



Lecture #2, Part 1

The Shape of the Gospel Story: The Synoptic Gospels

Theme:

Synoptic “seeing together”

Each Gospel was likely written for a different community of faith at a different time and location to bring the Gospel witness to bear on the needs of that particular community.

The Gospels of the New Testament tell us about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They tell us about Jesus’ birth, teachings, miracles, journeys, struggles, confrontations with religious leaders, as well as about his suffering, execution, and appearances after his resurrection. Since the story is so familiar to many it is easy to assume that the Gospels all tell the same story in the same way. It is true that they are telling the same story. But the way they tell it is considerably different.

A closer examination of the Gospels reveals that each of the Gospels was written in a particular style with a great deal of freedom in what was selected to include or exclude and how what is included is presented. The first three Gospels, [Matthew](#), [Mark](#), and [Luke](#) share more with each other in terms of material and arrangement of the material than they share with the [Gospel of John](#). It is this general similarity between the first three Gospels even in light of their differences that has given them the name Synoptic Gospels (**synoptic** = “**seeing together**”). The content and structure of [John’s Gospel](#) is so different from these three that it is usually studied separately from the Synoptic Gospels (see [Introduction to the Gospel of John](#) which will be studied later).

A careful examination of the organization 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



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Biblical scholars have concluded that these differences between the Synoptic Gospels, which include not only content and arrangement, but also chronology, significant themes, and theological motifs point to each Gospel having its own particular theological emphasis. Each Gospel was likely written for a different community (or communities) of Faith at a different time and location to bring the Gospel witness to bear on the needs of that particular community.

The Gospel writers selectively edited and arranged the diverse traditions about Jesus that were widespread in the early church ([Luke 1:1-3](#); cf. [John 21:25](#)) to emphasize different aspects of his life and teachings. That suggests that each Gospel has its own unique literary history as well as shares a great deal of the Jesus tradition with the others (see [The Synoptic Problem](#) which will be studied later).

In spite of their many differences, the Synoptic Gospels do share a similar outline in how the storyline unfolds. While each Gospel gives the story a particular personality, the Synoptics together share a general shape in recounting the events and significance of Jesus. We can see that shape in eight basic movements to the story. However, we have to keep in mind that these are divisions that help our modern minds follow the story and are really artificial and arbitrary in terms of the narrative itself.