

The Synoptic Gospels

Week 1

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Outline

Course Logistics

Introduction

- Synoptic Problem

- Mark

- Matthew

- Luke

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Course Description

The Synoptic Gospels together comprise the earliest *narrative* records available to us of Jesus' ministry and teaching. This class will be an in-depth study of these three gospels. In Carson and Moo's *Introduction to the New Testament*, they write, "The Synoptic Gospels as a whole make an irreplaceable contribution. Alongside John, they constitute the foundational witness to the person, ministry, teaching, passion and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah." (162-3) In line with the above remark, this class will primarily focus on the object of their testimonies: Jesus Christ. We will also examine their relationship to one another as well as look at their historicity, origins and distinctive styles.

Course Expectations

- **Attendance** You must attend 8 of 10 classes to receive credit.
- **Readings** There will be weekly readings to keep in step with the material being covered each week. These are strictly completion based.
- **Final Assignment** Select one of the titles used for Christ and write a brief report on its use, meaning and theological significance.

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Date	Week	Topic
3/29	1	<i>Introduction</i>
4/5	2	Infancy & Genealogy
4/12	3	John, Baptism & Temptation
4/19	4	Ministry in Galilee
4/26	5	The Passion, Jerusalem
5/3	6	From Arrest to Resurrection
5/10	7	<i>Major Sermons</i>
5/17	–	NO CLASS
5/24	8	<i>The Parables</i>
5/31	9	<i>Evidence for the Deity of Christ</i>
6/7	10	<i>Conclusion: Who Was Jesus Christ?</i>

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Importance of Introduction

We will first examine introductory matters: Purpose, Author and Audience, date of authorship and other historically relevant concerns.

What benefit is there in investigating any of these?

Importance of Introduction

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- **Author** Authorship is connected closely to matters of authority (Cf. *Gospel of Thomas* and other pseudepigrapha)
- **Date** Like authorship, date is important for authority. Dating and general historical circumstance is important for interpretation (Cf. different Herods)
- **Audience** heavily constrain interpretation. (E.g. II Tim 1:5—I am reminded of *your* sincere faith, which first lived in *your grandmother* Lois and in *your mother* Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in *you* also—those aren't *my* family members!)
- **Purpose**, especially when explicitly stated, constrains interpretation. Cf. Luke's prologue: With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided 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 1:3-4)

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What is the Synoptic Problem?

In surveying the four gospels, there is an immediate sense that Matthew, Mark and Luke are similar to one another and that John is quite different.

The problem becomes then, *What historical relationship do the synoptic gospels bear to one another?*

In other words, the similarity is so striking that we must conclude that we are not looking at completely independent presentations of the gospel. So, to what extent are these documents dependent one another?

Working Hypothesis

No solution to this question will be entirely satisfactory given the dearth of physical evidence. However, we can say with some confidence that Matthew and Luke depend upon Mark (and not on one another) for the following reasons:

- Mk is the shortest gospel. It is easier to explain the need for an expanded gospel than a need for a shortened gospel.
- 90% of Mk appears in Mt with as much as 51% appearing word-for-word; Lk has at least 53% of Mk's verses with a similar percentage of exact wording.
- Wherever all three gospels have an episode, if there is any disagreement in presentation (wording or sequence), it is found almost always between Mt & Lk.
- Mark's presentation uses more vivid and active language in key episodes than Mt & Lk. If Mk were writing a "Cliff's Notes" from Mt & Lk, one would expect vividness to drop, not rise.

Dating the Synoptics

Dating precisely proves difficult. Certain observations help:

1. *Acts* ends before Paul's trial. This would place the writing of *Acts* in the early 60s and *Luke* shortly before that. This puts *Luke* in the early 60s at the latest.
2. Given *Luke's* dependence on *Mark*, it follows that *Mark* would have to be written even earlier, most likely in the 50s. Even without the relationship to *Luke-Acts*, *Mark's* relationship to Peter places it no later than mid-60s (best estimate of Peter's death).
3. Many (anti-supernaturalists) place *Matthew* after the destruction of the temple in 70AD. The following supports a date strictly prior to 70:
 - Jesus consistently mentions the temple in his teaching (5:23,4; 12:5-7; 17:24ff; 23:16-22; 26:60,1). In a world without a temple, these teachings would be moot at best.
 - If Matthew were inventing Jesus' predictive ability (and the passage is only about the historic destruction of Jerusalem), then why include Jesus' remarks in Matthew 24:20 that don't fit the actual events?

