to examine the biblical text closely. If we are honestly to hear and understand Scripture on its own terms, we will have to come to terms with this issue in ways that go beyond simply denying that there is any issue because of a certain theology or ideology about Scripture.

On the other hand, we need honestly to concede at the beginning that there is no final answer to this “problem.” There are various perspectives, hypotheses, and theories based on the evidence of the biblical text as well as what we know about the process of writing. But there is not a “correct” answer. That simply suggests that while we need to take this issue seriously as part of what we see in the biblical text as we have it, it is not a matter of faith one way or the other. Rather, it is simply being honest with the biblical text and not trying to make it say or be what it is not. It is also acknowledging that we do not have to have all of the answers to our logical questions before we can accept the Bible as Scripture for the Church. The issue is not a matter of believing or not believing the Bible; it is a matter of believing, and then seeking to understand as best we can that which we believe (“faith seeking understanding”).

So, one might ask why we should bother with the issue at all if there is no “correct” solution to a “problem” that is not an essential matter of Christian Faith. Here we return to a simple principle that grew out of the Protestant reformation, the principle of *sola scriptura*, “only Scripture.” This principle, as one of the cornerstones of the Reformation, held that Scripture should be the first and final authority for the faith and practice of the Church, and that it should be allowed to stand in judgement over all human creeds, doctrines, and traditions.

As that principle worked out in the history of the church in the centuries following the Reformation, it meant a rigorous honesty with how Scripture was studied. The goal was to hear the Bible as Scripture for the church, neither in isolation from the traditions of the Faith nor captive to them. This allowed the development of critical methodologies for the investigation of Scripture that included a careful and detailed reading of the biblical texts for what they actually said apart from the doctrines that told people what they should mean. This did not deny the authority of the Bible as the inspired word of God. In fact, it affirmed it

even more strongly. But it did allow the biblical text to be seen as something more than a repository of timeless and unchanging truths written by the finger of God.

While not always as successful in objectivity as envisioned, these critical methods allowed the tremendous diversity of the biblical text to emerge, a diversity that had been masked for many centuries by dogmatic and doctrinal approaches that sought to harmonize any differences in the biblical text. The rich texture of the biblical traditions emerged as the witness of various communities of faith over many centuries to God's self-revelation in their history came to light (see [Revelation and Inspiration of Scripture](#)). Like an elegant tapestry, the Bible could be viewed on a broad scale as a marvelous record of God's dealing with humanity, the story of God in striking panorama. Yet, on closer inspection, the tremendous complexity of the fabric and the threads that created the larger picture could now be seen. Biblical study then turned to the careful examination of these strands as a way to help understand the larger picture.

So, an understanding of the "synoptic problem" is a crucial first step in any detailed study of the Gospels and their testimony to Jesus the Christ, simply because it allows us to begin with the witness of the biblical text itself. That will not assure a student of the New Testament that everything s/he concludes will be unbiased and objective. But it will encourage us to listen to the text, to take it seriously even in all its diversity, and will constantly warn us against a too easy and perhaps unconscious manipulation of Scripture for any particular theological agenda.

The "Problem"

The Synoptic Gospels share a great deal of material and features. There are differences between them in many areas, some more pronounced than others. Yet, all the questions about the differences arise precisely because of the otherwise close parallels between the Synoptics. While we might be able to answer some of these questions about differences as a matter of context, culture, personality, or purpose, the parallels are not as easily explained. The questions that arise about the literary relationships between the Synoptic Gospels concern both the differences as well as the similarities, although the similarities really focus the questions. So, the Synoptic Problem is the way that serious students of the Gospels attempt to understand the origins and interrelationships of the first three Gospels that will explain both the similarities and the differences between them.

There are places where the Synoptic Gospels are closely parallel in their recounting of incidents from the life of Jesus. For example, in the account of the calling of Levi (Matthew):

Matthew (9:9-13)	Mark (2:13-17)	Luke (5:27-32)
	13 Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them.	27 After this he went out
9 As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.	14 As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.	and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." 28 And he got up, left everything, and followed him.
10 And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples.	15 And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples--for there were many who followed him.	29 Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them.
11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"	16 When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"	30 The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"
12 But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.	17 When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick;	31 Jesus answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick;
13 Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'		

For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners. “	I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”	32 I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.
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How can we explain these very close parallels between the synoptic Gospels, especially considering that the Gospels were likely written in different places at different times? Were they using a common written source or a shared tradition in their writing? Did there exist a record of Jesus that was earlier than the Gospels that all the writers used in producing their own Gospel? If so, why were the Gospels themselves written if there already existed an earlier account? If either written sources or oral tradition were used in the compilation of the Gospels, were those sources reliable? Would the sources have to be inspired in order for the Gospels to be inspired? And exactly how were the sources used? Were the Gospel writers simply trying faithfully to reproduce those sources? Or did the Gospel writers feel free to interpret and apply the Jesus traditions as they wrote their Gospels? These are the questions that lie at the heart of the Synoptic Problem.

