

## **New Testament Theology: The Synoptic Problem in the Gospels**

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For the majority of approximately 1700 to 1800 years, the Christian movement (whether Roman Catholic or Protestant) did not attempt to answer the similarities contained in Matthew, Mark and Luke.<sup>1</sup> It is common knowledge that the 1800s brought an increase of information (perhaps resulting from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment periods) in the area of archaeology, religious sects, and biblical criticism. All that arose during this century, however, was not negative; it is because of the many newly discovered facts in these areas that many theologians began to question—with a predominant humanistic and evolutionistic bias—how many of the similarities of the Gospels arose. In other words, these theologians sought to answer what Gospel came first (Matthew, Mark, Luke or perhaps other manuscripts), and who copied from whom? Many more questions of the like were asked that led many to doubt the integrity of the manuscripts, the writers, and the contents that convey the facts about the person and work of Jesus Christ.

From this author's pastoral and professorial perspective, there is danger for Bible students (that will later pastor churches if they do not become discouraged by such views promoted by the Synoptic problem theories) and the common lay person (that will cause him/her to question the integrity of the writers and biblical inspiration and inerrancy). Henceforth, one needs to ask and answer several questions. (1) What does the word "Gospel" mean? (2) Were the Gospels comprised in an evolutionistic way from the simplest to the most complex (i.e. Mark, another document called Q, or did other documents come first before Matthew)? (3) Were these writers such

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<sup>1</sup> The name Synoptic means "similar" or "same" (i.e. Matthew, Mark, and Luke contain similar material unlike John that contains 92% of different material than them). Hence, John's Gospel is not considered one of the "Synoptic Gospels." Of course, there are always the liberal zealots that regardless of the evidence (archaeological, historical, textual, philosophical, and logical) let their bias to renounce Jesus Christ and His work influence them not to accept the Gospels as they are. To understand some of those zealots intent on denying the prima facie evidence of Jesus Christ found in the Gospels, see René A. López, "Efforts to Disprove the Biblical Jesus," *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 12 (December 2008): 53-70.

plagiarists that they had to borrow from another to record their information where similar events appear? (4) Is there definite evidence for such documents like Q or others that are presented in universities as if they actually exist? (5) What role does the Holy Spirit have in all of this, since the Scripture asserts to be inspired of God and that men were moved to write by the Spirit of God (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:19-21)? (6) What are the positives and negatives to each of the views? All of these questions will be addressed in this article so that the reader will more clearly understand the issues involved and be able to make an informed decision regarding the integrity of the Bible with regard to discussing *the Synoptic problem in the Gospels*.

### GOSPEL AS GENRE

To regard Gospels as “genre” was once debatable. However, today scholars acknowledge and classify this as a distinct type of literary genre that parallels Greco-Roman biographies, which present the ethos of a person by recounting the nature and manner of lifestyle. It seems normal that the New Testament writers would be influenced by and employ the common “literary conventions of their day.” In that regards, the four Gospels appear to have this in common with the ancient world. However, the Gospel genre seems to go beyond the Greco-Roman biographies to highlight the kerygmatic record of Jesus’ life as the Messiah with a profound theological motif written for the early Christians. In that regards, this genre is unique and different than those of the Greco-Roman period.<sup>2</sup>

The term Gospel translates the original Greek word εὐαγγέλιον meaning “good news.”<sup>3</sup> As Jim Anderson noted: “The word comes to us through the Anglo-Saxon word that meant the story of God.”<sup>4</sup> To describe the nature of this good news, some turn to 1 Corinthians 15:1-8 to explain it in terms of Christ’s redemption of mankind through His life, death and resurrection confirmed by many. While true, the gospel should not only be described in what Christ did for humanity, but also by the impact it has on mankind in the present and future. By dying, Christ paid humanity’s debt and died substitutionarily (this allows all who believe in Him to be justified before

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<sup>2</sup> See L. W. Hurtado, “Gospel (Genre),” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992) 276-82.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 402.

<sup>4</sup> Jim Anderson, *The Life of Christ: With a Sequential Biblical Commentary of the Four Gospels* (Omaha, NE: Anderson Evangelistic Enterprises, 1991).