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External Evidence for Author

Beginning with patristic evidence (early church fathers), Papias is quoted as follows in Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*:

This also the presbyter used to say: Mark indeed, who became the interpreter of Peter, wrote accurately, as far as he remembered them, the things said or done by the Lord, but not however in order. For he had neither heard the Lord nor been his personal follower, but at a later stage, as I said, he had followed Peter, who used to adapt his teachings to the needs of the moment, but not as they were drawing up a connected account of the oracles of the Lord: so that Mark committed no error in writing certain matters just as he remembered them. (Cole, 28)

There are ambiguous portions to this comment. What is clear is that Mark wrote a gospel under Peter's apostolic authority.

External Evidence for Author

There was a key figure in the New Testament by the name of John Mark:

1. Cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10; cf. Acts 12:25)
2. Son of Mary, prayer meeting hostess (Acts 12:12)
3. Abandoned Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:13) and later caused P & B to part ways (Acts 15:37-39)
4. Fellow prisoner and minister with Paul later in life (Colossians 4:10, Philemon 1:24, II Timothy 4:11)
5. Appears with Peter along with another of Paul's band (Silas) (1 Peter 5:12-13)

Internal Evidence for Author

Some have argued that the titles are actually original to the gospels; i.e. the title *According to Mark* was on the gospel from the beginning.

1. There is no direct evidence either way: all extant manuscripts have titles.
2. The unanimous witness of the early church that the gospels were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John imply at the very least that it was well-known who wrote them. This fact suggests that their names were attached from the very beginning.
3. In the 3rd Century, Tertullian complains about how Marcion's clipped copy of Luke was published without the author's name. This indicates that anonymity was (by then) unconventional.

These are not conclusive but they do indicate that the anonymity of the documents should not be assumed.

Audience and Purpose

It is very likely that Mark had Gentiles as part of the audience, given his transliteration of Aramaic throughout. He regularly adds commentary on Jewish practices, Aramaic terms & Palestinian geography (3:17; 5:41; 7:3-4, 19, 34; 10:46; 15: 16, 22, 34, 42).

He is also explicit about the laying aside of food laws (Mark 7:19) which would have special interest to Gentiles.

As to purpose, the book begins as follows:

Mark 1:1— The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God . . .

Such a strong beginning remark indicates a desire to communicate the Good News. Indeed, it is famously said that Mark is a passion narrative with an extended introduction.

Language and Style

Mark is most known for his compact but vivid style. His conciseness is matched only by the intensity of expression. He uses the term 'immediately' frequently. Here is a sample of *Mark's* striking imagery:

- 1:10—he saw heaven being *torn* open
- 1:26—The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him *with a shriek*.
- 2:4—they made an opening in the roof above Jesus *by digging through it*
- 3:5—He looked around at them *in anger and, deeply distressed*
- 6:56—They *begged* him to let them touch *even* the edge of his cloak
- 7:37—People were *overwhelmed* with amazement.

Themes

Some of the larger themes of Mark involve the so-called “backwards wisdom of God”:

1. Secrecy concerning the message
 - Jesus tries to keep quiet displays of spiritual power (3:12, 5:43, 7:36)
 - Use of Parables—Jesus rarely teaches directly, excepting disciples
 - Kingdom parables indicate mystery, smallness (cf. mustard seed)
2. Suffering is essential to Christ’s mission and discipleship:
 - Fairly early in the book, Herodians and Jews plot his death (3:6)
 - As his messianic identity increases so too does his teaching on his inevitable betrayal and death (cf. Peter’s confession and its proximity to his expostulation, Mark 8:27-33)
 - Explicit descriptions of discipleship all involve suffering, denial and the cross (8:34ff, 9:35, 10:42-45)

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External Evidence for Author

Papias is quoted by Eusebius *Historia Ecclesiastica* on Matthew:

*So then Matthew *compiled* the *oracles* in the *Hebrew dialect* [style?], and everyone *translated* [interpreted?] them as best he could (France, 33, emphasis original)*

This remark has given way to much speculation given its ambiguity on the starred words above. What are some options?

- The language of *Matthew* as we have it does not support a translation (note the novelty in OT citation and the extent of word-for-word similarity to *Mark*.)
- This passage could be describing a lost document.
- Papias could be wrong

Some completely abandon the evidence from Papias as inconclusive. I believe we can recover at least that Matthew was in the business of writing even if this passage isn't referring to what we currently have.

Internal Evidence for Author

As with Mark, the titles could well be original.