Yet, as similar as they are, there are still differences between the Gospels on many levels. Even in these very similar passages, there are minor differences of word order, words used, syntax and style of writing, and grammatical variations. There are also differences in other details between the Gospels, some of which can be seen above. Sometimes names are included or omitted, or are given in different forms, as in the illustration above where Matthew is called Levi in Mark and Luke. Sometimes additional details are added in one account, such as the quotation from Hosea added in Matthew’s version above (v. 13). Sometimes a saying of Jesus is recorded in Aramaic, while the parallel passages record it in Hebrew, for example in Jesus’ quotation of Psalm 22:1 from the cross, recorded in Aramaic in Mark (15:34) but in Hebrew in Matthew (27:46). Sometimes different but synonymous Greek words are used in an otherwise parallel passage. In most ways, these variations do not change much about the narrative. Yet, they are significant enough that they are not easily ignored.

Also there are differences in minor historical details. For example, the well-known story of the healing of the blind man Bartimaeus contains several such differences.

Matthew (20:29-34)	Mark (10:46-52)	Luke (18:35-43)
	46 They came to Jericho.	35 As he approached Jericho,
29 As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him.	As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho,	
30 There were two blind men sitting by the roadside.	Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside	a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.
When they heard that Jesus was passing by,	47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth,	36 When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening. 37 They told him, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.”
they shouted, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!”	he began to shout out and say “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”	38 Then he shouted, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”
31 The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet; but they shouted even more loudly, “Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!”	48 Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”	39 Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”
32 Jesus stood still and called them,	49 Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.”	40 Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him;
	And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” 50 So throwing off his cloak,	
	he sprang up and came to Jesus.	and when he came near,
saying, “What do you want me to do for you?”	51 Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?”	he asked him, 41 “What do you want me to do for you?”
33 They said to him, “Lord, let our eyes be opened.”	The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.”	He said, “Lord, let me see again.”
34 Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes	52 Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.”	42 Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.”
Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.	Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.	43 Immediately he regained his sight and followed him
		glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, praised God.

In Matthew and Mark, the incident happens as Jesus and the disciples were leaving Jericho (Matt. 20:29, Mk 10:46), while in Luke as they were entering the town (Lk. 18:35). In Matthew there are two unnamed blind men (20:30), in Luke a single unnamed blind man (18:35), while in Mark he is called Bartimaeus son of Timaues (10:46). In all three accounts the crowd is hostile to the blind man, but Mark tells us that some of the crowd encouraged him to respond to Jesus (10:49). In Matthew, Jesus simply calls to the two men, while in Mark and Luke he has the blind man brought to him. Other differences can be noted as well.

Again, while these differences can be understood in terms of writings styles or different purposes of telling the story within the Gospels, the fact that they are such variations on an incident reported in very similar ways in the Synoptics raises the question of the relationship between the accounts.

Other differences are even more substantial, although still variations of what seems like a common tradition. While the basic order of events is similar in the Synoptics, some sayings of Jesus occur in different settings in the various Gospels. For example, Matthew presents many of Jesus' sayings in a large block of teaching material delivered while he is seated on a mountain (the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5:1-7:27): "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying" However, many of these same sayings are scattered throughout the other two Gospels. Luke has a much shorter version of these collected sayings (Lk. 6:17-49), but the locale in which they are placed is different: "He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon." Because of the location, Luke's version of Jesus' teachings is known as the Sermon on the Plain.

Other parables, teachings, or particular events in the Gospels are placed at different points in the narrative or in different literary contexts (see [The Time of the Crucifixion](#)). For example, Luke places Jesus' rejection at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth as one of the first events of his public ministry (Lk 4:16-30). However, Mark places it much later, about halfway through his Galilean ministry (Mark 6:1-6). Mark places Jesus' calling of the disciples before his Capernaum preaching (Mark 1:16-20), while Luke places it after (Lk 5:1-11).

These are not isolated examples. A careful examination of the structure of the Synoptic Gospels reveals that even though they follow a similar structure of events (compared to John), there are differences, sometimes substantial differences, in the order in which material is placed. For example, the first five chapters of Mark contain material that is also recounted in Matthew and Luke. While Luke roughly follows the order of Mark, Matthew organizes that material in significantly different ways.

Mark	Matthew	Luke
1:21-45	7:28-8:15	4:31-5:16
2:1-22	9:1-17	5:17-39
2:23-3:12	12:1-16	6:1-6:11, 17-19
3:13-19	10:1-4	6:12-16
3:20-35	12:22-37	6:43-45
4:1-34	13:1-34	8:4-18
4:35-5:20	8:18-34	8:22-39
5:21-43	9:18-26	8:40-56

In some passages, the difference between the various Gospels is compounded. For example, Matthew and Luke give us different versions of the Lord's Prayer, while Mark does not even record the prayer. Even within the same book there are a variety of different readings among various manuscripts (variant readings added in some manuscripts are indicated in red/brackets.)

Matthew 6:9-13	Luke 11:2-4
	He said to them,
"Pray then in this way:	"When you pray, say:
Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.	Father [in heaven], hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.
	[Your Holy Spirit come upon us and cleanse us.]
Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.	[Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.]
Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.	Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,	And do not bring us to the time of trial."
but rescue us from the evil one.	[but rescue us from the evil one.]
[For the Kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours forever. Amen.]	

