



**Lecture #3, Part 5**

## 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 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.

<b>Matthew 8:14-17</b>	<b>Mark 1:29-34</b>	<b>Luke 4:38-41</b>
	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	[and cast out many demons;	<b>[Demons also came out of</b>



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with a word,		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](#). [Matthew](#) 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



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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 which will be studied later](#)). 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 which will be studied later](#)). It was only



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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 which will be studied later](#)). 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.



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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**



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

Here also we need to consider the likelihood suggested above that the Gospel 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](#)):



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**Luke 1:1-4 (NASB)**

<sup>1</sup> **Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us,**  
<sup>2</sup> **just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,**  
<sup>3</sup> **it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write *it* out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus;**  
<sup>4</sup> **so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.**

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.



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**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





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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



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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.



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## 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” which will be studied later**).

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 which will be studied later**). 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.



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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



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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 which will be studied later](#)).

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.



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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



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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.