God; cf. Rom 3:21—4:5). By rising from the dead, this proves God accepted Christ’s sacrifice (Rom 4:25), gives believers present power to live righteously (Rom 5:9-10; 6:1-13; 8:1-39; 10:9-13) and guarantees the believers’ future with God (1 Cor 15:50-54; 1 Thess 4:13—5:11). Therefore, the gospel is good news with regard to what Christ did for humanity that encompasses the believer’s total experience from the time of birth to a future life with God.

***The Synoptic Problem***

Upon reading the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke tell almost the same story of Jesus Christ but John differs. The chart below demonstrates similarities among the three and the divergence of the other.<sup>5</sup>

	Differences	Agreements	Explanation:
<b>Matthew</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>58%</b>	“Mark has 678 verses. Only about 50 of those are unique to Mark. He shares 480 with <b>both</b> Matt and Luke, and another 120 with Matt only, and another 20 with Luke only. Thus Mark demonstrates differences only 7% while showing agreements 93% of the time.” John agrees only 8% with all three while disagreeing 92%.
<b>Mark</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>93%</b>	
<b>Luke</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>41%</b>	
<b>John</b>	<b>92%</b>	<b>8%</b>	

Consequently, Matthew, Mark and Luke are named Synoptic, which means *to view similarly*.<sup>6</sup> The problem of the Synoptics becomes apparent since much of the information appears in all three of the Gospels but in numerous cases it varies. Therefore, the Synoptic problem was the name given to address this issue. To solve this issue, critical scholars suggest that the three Synoptic

<sup>5</sup> The chart was adapted from James A. Borland, *A General Introduction to the New Testament*, rev. ed. (1986; Lynchburg, VA: University Book House, 1995) 198.

<sup>6</sup> The term Synoptic is derived from the Greek term *synoptikos*, which means: “‘seeing the whole together, taking a comprehensive view.’ But as applied to the Gospels the word has come to mean *affording, presenting, or taking the same or a common view*” (Henry C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* [1943; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989] 101).

authors shared a common source or sources to compile their accounts. No less than seven views are proposed.<sup>7</sup>

**The common original (urevangelium) theory.**<sup>8</sup> First, late in the 1700s some taught Matthew perhaps wrote his first Gospel in Aramaic not Greek.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, other Gospel authors drew from Matthew's Aramaic Gospel, including Matthew when he wrote his Gospel in Greek (this hypothesis cannot be supported literarily, because no Aramaic Gospel exists).

**The numerous fragment theory.** Second, another theory arose in the early 1800s that suggested pieces of fragments of Christ's life circulated that were the common source used by Synoptic writers.<sup>10</sup> However, this does not explain how numerous fragments could lead to so many similarities in the synoptic Gospels. Moreover, no evidence exists for these fragments.

**The mutual dependence theory.** Third, "this theory holds that one Gospel was used by the others and thus accounts for the similarities. The problem comes when one tries to decide which of the Gospels was written first and which two borrowed from the original source."<sup>11</sup> Throughout the centuries, many have suggested the second Gospel author (Mark) drew its information from the first (Matthew), and the third relied upon both. Every imaginable order of arranging how the three Gospels arose was suggested (six possibilities exist; however, today this theory is not popular). Though many believe in the priority of Mark followed by Matthew, many conclude Luke developed his account by using both of these sources.

**The two document theory.** Fourth, the two document theory suggests Mark came first, then a second early document called Q (i.e. from a German word *Quelle* meaning "source") had more information with regard to

<sup>7</sup> The following sources were used in explaining the synoptic problem: Robert H. Stein, "Synoptic Problem," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 784-92; and, Borland, *General Introduction*, 193-203. For a more in-depth analysis, see Robert H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> The titles of the seven theories explaining the synoptic phenomenon were adapted from Borland, *General Introduction*, 194.

<sup>9</sup> G. E. Lessing (1776) and J. G. Eichhorn (1796) argued that Matthew's gospel was first written in Aramaic but later translated into Greek with its numerous revisions. See Stein, "Synoptic Problem," 785. "So Matthew composed the oracles in the Hebrew language and each person interpreted them as best he could" (Michael W. Holmes, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989] 316).

<sup>10</sup> "One explanation, originating with F. Schleiermacher (1817), suggested that the disciples had taken notes (memorabilia) of Jesus' words and deeds. These eventually were collected and arranged topically. From these collected memorabilia the Synoptic Gospels arose" (Stein, "Synoptic Problem," 195).