Besides the obvious difference between the prayers, we can also note the different contexts in which they are presented in the two Gospels. Matthew includes the prayer in the concluding section of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus taught the people about practical piety, how the people should live out a life of commitment to God. Yet Luke sets the prayer in a narrative context in which the disciples see Jesus praying and ask him to teach them to pray.

There are far more significant differences in many parallel accounts. These amount to more than just differences in words, but differences in how the story is used, details included or omitted, how a passage is related to the Old Testament, even in how the event itself is presented or how the writers understood the event. Take, for example, the report of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law and the subsequent report about Jesus' healing miracles. Even apart from the differences in the narrative context in which the various writers place the stories, or where they place the stories in the chronology of Jesus' ministry, there are significant differences between the accounts.

Matthew 8:14-17	Mark 1:29-34	Luke 4:38-41
	As soon as they left the synagogue,	After leaving the synagogue
When Jesus entered Peter's house,	they entered the house of Simon and	he entered Simon's house.
	Andrew, with James and John.	
he saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever;	Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever,	Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever,
	and they told him about her at once.	and they asked him about her.
he touched her hand, and the fever left her,	He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her,	Then he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her.
and she got up and began to serve him.	and she began to serve them.	Immediately she got up and began to serve them.
That evening they brought to him	That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick	As the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him;
many who were possessed with demons;	or possessed with demons.	
and he cast out the spirits with a word,	[and cast out many demons;	[Demons also came out of many, shouting, "You are the Son of God!"
	and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.]	But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Messiah.]
	And the whole city was gathered around the door.	
and cured all who were sick.	And he cured many who were sick with various diseases,	and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them.
This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases."		
	and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.	Demons also came out of many, shouting, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Messiah.

And, of course, there are the sections of each of the Synoptic Gospels that do not have parallels in the other Gospels and are unique to that Gospel, or are recorded in only one other Gospel. For example, the accounts of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke are strikingly different. Luke includes an extended description of the events leading up to the birth, including the activities of Mary and the parents of John, as well as the later narratives about the visit of the shepherds, the speeches of Anna and Simeon, and the visit of the young boy Jesus to the Temple. None of these are included in Matthew or Mark. Mathew includes the visit of the Magi and the flight into Egypt that the other accounts omit, while Mark simply omits any narratives about Jesus' birth.

Are these differences a matter of the Gospel writers simply trying to clarify certain words or to interpret the meaning more clearly? Are they writing to different audiences and trying to adapt a common tradition into local contexts in different geographical regions? Are they writing for different cultural groups within the same area, and so feel the need or necessity to adapt the story of Jesus into that cultural context to communicate its message?

Are they working with only a rough outline of the Gospel traditions, perhaps an oral tradition, and filling in details to tell the story? Were there slightly different versions and traditions about Jesus that were circulating in the early church in different areas? If so, how do we know which one is accurate? Or is that kind of historical accuracy even important? If they are working with a common tradition, do the changes they make significantly alter the tradition in any way? If the writers changed the tradition, is it possible that it has been corrupted by other influences (the *Gospel of Thomas* is a good example of the Jesus tradition adapted in ways that significantly alter it)? How do we see the differences in terms of inspiration and the authority of Scripture?

The Nature of the Gospels

There are a range of opinions and suggestions offered to explain the literary relationship of the Synoptic Gospels that addresses these questions. But even before we examine these proposals, perhaps it would be helpful to consider an even more fundamental issue, that of the very nature of the Gospels as Scripture in light of the history of their formation.

Consideration of how the Gospels came to be and some of the implications of that process for understanding the nature of the Gospels as literature of the early church will provide some basis to evaluate the various proposals to address the Synoptic "problem." This in no way raises questions about the inspiration or authority of the Gospels as Scripture for the Church. It only asks that we look at the Gospels from the perspective of the history of their formation as well as their theology. While there are other methodological issues that are relevant here, such as the compilation, redaction, and canonization of the Gospels, here we will only survey very briefly the general outlines of the Gospels' formation.

Most biblical scholars recognize at least a three-stage process in the development of the Gospels: the events themselves, reports or testimonies about the events either oral or written, and the collection of various reports (the traditions) into biblical books. The same process can be applied to most other biblical writings. The book of Amos, for example, can be seen rather easily in this perspective. In the case of much of the Old Testament including the prophets there is a fourth stage of development. Because of the long period of time involved, and the way the traditions were used in the community over that span of time, the material could be adapted into later historical contexts, even to the point of adding later material to the "original" writing (see [JEDP: Sources in the Pentateuch](#)). For example, the preaching of Amos to the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the Assyrian crisis of the eighth century BC was preserved in a tradition that could be reinterpreted and reapplied in the Southern Kingdom of Judah in the sixth century context of the Babylonian era (the post-exilic additions at the end of the book, Am. 9:11-15).