Themes are consistent with what we know about Matthew:

1. The name 'Levi' (cf. Mark 2, Luke 5) indicates he was probably part of a levitical family and would have sensitivity to legal concerns, as exhibited in the gospel (e.g. Matthew 5:17-20)
2. Here are features that would be expected from a tax collector:
 - The author of *Matthew* has a strong command of greek.
 - *Matthew* contain the most frequent remarks on precious metals and coin weights.
 - Christ's conflict with the Pharisees is most pronounced in *Matthew*.
 - Matthew's genealogy contains a number of taboo characters who played a special role in God's kingdom: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth (Moabite), Bathsheba.

Audience and Purpose

Matthew neither offers an explicit statement of purpose nor indicates his audience. Here are some relevant textual data:

- 61 OT references (cf. 31 in Mark, 26 in Luke, 16 in John)
- Mark's sensitivity to explaining Jewish custom is mostly absent
- The book opens with Jesus' genealogy, and in particular begins with the Jewish patriarchs.
- Numerical sensitivity (14 generations in the genealogy; 7 parables; 7 woes to Pharisees)

These facts signal the following about *Matthew*:

1. The audience contained a very large Jewish component. We may only speculate whether it was for evangelism or edification.
2. The book is meant to be employed in teaching and memorization

Themes

In line with above observations, the following themes emerge:

1. *Kingdom*—More than anyone else, Matthew focuses on Jesus as the Davidic king. The following phrases appear frequently:
 - Kingdom of heaven (32×); Kingdom of God (5×); Kingdom (6×)
 - Son of David (8×); Christ (13×); Messiah (4×)
2. *Fulfillment*—Matthew is concerned to demonstrate Jesus' unique place in history through His fulfillment of Old Testament law, prophecies, types, etc. The word 'fulfillment' occurs most in Matthew and is found on the lips of Jesus (5×) and Matthew as narrator (11×).

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External Evidence for Author

As with the other gospels, tradition is unanimous:

- Marcion (anti-semitic heretic of 2nd C.) signals that *Luke* was indeed written by the beloved physician, Luke. The inclusion of the butchered copy of *Luke* in the canon of Marcion makes it clear that its author was most likely a Gentile.
- The Muratorian canon (late 2nd C. document) again has Luke writing his gospel.
- Patristic evidence does not deviate: Irenaeus, Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria.

The criterion of embarrassment is in play here. Luke is not a likely author: he's neither Jewish, nor an apostle nor an eye-witness of Jesus' earthly ministry. (Cf. Pseudepigrapha all use big names.)

Internal Evidence for Author

Again, if we accept that the titles are original, then any concerns about anonymity vanish.

There was a key figure in the New Testament named Luke:

1. Luke was most likely a Gentile (not a Jewish name, cf. Marcionite data)
2. Luke was a doctor (Colossians 4:14)
3. Luke was a long-term companion of Paul (Colossians 4:14, II Timothy 4:11, Philemon 1:24)

These are features of *Luke* consonant with the above information:

- Luke gives a special place to Gentiles: genealogy ends with Adam; mentions key Gentiles from OT; Good Samaritan; minimized discussion of Jewish law
- Parts that are original to *Luke* exhibit clear command of Greek. Furthermore, *Luke* favors Hellenistic over Semitic expressions (e.g. 'Lord' vs 'Rabbi')
- *Luke* employs more detail in healings (not especially technical language)

Audience and Purpose

In the other synoptics, the purpose and audience are left implicit. The reader must infer its purpose from its themes and emphases. Fortunately, Luke is explicit:

Luke 1:1-4—Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

The fact that he uses the expression 'most excellent,' indicates that Theophilus is an official of some kind. He could be a recently converted statesman. Some have speculated that he was Paul's lawyer given the abrupt ending of Acts. Past a certain point, we won't know.

Themes

Here are several themes that receive special attention from Luke:

1. *Salvation*—Jesus' role as savior is frequently highlighted during the childhood narratives (Mary, Zechariah, Simeon). The word save (& cognates) occurs most frequently in Luke.
2. *Wealth vs. Poverty*—Throughout Luke's gospel, the rich are portrayed as foolish either directly by Christ or through parables. Likewise, the poor receive special attention in parables (Lazarus, Parables of Guests)
3. *Prayer/Praise*—
 - Jesus is exhibited as praying here more than any other gospel. Major parables on prayer are unique to Luke (Audacious Neighbor, Persistent Widow). Jesus regularly exhorts his disciples to pray.
 - There are also numerous songs of praise (Elizabeth, Zechariah, Mary, Simeon, Anna) as well as images within parables of joyful celebration. The word rejoice appears most frequently in Luke.

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