<sup>11</sup> Charles H Dyer, "Do the Synoptics Depend on Each Other?," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (July 1981): 235.

Christ's life.<sup>12</sup> It logically follows that Matthew and Luke copied from both of these sources, which account for the similarities. Over the years, this theory has become very popular, but it leaves many questions unanswered, such as James A. Borland noted: "(1) Can it be proven that Mark predated Matthew and Luke? (2) Would Matt and Luke have been such plagiarist, or dependent on Mark that they had to copy almost verbatim so much of Mark? (3) Why did Luke omit some large sections of Mark? (4) Why is there no record or copy of the supposed Q document? (5) What is to account for many differences between Matthew and Luke if they both used identical sources?"<sup>13</sup> Another criticism aimed at the two document theory implies a close connection with an evolutionary mindset since this view came at a time (late 1800s) when evolution was fashionable. Henceforth, the Mark (16 chapters) and Q theory suggests a literary form of the simplest to the more complex order of Matthew (28 chapters) and Luke (24 chapters). However, because of the theory's inability to answer the questions already stated (especially #5), a man in 1924, named Burnett Streeter suggested a four document theory in studying the origins of the Gospels.

**Streeter's four document theory.** *Fifth*, upon noticing the inadequacy of the Mark-Q hypothesis, Streeter expanded upon it and originated a four document theory. Matthew and Luke, without having the Mark-Q documents, also used additional sources particularly to their own account. Therefore, Matthew used a source peculiar to his Gospel called *M* and Luke's supplement was called *L*. Consequently, *M* and *L* supplied the information that was not found in Mark-Q, which accounts for the unique information in Matthew and Luke. However, one cannot compile the accounts of sources *M*, *L*, and *Q* neatly because they overlap. Critical scholarship still holds to the Mark-Q priority. Nevertheless, the same objections posed in the two document theory holds true in the four document theory.

**Form criticism.** *Formgeschichte* (form history) known as form criticism holds a "many fragments" theory. The form history theory proposes that the Gospels evolved by combining, recombining materials, and editing distinct sources of early traditions with regard to Christ's life. Accounts forming these fragments are composed of numerous literary types or genres: (1) tales (miracles); (2) legends (of church saints); (3) birth accounts; (4) sayings; (5) myths (baptism, temptation, and transfiguration); (6) paradigms (short narratives); and, (7) passion stories (etc.). A major weakness of this view is that it assumes its premise without proving it, that is, no arguments are

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 787-88.

<sup>13</sup> Borland, *General Introduction*, 195.

presented that prove the forms are myth or legends (it simply assumes it). The mere *form* of a story does not prove the truth or falsity of its content. Henceforth, Borland concluded: "Truth can be conveyed in prose, poetry, or parable. Unhappily, many of the leading critics behind *formgeschichte* (Bultmann, for example), have had trouble believing that the New Testament could be trusted in what is said about Jesus."<sup>14</sup>

***The oral tradition theory.*** The attempts of this theory are to explain the Synoptic phenomenon without literary dependence. Instead the similarities of the Gospels arose due to a common circulation of oral tradition. Perhaps this may explain the peculiarities in each of the Gospels and its verbal expressions arising from cultural traditions rendered.<sup>15</sup> The theory has its shortcomings: besides not demanding that the Gospels be inspired of God, it does not carefully handle the evidence that argues for dependence.

### ***The Synoptic Problem: Proposed Solution***

While the Gospel authors can rely on sources (e.g. Luke 1:1-4), most of the previously stated explanations derive its emphasis from humanistic (contrary to a faith-base) explanations and does not adequately answer the Synoptic "problem." There are numerous reasons that answer this supposed problem in a better manner. *First*, Matthew and John were witnesses of Christ's life. Likewise, Mark's Gospel was believed to derive from Peter's account. Since Peter (and Mark in numerous occasions) was present throughout Jesus' three-and-a-half year ministry, this makes him a credible witness to be able to convey Christ's life to Mark.

*Second*, in case they forgot certain events, Jesus said the Holy Spirit would remind them later (John 14:26).<sup>16</sup> Therefore, Matthew would not need

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 196.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson noted how some explain the similarities in the Gospels by assuming "the gospel writers are often imagined with variations due to regional collections at the varying cities of Rome (for Mark), Antioch (for a common source), Jerusalem (for Matthew) and Caesarea (for Luke). Since Mark is considered basic by this humanistic approach, it is the gospel of Mark that is most often used as the primary means of structuring a harmony of the gospels" (*Life of Christ*, 31).