This fourth stage of development of Old Testament traditions, the re-application of traditions into new historical contexts, is different in the Gospels because of the shorter span of time involved. Yet this dimension corresponds to the issues raised in discussing the Synoptic Problem. It reveals a dynamic and

living tradition that could grow and be adapted into different historical contexts to address new needs within the community (see [Revelation and Inspiration of Scripture](#)). It was only later that these writings of both Testaments reached a fixed and unchanging form. This dynamic nature of a living tradition becomes the basis to understand the diversity of the Gospels.

1) The first stage in the formation of the Gospels was the life and teachings of Jesus (or of Amos). He traveled throughout the countryside speaking, teaching, performing miracles, and healing people. These events became the basis for what would later become the Gospels. We can note here that, contrary to the myths of the ancient Near Eastern religions or of the Greeks and Romans and in keeping with the faith confessions of the Old Testament, the Gospels are grounded in historical event rather than in cosmic stories about the gods (see [The Enuma Elish: The Babylonian Creation Myth](#)). This does not mean that the Gospels must be seen simply as historical data, or that their primary function was to record history. But it does mean that they are grounded in human history. From the perspective of faith confession, we would say that they are grounded in God's self-revelation in human history.

And here we must take seriously the fact that Jesus lived in a certain time and place, in a certain cultural and social context, and spoke a certain language. It is sometimes easy to forget across 2,000 years of Christian history that Jesus was not a Christian! He was a first century Jew, who most likely spoke Aramaic, could read Hebrew, and perhaps also knew Greek. He acted in accordance with first century ideas and customs, and taught in terms that first century people could understand. We are sometimes so concerned with seeing Jesus as the Christ, as the Incarnate Son of God that we forget the historical nature of the Incarnation. Of course, Jesus was all of that. But by definition, the Incarnation means that Jesus was a real human being who lived and died in real human history. What he did and taught was in the context of the time in which he lived. That does not make it irrelevant, or we would have no New Testament at all. But we must keep that historical dimension in mind as we study the Gospels.

2. In the course of Jesus' actions and travels, he attracted followers, including the twelve handpicked men who would become the Disciples and later Apostles. They listened and watched as he taught. In several places, the Gospels tell us that people spread the news of Jesus' teaching and action (Mk 3:7-8, 5:19-20, 7:36; Lk 5:15, etc.).

Soon after Jesus' death and resurrection, the Disciples and others began to witness of the resurrection. Early in the book of Acts, we read of the Apostles preaching to large crowds about Jesus (Acts 2:14-26), and that message was carried throughout the Roman world (Acts 1:8, 8:4, 11:19-20, etc.). So the second stage of Gospel formation was a Gospel tradition that grew out of the testimony and preaching of the followers of Jesus, as well as the practices of the church such as Eucharist and worship that grew out of that preaching. This tradition may have been oral, or written, or a combination of both. In any case, this tradition was the main vehicle for the Gospel message in the 30 or so years after the death of Jesus but before the actual writing of the Gospels.

And again here we need to remember the context of the message. With our modern concern with details, with data, with direct quotation, we sometimes expect the Gospel message to be repeated word for word just as Jesus spoke it. From our preoccupation with the written word, and now with video recording, we sometimes assume that Jesus' words were transcribed as he spoke them, and that people recorded his actions as if they were writing a script for an epic film of his life.

While there is no evidence of it in Scripture, it is entirely possible that written records or notes of Jesus' teaching were kept. Yet, here we need to do some reflection on the nature of the preaching of the Apostles. Their goal was not simply to preserve the details of Jesus life or to transcribe his sermons. They were far more concerned with proclaiming the significance of the events surrounding Jesus as a new revelatory act of God in human history. And that proclamation was primarily concerned with calling people to respond to that new revelation. This is why the apostolic preaching is referred to as the *kerygma* (Greek, "preaching"), the heart of Gospel message.

This has several implications in how we think about the Apostles' message and the emerging Gospel tradition. First, a concern with the significance of the coming of Jesus implies that they reflected on the events and teachings of Jesus in light, not only of past history, but of what they understood to be God's unfolding work in the world in light of the emerging church. Of course, we would want to say that God helped them understand the significance of Jesus' coming through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But that does not alter the fact that their preaching was aimed at communicating that significance. There is some indication that even within the Gospels this reflection on the meaning of Jesus' life continued throughout the first century.

For example, it is readily recognized by almost all biblical students that the Gospel of John was the last of the Gospels written, toward the end of the first century (c. AD 90). As would be expected, John presents the most deliberately reflective theological perspective of all the Gospels. If this is obvious in John, it is reasonable to conclude that the same process of reflecting on Jesus' teaching in terms of theological implication and communication was already underway in the Synoptics as well, most of which were written in the last half of the first century some 30 to 50 years after Jesus' life (Mark, c. 60, Matthew and Luke c. 70-80; by contrast, the Pauline Epistles were likely all written c. 50-60).

