

## **The Synoptic Gospels: An Overview**

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The New Testament is a collection of 27 books, many of which were penned by the Apostle Paul. Of the said books, four of them have been dubbed “gospel” meaning “good news,” the glad tiding relating to the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is very important to have an accurate and yet clear grasp of what these gospels teach and portray because many theories have been advanced relating to them and their specific purpose.

In this paper, we explore the gospels, yea, the “*synoptic*” gospels in particular. In the quest to achieve this objective, the paper is divided into various cohesive sections and then summarised at the end.

### **What the Gospels are**

The gospels are the good news as written by the inspired writers, two of which were apostles of Jesus Christ (Matthew and John). They (gospels) were written during the apostolic era, initially orally shared but were eventually penned down. These oral traditions took their rounds among the early Christians, were recognised, accepted as true and authentic accounts later canonized confirming their authoritative status. The gospel is about Jesus Christ as the saviour of the world whose work and mission was to save all his elect in the world in keeping with what had been prophesied in earlier generations. All the four gospels have Jesus at the centre of their narratives though told from/to different perspectives and audiences. Out of the many hundreds (approximately 140+ “gospels”) of the so-called gospels that took their rounds in the early centuries, only four were progressively recognised by the church and communities as the authentic, authoritative, divinely revealed integrated and inspired word of God (Riches 2000). The others were rejected for various reasons which included spurious claims about what Jesus said or did. An example of such a gospel so rejected is the famous “Gospel of Thomas” claiming many secret sayings and deeds of Christ. However, as the communities discerningly read and discussed the documents in their possession, God impressed it upon the hearts of the church to accept or reject a particular set of writings. The compilers of the final 39 book canon would use relevant criteria to include or exclude a given work. The canon of the New Testament would be complete and sealed by the fourth century, with

only the four gospels as the authentically true factual accepted accounts of Jesus and his work.

### **What the 'Synoptic Gospels' are**

The 'synoptic gospels' are factual accounts about the ministry of Jesus Christ. These are literary compositions fitting the first century writing standards and form extant at the time. They are composed simply and in clear human language, the common koine Greek as it was at the time. Although one may be tempted to think that they are biographical accounts, they are primarily not but writings portraying the saviour of the world and how the God-man brought salvation to mankind. By definition, the gospel is the good news or evangel of God which declares the glad tidings of salvation, how God intervened in the human realm in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The incarnation, virgin birth, growth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has been documented by the gospels. Although the gospels do not explain in detail the implications of Jesus' life and death, they expressly declare that He is the promised messiah as foretold by the Prophets. Three of these gospels (i.e. Matthew, Mark and Luke) are very similar in their narration of the saviour. As one reads them, they may easily get the impression that they are reading the same account all over again when in fact there are some differences that exist.

### **Why the Gospels are called 'Synoptic'**

These similar gospels are dubbed 'synoptic' because of the following reasons:

1. They carry the same message of the Lord's ministry from the time he was born, right through to his death and resurrection.
2. At first sight, they appear to have been written using a common source document. The cursory evidence seems to point in this direction but in reality, is it really so?
3. Some arguments have been advanced trying to prove that one of the gospels (probably Mark) was used as a source document for the other two, hence the similarity (i.e. the two-source hypothesis).
4. The narrative genre and style is generally similar and can easily be followed through.
5. They portray the Lord Jesus in his human form while his divinity is mentioned, though indirectly through his miraculous acts and words.
6. Several incidences are recorded in all or at least two of the gospels.

While the synoptic gospels are similar in their narrative form and approach with each containing parallel passages to the other two, a fourth gospel, written by the Apostle John much later is in many senses different in approach to narrating the story of Jesus. It begins by stating fundamental truths which are in a sense anatomical to the gospel such as Christ's pre-existence, the incarnation, his uniqueness, his distinctness from John ('who came in the spirit of Elijah'), the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the Father-Son relationship as well as the clear demonstration that Jesus is for a fact the Christ. This gospel does not highlight as many miracles akin to other gospels but strategically points out some salient issues which clearly and directly point to Christ's divinity.

Thus, we can see that though the synoptic gospels have a similar narrative approach, meant for different audiences, the gospel of John tells the same story from a different angle.

