

The Synoptic Gospels

Matthew, Mark, Luke

The first three gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are called the Synoptic Gospels. This comes from a Greek word (translated “synopsis), which means, “seeing together.” The high degree of similarity found among Matthew, Mark, and Luke in their presentations of Jesus is seen in structure, content, and tone. The gospel of John stands separate from the other three in these manners.

The Synoptics structure the ministry of Jesus according to a general geographic sequence: ministry in Galilee, withdrawal to the North (with Peter’s confession as a climax and point of transition), ministry in Judea and Perea while Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem (less clear in Luke), and final ministry in Jerusalem.

Very little of this sequence can be found in John, where the focus is on Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem during his periodic visits to the city.

In content, the synoptics narrate many of the same events, focusing on Jesus’ healings, exorcisms, and teaching in parables. John, while narrating several significant healings, has no exorcisms and no parables (at least of the type found in the gospels).

The synoptics convey a tone of intense rapid-fire action by having Jesus constantly on the move and by juxtaposing actions – especially miracle – with (usually) brief teachings. John narrates far fewer events and presents Jesus as speaking in long discourses rather than in brief parables or pithy sayings providing a more meditative tone.

The similarity of the gospels invites debate regarding the source of these writings. A mathematical comparison shows that 91% of Mark’s Gospel is contained in Matthew, while 53% of Mark is found in Luke. Various hypotheses place one of the gospels (usually Mark) as the first to be written (in the 50’s or 60’s), and the others based upon the one (and written in the 70’s). Some have even suggested a lost collection of Jesus’ sayings – called the “Q” source – which was the basis for the other writings.

There is a lot of interpretational issues when discussing the synoptics but our purpose, at this point, is to focus on the content of the gospels.

Mark

Purpose: To share the good news with Gentiles in Rome.

Outline: 1:1-13 – Early years of Jesus’ ministry

2:1-6:29 – Jesus’ ministry in Galilee

6:30-9:50 – Withdrawal from and return to Galilee

10:1-52 – Jesus’ ministry in Judea and Perea

11:1-16:20 – Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem (i.e. Passion Week)

Author: John Mark, a close friend of Peter (authorship is greatly debated)

Date: 50’s or 60’s (date is greatly debated)

Highlights:

The shortest of the gospels, Mark is often the best one to read first. As you read Matthew and Luke you can see them build upon Mark.

Mark does not mention the birth of Jesus, but begins with John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus’ ministry.

There are early manuscripts that do not contain the resurrection account of 16:9-20.

The NIV Study Bible notes Mark’s emphasis on “The cross...Discipleship...The teachings of Jesus...The Messianic secret...Son of God.”

Matthew

Purpose: “To prove to his Jewish readers that Jesus is their Messiah” (NIV Study Bible).

Outline: 1:1-4:11 – Birth and early years of Jesus’ ministry

4:12-14:12 – Jesus’ ministry in Galilee

14:13-18:35 – Withdrawal from and return to Galilee

19:1-20:34 – Jesus’ ministry in Judea and Perea

21:1-28:20 – Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem (i.e. Passion Week)

Author: Matthew/Levi the tax collector turned disciple (authorship is greatly debated)

Date: 70ish (date is greatly debated)

Highlights:

The material of Matthew is built around five great discourses:

Chapters 5-7 – Discourse #1

10 – Discourse #2

13 – Discourse #3

18 – Discourse #4

24-25 – Discourse #5

The genealogy of Jesus in Matthew is traced from Abraham to Jesse; from David, to the exile; and from the exile to Jesus (through Joseph). The fourteen generations that come between each set of genealogies is a bit of a stretch. There were actually more than fourteen generations, but it was not an uncommon practice to achieve the desired number of names in a genealogy.

The birth of Jesus is seen mainly through the eyes of Joseph and his encounters with an angel. The magi are mentioned in Matthew.

The beatitudes are part of the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7 (Discourse #1).

Jesus speaks of the end times in chapter 24.

The gospel of Matthew closes with the Great Commission (28:16-20).

Luke

Purpose: “It seemed good to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:3b-4).

Outline: 1:1-4:13 – Early years of Jesus’ ministry

4:14-9:9 – Jesus’ ministry in Galilee

9:10-9:50 – Withdrawal from and return to Galilee

9:51-19:27 – Jesus’ ministry in Judea and Perea

19:28-24:53 – Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem (i.e. Passion Week)

Author: Luke, the physician, a close friend of Paul (authorship is greatly debated)

Date: 70ish (date is greatly debated)

Highlights:

Luke is the only author to give an introduction to the gospel (1:1-4).

The birth of Jesus is seen mainly through the eyes of Mary and her encounters with an angel.

The account of Jesus being presented in the temple on the 8th day of life, and Jesus at the temple as a 12 year old, is only in Luke.

The genealogy of Jesus in Luke traces from Joseph back to Adam (contrast with Matthew).

Luke puts a tremendous amount of emphasis on Jesus’ ministry in Judea and Perea.

The “Lost” parables (lost sheep, coin, and son) are in chapter 15.

Luke tells more parables (by far) than either Matthew or Mark (especially in chapters 11-18).

Luke also shares more resurrection appearances than the other synoptics.

Luke closes his gospel account with the ascension of Jesus, which is where he picks up the book of Acts.