Second, the Apostles had to communicate that message in language and terms that the people to whom they were speaking would understand. There were the basic issues of language. If we assume that Jesus spoke Aramaic, then the message had to be translated into Greek for Hellenistic Jews and Greeks, or Coptic for Egyptians. And that is more than a trivial matter, as anyone who has studied a foreign language can attest. Words in any language have meaning against a whole cultural and conceptual background. So it is not just a matter of finding equivalent words; the concepts that the words represent must be translated as well. That raises tremendous potential for misunderstanding (something we should always keep in mind when we read the biblical text in our own language and then assume that the message is clear because the words have obvious meaning to us!). The misunderstanding was not as great a danger for the Apostles since they were most likely both bilingual and bicultural. That was a necessity of the times and cultures in which they lived, just as it is for most Europeans or Asians today. But it remains a problem for most of us in the modern world since we are far removed both in time and place from the origins of the Gospel tradition.

But there were also the larger issues of cultural background. Even in the Gospels, there are places where the writers stop and explain Jewish customs (e.g., Mk 7:3), an indication that the people to whom they were writing were not familiar with them. Because of their cultural and religious background, Jews would need to hear the message in one way, while Greeks with different interests, background, and concerns would need to hear it in a different way. Even among Jews, traditional Palestinian Jews most likely needed to hear it in different terms than Hellenistic Jews (Jews who had adopted Greek culture).

All this simply suggests a diversity of the Gospel tradition even before it was ever written down. The demands of the growing and spreading church encouraged, not a change in the message itself, but certainly in how it was communicated. Even if there were "original" written records or notes of Jesus' preaching, or early written records of the *kerygma* of the Apostles, the reality of how that message was proclaimed was also a function of both the ongoing theological reflection of the early church as well as the practical demands of proclamation to widely scattered and diverse first century audiences.

3. The third stage of Gospel formation was the actual writing of the biblical texts. Most of what was noted above in the development of the Gospel tradition can also be applied to the writing of the Gospels. Just as the Apostles had to speak to certain audiences in their preaching and practice of worship, so also the Gospel writers had to translate the *kerygma* into the cultural and historical context of the audience for which it was written. While we do not know for certain who these audiences were or their location, the very fact that there were a variety of Gospels written in the first and early second centuries suggests that the Gospel message was being preserved in various locations (see [The Gospel of Thomas](#)).

Here also we need to consider the likelihood suggested above that the Gospels writers did not inherit a "master" copy of the Jesus tradition. Instead, they were heirs to a variety of ways that the Gospel message

had been proclaimed for 30 or 40 to as much as 60 years before they wrote. The preface to Luke's Gospel confirms that at least this writer was aware of the diversity of the tradition even in written form (Lk. 1:1-4):

1 Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

This reveals that the writer of Luke's Gospel was aware of other Gospel writings (whether or not these were the canonical Gospels that we now have), that he was familiar with a larger Jesus tradition, and that he chose to write to a certain audience for a particular purpose.

While we might want to assume other things from this statement, we might notice what he does not say. He does not define exactly what was "handed on to us." The sentence construction tells us that "events" is the referent for the statement. However, that does not mean that he is writing only historical data since his own declaration of purpose, as well as the unfolding Gospel itself, says that he is writing for instruction about the "truth," in this context a reference to the larger Gospel message as it worked out in the early church. This is even more obvious if we conclude that this Gospel is the first volume of a two-volume work that included the Book of Acts (note Acts 1:1).

Also, he does not say precisely *how* this tradition was "handed on to us." This leaves open the possibility that he was using written documents, which might have included one or more of the other Gospels of Mark or Matthew. But it is equally possible that he is referring to a widely circulated oral tradition that had become central in the early church. Or it could have been a combination of an oral tradition supplemented by earlier documents. In other words, he is only concerned with acknowledging sources by which to ground his Gospel in the apostolic tradition, not in giving details about what the sources were. This suggests that his concern lay more with the content of the message than how it came to be, which should caution us against being too rigid in our conclusions about the whole process.

He also does not define what he means by "orderly." From our perspective, concerned as we are with time sequence, we easily assume that he means chronological order. However, the Greek word he used does not mean that specifically; it only refers to compiling or organizing without references to the method of organization. This allows the author to use whatever principle of organization fit his purpose in writing rather than trying to fit our modern expectations of what proper order would entail. From a comparison of the differences mentioned earlier between the Gospels, it is apparent that the Gospel material is arranged theologically according to what each writer wanted to emphasize about the tradition, not chronologically.

Finally, the writer does not claim to be an eyewitness of the events he relates, as many often assume about the Gospel writers. He does say that the tradition he is using comes from eyewitnesses. Likewise, this does not mean that his sources were eyewitnesses or written by eyewitnesses, only that the traditions he used were faithful to the testimony of those who were eyewitnesses.

While the other Synoptics do not give us any of these details about their writing, it is reasonable to conclude that what is true of Luke's Gospel would also be true of the other Gospels as well. This helps us understand that the Gospels were the result of a deliberate process of preserving an already existing tradition about the life and teachings of Jesus for use within the church. It is this understanding of the process in the formation of the Gospels that allows the following suggestions to address the Synoptic Problem.

Proposed Solutions

There are many suggestions and still more variations that attempt to explain the relationship between the Gospels. Even with these, ranging from simple to complex, they can basically be seen in terms of four basic approaches. These are not specific proposals, but categories under which the various proposals can be grouped for convenience. (Since the issues are complex, specific textual evidence will not be given for any of the proposals; consult a good New Testament introduction, such as Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Doubleday, 1997).