### **Why the Gospels were Written**

The purpose for which the gospels were written is basically one, to tell the objective factual story as relates to the life and Ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. The writers wrote in their native context using the extant forms of writing and yet inspired to write scripture as we have it today. Each of them had a specific objective why they wrote and to whom. For instance, Mark is believed to have been the earliest gospel to have been written (about AD 53 or later). It is relatively short but highlights aspects that would have appealed to a Gentile, probably Roman audience and yet in so doing proving that Jesus was the promised messiah. Mark highlights a lot of miracles and power probably for his Roman audience with whom this kind of thing would have instantly resonated. Although the Jews rejected and questioned Jesus' claim to being the promised messiah, it was still necessary to document and prove that he was for a fact the long expected saviour, but not in the political sense that many had expected. Although born in a manger, a fugitive from birth, a Nazarene and yet of royal birth, Mark (probably a travelling companion of Paul from Acts?) proves point after point from the available evidence that Jesus himself demonstrated while he walked the earth that he was in fact the Messiah. After being in oral tradition form for several years, Mark writes a short account about Jesus, his ministry and mission that would later become authoritative and canonical. On the other hand, Matthew writes to a more Jewish audience drawing on aspects that would make sense to the Jew such as the detailed genealogy and yet in the same breathe prove that Jesus is indeed the Christ. Dr Luke, on the other hand, wrote to Theophilus (and by that token to a wider universal context of both Jews and Gentiles) in his two-volume work, Luke and Acts. In both books, he states why he wrote in the preamble of each treatise as well as gives a hint on how he went about his work. Evidently, Luke took extensive and deep pains to investigate the integrity of his facts, document and write about Jesus, despite having probably

never met Jesus in person. In his second volume (i.e. Acts), Luke refers to his “former book” which obviously is the gospel of Luke. In Acts, which may be arguably called the “fifth gospel” by some, the author records and documents the birth and expansion of the church as fostered by the Apostles. In the gospel of John, although not among the synoptic, Christ is portrayed using a very different approach but yet the same message. John writes that people may believe that Jesus is the Christ. His audience appears a mixed audience although in the first chapter states that the Jews (his own) rejected the Christ. Thus, the gospels are not merely a biographical account of Jesus Christ, in fact they are not a biographical account but a factual narration introducing the saviour of the world and His divine message as relates to the spiritual kingdom of God.

### **Similarities and Differences in the Synoptic Gospels**

So far we have alluded to the fact that the synoptic gospels are similar in many respects but it is also important to highlight the fact that there are some differences in the narratives too. To help us appreciate this point, we commence by highlighting the similarities and then the differences:

#### **Similarities**

The similarities abound and hardly need any proving. But for the sake of the enquirer, we highlight some similarities below:

1. The gospels have several parallel events that are reported in all the three narratives. Examples would include the following: Matthew 13; Mark 4 and Luke 8 which speak about Jesus’ parables. The other set is Matthew 24; Mark 13 and Luke 21 that are apocalyptic in nature. A third category would include that of the rich young ruler that confidently asks the Lord Jesus about what is needed for his soul to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.
2. If some event does not appear in all the three, at least it appears in two and the timing is often similar. Examples include Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:3-9 but is not recorded in Luke’s gospel.
3. Though the writing form and style is similar, the authors differ in the details they emphasise relative to their varying audiences. The central truth remains the same however.

These similarities have generated some theories in many quarters as to why the synoptic gospels have such striking similarities. This has been dubbed the “Synoptic problem” because the similarity is so striking as though the materials were derived from the same source. Could it be that they were synthesised from each other as source documents? Were they not drafted by the same person with the intent to deceive and lead astray? These and many questions (including

the two-source hypothesis which holds that Mark was the source for both Matthew and Luke, as highlighted earlier) arise because of the similarities. Having briefly highlighted the similarities, it's only fitting to consider the differences as given in the next section below.

## **Differences**

While the similarities have startled enquirers almost leading them to conclude that they must have had a common or shared source documents, the synoptic gospels equally have some remarkable differences which in itself proves that the writers did not intentionally collaborate or collude in drafting their gospels. The Lord inspired these writings. Furthermore, if not carefully understood, these differences have a propensity to inject doubt or confusion in some one's mind. The antidote to this kind of poisonous thinking is to arm oneself with the fact that God makes all things clear in the process. Have the big picture view and things will eventually be well. Never be afraid of scrutiny or interrogation, the scripture is able to stand on its own since it is inspired. The differences therefore are:

