



Lecture #3, Part 3

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.

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!"



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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.



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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 which will be study later**). 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](#)).