1) Oral Tradition. This approach suggests that all of the differences in the Gospel tradition can be explained in terms of a pre-existing Aramaic oral tradition. The early preaching of the gospel was quickly reduced to a selected set of core traditions that soon evolved into a rather fixed form in the church because it was repeated so often. The differences arose because that core tradition was preached in different circumstances that required adaptation of the tradition.

While this reflects the second stage of the formation of the Gospel tradition outlined above, it does not take seriously enough the specific similarities and parallels of the written Gospel accounts in Greek. A preexisting oral Aramaic tradition simply does not explain how the Gospels could be so similar in the Greek text, which probably explains why few people hold this position today.

2) Interdependent. This approach suggests that in some way the later Gospels are more or less dependent on one or more of the previous Gospels. That is, there is some sort of sharing of material between the Gospels. While there are many variations of the specifics of this approach, usually it assumes that Mark was the first Gospel written, and that Matthew and Luke used the written form of Mark. This also generally assumes that Matthew and Luke wrote independently of each other for their own purposes.

3) Proto-Gospel. This approach generally assumes that the Gospels were composed from a hypothetical written source that no longer exists. Again, there are variations of this approach, but they generally revolve around two basic suggestions, either that all of the Gospels were dependant on a posited original Aramaic Gospel, perhaps an Aramaic version of Matthew, or that they used a proposed collection of sayings (*logia*) of Jesus.

4) Fragmentary. This approach suggests that the Gospels used various hypothetical sources that were available to them in the early church. These would have been various collections or summaries or short accounts of Jesus' actions and teachings that were preserved in various forms and places in the church. For example, there may have been a collection of miracle stories, or parables, or accounts of the crucifixion, or even a collection of the sayings of Jesus. The various Gospel writers, who could have had access to different documents or different versions of the collections, then used these to compile their accounts.

The Early Church: The Priority of Matthew

The specific formulation and study of these issues as “the Synoptic Problem” is a relatively recent endeavor, dating to the 18th century and the rise of the analytical study of Scripture as a result of the Enlightenment. Yet, there had been previous observations about the relationship of the Gospels and “traditional” conclusions had been reached about them.

One of the earliest traditions comes from Papias writing around AD 125, preserved in the writing of Eusebius. Papias concluded that the Gospel of Mark was an interpretation (or perhaps translation) of the preaching of Peter. He also observed that Mark was not a follower of Jesus but of Peter, and that he wrote accurately but not in order. Only slightly later, Justin in the mid second century referred to Mark as “Peter’s memoirs.”

Papias also observed that Matthew was written in a Hebrew style (*dialektô*) of writing. Some have taken that comment to mean that Matthew was originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic and only secondarily translated into Greek, a theory that persists today.

From the order in which Papias treated the Gospels, we could infer that he thought Mark was written before Matthew. However Clement of Alexandria writing around AD 200, also preserved in the writing of Eusebius, commented that the Gospels with genealogies, presumably Matthew and Luke, were written first. By the fifth century, the traditional order of Matthew, Mark, and Luke had been established. Augustine writing around AD 400 asserted that each Gospel was dependent on those previous, with Mark simply an abbreviation of Matthew, Luke drawing on both Matthew and Mark, and John using all three.

There have been some modifications to this basic view, such as J. Griesbach's suggestion that the order should be Matthew, Luke, and then Mark (called the Griesbach Hypothesis, 1783). This was an attempt to explain some of the unique features of Luke as well as to explain why Luke should be written at all if after Mark's abridgement of the tradition. He also concluded that Mark was not just an abridgement of Matthew, but actually a conflation of both Matthew and Luke. Strauss and Baur (c. 1835) continued to support a variation of the Griesbach Hypothesis, only proposing a late date for the writing of all the Gospels (early to mid-second century) and assuming that they were non-historical.

This basic view of the priority of Matthew as the first Gospel written has remained the popular traditional view well into the 20th century. It still has defenders among scholars who have posited a very complex matrix of sources to explain the relationships between the Gospels based on the assumption of Matthew's priority. Still, the main argument for the priority of Matthew is the almost unanimous voice of the early church tradition that places Matthew first.

The Rise of Analytical Study: A Proto-Gospel

However, with the rise of more analytical investigation of Scripture in the 18th century, the problems with the traditional order of the Gospels as well as their relationship became more apparent. Without as many constraints of dogma and tradition concerning authorship and the order of the Gospels, historians and biblical scholars of the late 18th and early 19th century began to look more closely at the Gospels themselves. They began to discover the features that pointed to a more complex relationship between the Gospels.

The first attempt to address this issue was to posit a primitive version of the gospel traditions. There are two basic directions in which this proposal developed: early proposals that saw a no longer extant Aramaic original, and much more recent variations that propose various non-canonical (apocryphal) gospels that have been discovered as the original source.