1. Not all the gospels record all the accounts and incidences the same way. For instance, the sermon on the mountain (Matthew 5-7) or "the sermon on the sea" (Matthew 13) may not be recorded in all the other gospels.
2. The chronological placing of certain events may differ from gospel to gospel.
3. There appears to be some apparent contradictions and errors in some of the gospels. However, once read in their rightful context bearing authorial intent in mind, most of these problems melt away into insignificance. The apparent contradictions and errors include speeches, names, dates or numbers mentioned in different texts. With hind knowledge to the differing contexts, counting and calendar systems, many of these differences are often harmonised.
4. At times, some parallel episodes are found in two gospels but not the third.
5. Only one gospel has a detailed genealogy unlike the other gospels. Only Matthew seems has an elaborate genealogy tracing all the way from the beginning while Mark or Luke directly delve straight into their narrative (though Luke also has a relatively detailed genealogy in chapter 3:23-38) as does John. Probably their target audience could have influenced the method and mode of writing. Some have alleged that Matthews' genealogy is not in sync with that given by some Old Testament book narratives.
6. The narratives have different emphasis in a particular gospel while in the other seem to give another perspective. An example is the story of the preparation of the Lord's Supper. In one gospel, the disciples appear to be asking the Lord Jesus when the Passover meal would be so that they can

prepare while in another parallel passage of another gospel, Jesus is the one that gives the express command. So, who exactly started that particular discourse, is it Jesus or his disciples? (Matthew 26:17; Mark 14:12; Luke 22:7).

### **Why the Book of John is not a Synoptic Gospel**

As earlier alluded to, the gospel of John is in a class of its own. It is not a synoptic gospel in the sense that it scarcely has any parallel accounts in sync with the other gospels (One case however may be said to be similar though narrative approach differs somewhat: Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9 and John 12:2-8). John's aim and audience appears to be wider (though some hold that it is Jewish targeted rather than Hellenistic) than that of the others and the timing of the writing of the gospel is equally different. Thus, it is not possible to directly align the book to other gospels in the same chronological linear sense as the synoptic gospels. Furthermore, John highlights aspects which the other gospel writers have not pointed (... by that token excludes some aspects highlighted by other gospel narratives) out such as John the Baptist not being the Christ or the Elijah that was to come. Another point which John brings out is that of Father-Son relationship as well as the need for the new birth (John 3:1-8). John makes extensive use of symbols & signs like water, the dove, miracles etc to point to some spiritual truth which others may not necessarily do.

### **What can be learned from the Synoptic Gospels**

From what has been highlighted above both on the synoptic and John's gospel, it is evident that the gospels are objective factual historical narratives of who or what Jesus stood for or came to do. They are still as relevant and fresh as they were when they were first drafted because they have the divine stamp. The fact that they are similar and do not contradict each other at any point should cause one to marvel. This proves their inspiration, authoritativeness and veracity. The gospels further reveal the God-man, Jesus Christ and how he became a human and yet remained divine. His passive and active obedience are in the background showing that he had come to fulfil the law rather than abolish it as some were wont to believe. As one reads and familiarises themselves with the narratives, they cannot help but see that Jesus was a real live human being that actually walked the face of the earth, expressing feelings, emotion and human limitations like the rest of us yet without sin. He was not merely an extraordinarily good man who soon was turned into God (adoptionism) nor was he a mere phantom who appeared to be a man and yet not one (docetism). Jesus was both God and man at the same time (i.e. hypostatic nature). How this was, no human mind can fully comprehend or explain. There are many points which are accepted by faith as narrated in the gospels and in this we rest. That said, the gospels are available

for interrogation or scrutiny and will definitely stand any objective enquiry as to their authenticity and divine origin.

### **The Relevance and Meaning of the Synoptic Gospels Today**

Arising from what had been said in the previous sections above, the gospels are very relevant and hold deep meaning for genuine believers everywhere today and tomorrow. Contrary to what some pundits purport, the gospels present the saviour to the world in as clear and vivid form as can be. The gospels are not archaic or old fashioned as some would like us to believe but prove three or four times over that they are the very authentic accounts of Jesus Christ and thus pointing to the saviour. If there was only one gospel available in the world, it would be difficult to verify or countercheck their truthfulness but as in the Jewish custom, two or three witnesses to the same fact exist. In this, a matter is established to be true. On the other hand, the differences prove that the writers did not collude to write gospel accounts with an evil or ulterior wrong motive. Rather, they were led by the Holy Spirit to pen down whatever they did, using their faculties and style and yet writing scripture.

### **Conclusion**

It has evidently been demonstrated that the synoptic gospels are both relevant and helpful today. Although they carry the same message, as told from different angles, they were written to different audiences with different emphasis, portraying factual information as relates Jesus' life and ministry.

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