<sup>16</sup> John 14:26 reads, ". . . ὑμᾶς διδάξει πάντα καὶ ὑπομνήσει ὑμᾶς πάντα ἃ εἶπον ὑμῖν ἐγώ." Here the plural "you" is used for the eleven (and perhaps Mark was also there, although he was not one of the eleven disciples remaining, since it is possible they may have eaten the Last Supper at his house; cf. Acts 12:12-13) to convey how the Spirit will equally bring to memory *all that Jesus taught throughout His ministry* (this seems to add significance to the fact that all of them were equally inspired and that the content of the inspiration was not only new revelation that the Spirit would give them but also that it was more about the events

to copy Mark since the Spirit equally inspired Matthew. Better than assuming, as many do, a Q document that does not exist, why not believe directly what the Scripture affirms as the basis for remembering the facts in order to record them? *Third*, Luke, conversely, compiled his account based upon sources, but not without the inspiration of the Spirit since all Scripture is inspired of God (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 2:20-21) regardless of the oral and literary sources used.

*Fourth*, God had each of the four Gospel writers compose their account with a unique purpose thus accounting for the numerous differences and similarities at the same time. Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience to present Jesus as their King-Messiah promised from the Old Testament (Matt 1:1-22; 2:14, 17, 23; 4:14; 5:18; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14, 35, 21:4; 24:34; 26:54, 56; 27:9, 35). Mark presents Jesus as the suffering servant to the Roman audience who comes to provide unending peace (Mark 10:45). Luke wrote with a Greek audience in mind and presented Christ as the perfect “Son of Man” who comes to seek and to save (Luke 19:10). Finally, John wrote to all mankind to present Jesus as the Son of God who gives life to all who believe in Him and as also being God (John 20:28-31).

Ezekiel’s vision (1:10, 28) of the Lord’s promise to come and save His people may corroborate to the fourfold presentation of the Gospels.<sup>17</sup> For example, the “lion” compares to the kingly aspect of Christ in Matthew since a lion conveys the idea of headship in the jungle, and Genesis 49:9 and Revelation 5:5 speak of Jesus as being “the Lion of the tribe of Judah.” The “ox” likeness compares to the servant aspect of Mark. Such a beast parallels the brute and unending work to perform the necessary task to save humanity. The “man,” whose likeness is human, compares to Luke’s presentation of the “Son of man” that comes to save. Finally, the “eagle” likeness compares to Jesus’ deity in John. Eagles symbolically depict deity (Ps 57:1; 61:4; 91:4; Isa 40:31), which clearly portrays Jesus as God who became man to deliver mankind. John’s vision in Revelation 4:6-7 seems to confirm the unison threat of God’s word when he saw a similar vision of four living creatures around God’s throne. Henceforth, the fourfold aspect of the Gospels fit the purposes God wanted to convey of Himself of how He would accomplish His perfect plan to save humanity.

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that occurred while they walked with Jesus; hence, if taken at apparent significance, this answers much, if not all, of the synoptic controversy).

<sup>17</sup> Borland, *General Introduction*, 201-02.

## CONCLUSION

Understanding what the term “Gospel” means allows us to see that the disciples were using a common literary device of their day, but not without using unique features to highlight key elements of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, one does not have to accept the Gospels as being comprised in an evolutionistic manner from the simplest to the most complex (once one accepts that the Spirit was involved totally in the process). Henceforth, John 14:26 does not have to be interpreted as involving an evolutionistic concept. The Gospel writers were not plagiarists that borrowed from another to record their information since they were all equally promised to be inspired by the Spirit to document the life of Christ (John 14:26; 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:19-21). Since no substantial evidence for such documents like *Q* or others exist, one encounters perils if accepting such tenuous pieces of evidence that are based upon a liberal bias (this is not to mention the many problems instead of solutions that such views create rather than solve). After answering all these questions, the reader can clearly understand the issues involved, be able to make an informed decision, and have assurance regarding the trustworthiness of the Bible when it comes to discussing *the Synoptic problem in the Gospels* and the integrity of the men who wrote them.