A. an Aramaic original

In some ways, Augustine's idea of the priority of Matthew used as a source by the Gospels written later was the first formulation of the idea of an original Gospel. But the first real analytical proposal that attempted to trace sources beyond the canonical Gospels was toward the end of the 18th century. G. Lessing (1784) proposed that all of the Gospels were dependant on an original proto-gospel (*Urevangelium*, original or primitive gospel). He thought that this pre-canonical gospel was likely written in Aramaic and was used by the Synoptic writers. J. Eichorn (1794) refined Lessing's proposal and suggested that the original Aramaic Gospel was a full account of the life of Jesus, and existed in four slightly different versions, which would explain the differences between the Synoptics.

There is still discussion today of the possibility that the Gospel of Matthew might have been originally written in Aramaic. However, the idea that the entire gospel tradition originated from a "master" Aramaic original has few supporters.

B. apocryphal gospels

With the explosion of interest in the Ancient Near East in the 19th century, there were many new archaeological discoveries that included hoards of ancient manuscripts. Some of these proved to be various early Christian writings that included epistles and Gospels that were not accepted into the canon of the New Testament. At first these apocryphal or pseudigraphical Gospels (pseudipigraph = a document written under the name of a well-known person, such as *The Gospel of Thomas*), were viewed as interesting historical documents, but were obviously different from the canonical Gospels.

However, in recent years, there has been renewed interest in the apocryphal gospels as a source of information about the formation of the gospel tradition. M. Smith (1973) and H. Koester (1983) have proposed that *Secret Mark*, a second century writing preserved in only small fragments, was actually the original written form of the gospel tradition. J. D. Crossan (1985) has suggested that both *Secret Mark* and an early version of the *Gospel of Peter* were the original sources of all four canonical Gospels. These are all variations of the idea of a proto-gospel, although none of these proposals has gained acceptance.

A much more popular suggestion revolves around the idea of “Q” (from the German word *quelle*, “source,” J. Weiss, 1890). This is a designation given to a hypothetical document thought to be a collection of various sayings of Jesus from which the Gospel writers compiled at least parts of their Gospels. There are various proposals for both the content of Q and how it fits into the formation of the Gospels with some suggesting a larger role than others. Some scholars have attempted a reconstruction of what Q might have contained, although there is disagreement on the details (see [A Proposed Reconstruction of “Q”](#)).

The discovery of the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* in 1945 lent support to the idea of a Q document. *Thomas* is a collection of various sayings of Jesus without any connecting narrative (see [The Gospel of Thomas](#)). About one half of the 114 verses of *Thomas* have no parallel in the canonical Gospels, and another one third only appear in rough correspondence. Yet the number of similarities between *Thomas* and the Synoptics gives some support to the idea of an independent collection of sayings of Jesus that could have been a source document for the Gospels. Of course, the date of writing of *Thomas* is an important consideration. Some suggest that *Thomas* was written much later than any of the Gospels, which would suggest that it used the Gospels as sources rather than being a source for any of the Gospels.

The Priority of Mark: The Two Document Hypothesis

As scholars worked more with the Gospels, the complexity of the Gospel traditions became more apparent. Many scholars concluded that the questions raised about the relationship for the Synoptics could not be adequately explained by assuming that Matthew was the first Gospel written.

As a result, a new proposal for Gospel formation emerged based on the view that Mark, or some early form of Mark (*Urmarkus*), was the first Gospel written. Weiss, in a series of proposals in which he gradually refined his view (1838-1856), concluded that both Matthew and Luke were written independently from each other using two basic sources. The early form of Mark that contained material shared by all three Synoptics was supplemented by a separate collection of the sayings of Jesus (*logia*) that contained material shared by Matthew and Luke but not by Mark (the Double Tradition). This became known as the Two Source Hypothesis.

This understanding of Gospel formation continued to be refined and challenged throughout the 19th and early 20th century. The major debates about this theory revolved around how much the posited early form of Mark (*Urmarkus*) differed from the canonical Mark. Hawkins (1899) and Burkitt (1906) concluded that they were virtually identical, while Abbott (1901) argued for a later edited version of the canonical Mark (recension) that was used by the other Synoptic writers. Others modified other aspects of the hypotheses, for example R. Gundry (1979; earlier proposed by Holtzmann, 1880) who suggested that Luke also used some material from Matthew, which would functionally yield a three-source hypothesis.

These ongoing debates reveal that not all the details had been addressed, and that the Two-Source Hypothesis could not explain all the features of the Gospels. Still, it remains today the simplest and one of the most widely accepted ways to understand the literary relationship of the Synoptics.

The Priority of Mark: The Four Source Hypothesis

Scholars kept trying to refine the theories to explain more of both the similarities and differences in the Synoptics. That search led B. Streeter (1924) to modify the Two Source Hypothesis by expanding the number of posited sources. He rejected the idea of an early form of Mark, and saw Matthew and Luke using the canonical Mark as a source. Yet, for the material unique to each of those two Gospels, he also posited a separate source that he labeled M for Matthew and L for Luke. In other words, Matthew had access not only to Mark but also to his own M source, while Luke also had access to Mark but also to his own L source. Both Matthew and Luke depended on Mark, but were written independently of each other. He agreed with the earlier Two Document theory that both Matthew and Luke had access to a sayings collection (*logia* or Q) unavailable to Mark, but also posited that the L and Q sources were combined first into an early version of Luke that was later combined with the material from Mark to produce the canonical Luke.

