



**Lecture #3, Part 2**

## The Gospels and The Synoptic Problem

### The Literary Relationship of Matthew, Mark, and Luke

**Theme:**

*Christians before the 18th Century entertained few doubts that the Gospels were to be read as historically reliable accounts of the life of Jesus. The main problem to be faced was that of harmonization.*

There are places where the Synoptic Gospels are closely parallel in their recounting of incidents from the life of Jesus. While there may be minor differences in these cases the accounts are basically the same, 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,	14 As he 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.	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,	16 When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors,	30 The Pharisees and their scribes
they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"	they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"	were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"



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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.

Yet this similarity raises questions. 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.