This became known as the Four Source Hypothesis. The four original sources were Mark, L, M, and Q, with Matthew using Mark, M, and Q while Luke used Mark, L, and Q. Through the remainder of the 20th century there were various challenges and refinements of Streeter's hypothesis, such as Parker (1953) who posited an early version of Matthew (proto-Matthew) as the primary source of both Matthew and Mark, and a Q source used by Matthew and Luke, with Mark also providing material for Luke.

Summary and Prospect

What is clear from this brief survey of the Synoptic tradition is that there is no certain picture of how the Gospels were formed in terms of sources. There is no single theory of documents or sources that definitively demonstrates how all the similarities and differences in the Synoptic tradition can be explained. Today, most people accept either the Two Document or Four Source Hypotheses as being most reasonable, probably with the majority leaning to the Four Source Hypotheses. Today most allow a role for some form of a Q document, although there remains little agreement on the details of how it was used or what it contained.

But this should not be taken as saying that there is no value in any of this research. What Synoptic studies have shown us is that the Gospel traditions were truly living traditions passed on by a living community of Faith and used in that community. That has tremendous implications not only for how we study the Gospels, but also how we formulate our view of the nature of Scripture. For example, any view of the inspiration of Scripture must take into consideration the features of the biblical text that give rise to the Synoptic Problem. None of those proposals demand allegiance in the service of any particular theory of inspiration. But an honest formulation of any theory of inspiration that goes beyond dogma and ideology must consider the results of Synoptic research (see [Revelation and Inspiration of Scripture](#)).

A further implication of an examination of the Synoptic Problem yields one of the most important insights for the study of the Gospels. With this recognition of the complexity and interrelationship of the Synoptics, any detailed study of the Synoptics must consider the differences between the Gospels and the implications those differences have for interpretation. No matter which theory of composition we consider, since we are dealing with material that has identifiable sources, a major focus of exegesis must be how the individual authors have used, adapted, changed, or applied the material (redaction criticism or analysis).

For example, the differences between parallel accounts may reveal a particular theological emphasis as we examine what changes were made and what effect they have on the message. In one of the Beatitudes in Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Mt 5:3). Luke's

version reads simply, “Blessed are you who are poor” (Lk 6:20). In a later Beatitude Matthew’s version reads, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (5:6). Luke’s version of the same saying is: “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled” (6:21). It is obvious that Luke used the tradition to focus on physical needs, while Matthew used it to focus on spiritual needs.

At this point we might ask which version was the “original” version, and therefore which one was “true.” But that makes some assumptions about the nature of the biblical material that leads us to ask the wrong questions of the text. That kind of question does not consider what closer examination of Synoptic sources suggests: that the individual authors were working with a living tradition and proclaiming it to a living community to meet the needs and concerns of that community. It was not a matter of which saying is “true.” The better question is: “What was this author trying to say by telling us the tradition in this way?”

This assumes that the Gospels with all their diversity are a faithful witness to the tradition, and then proceeds to try to understand the differences. The way particular authors omit or include material, place a saying into a certain context, add interpretative comments, or emphasize certain features of the tradition by expansion may reveal not only creativity in writing but a certain theological concern. Careful study of those features will enable astute students of Scripture to hear and understand the testimony of the Synoptics on a deeper level.

This emphasis on redaction analysis that grows out of study of the Synoptic Problem also allows us to see the various strands of the Gospel tradition in terms of different authors who were themselves each theologians in their own right rather than simply being static conduits of a tradition. They were not simply editors or compilers who passed on what they had heard without comment. They took an active role in trying to bring the Gospel tradition alive within a certain context and for a certain purpose and likely for a certain audience.

We are compelled to see the Gospels, not as a single story that can be conflated into an epic script or harmonized into one story line (*e.g.*, Tatian’s *Diatessaron*), but as a living tradition, a testimony to God and his work in the world that is given to us out of the life of the early church. The various Gospels are each voices of that tradition, faithfully bearing witness to us of the truth that they had come to see in Jesus, as God had helped them understand that truth (inspiration). And, as John says, we believe their testimony is true!

But they are not the same voice no more than the church today speaks with a single voice. Of course, they bear witness to the same revelatory acts of God, but in a form that speaks of the same diversity of life and circumstances with which we are all familiar. That unity in diversity to which the Gospels so adequately bear witness might suggest that we not only hear the Gospel message in its own diversity, but that we also learn to do what the Gospel writers did and interpret that tradition amid the diversity of culture and history in our own world.

The Gospels writers did not change the basic truth of the tradition in its testimony to Jesus as the Christ and God’s self-revelation of Himself in Jesus. But they did treat its message as a living tradition that could be applied and reapplied in the life of the community of Faith to call people to faithful response to that revelation, and to God. That may be the greatest insight we can learn from the study of the Synoptic Problem, because finally, for most of us, that is still our task today and is the purpose for which we study Scripture.