



The Synoptic Gospels

The term synoptic means view together. Of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke are the synoptics because they present a similar view of Jesus, as opposed to John who presents Jesus in his own unique way.

The synoptics emphasise Jesus' teachings, miracles and passion/resurrection. They are not intended to be biographies but a proclamation of the good news about Jesus Christ and the redemption he has provided.

The synoptics have many things common to all three accounts. They all recount four major periods of Jesus' life: the ministry of John the Baptist, Jesus' ministry in Galilee, the journey and ministry around Judæa and Jesus' final week in Jerusalem culminating in his passion and resurrection.

Jesus is identified as Messiah and Son of Man. The nature of these roles were commonly misunderstood by the Jews; therefore Jesus kept his identity secret until he could clarify what he meant by such terms. His role is presented as a suffering servant and not the political ruler the Jews were expecting.

Each of the gospel accounts culminate with a report of plots to kill Jesus, the institution of the Communion Supper, Jesus' betrayal, trials, crucifixion, burial, resurrection and appearances to select disciples.

Each gospel also has its own unique features, distinguishing it from the other two. Matthew's resurrection account is much briefer than Luke's and focuses on the appearances of Christ to the disciples in Galilee, as opposed to Jerusalem. He also uses the term 'kingdom of heaven' instead of 'kingdom of God' as do Mark and Luke. One other unique feature of Matthew's gospel is his many quotations and allusions to the OT and explaining how they were fulfilled in Christ.

Mark has a fast-pace style marked by terminology such as then, and, or immediately. He pictures Jesus as suffering many abuses of the Jews and of his opposition to their wicked practices. He also uses Aramaic phrases at least five times. These are translated which suggest his audience was not Jewish like Matthew's but Roman.

Luke gives us the details of John the Baptist and Jesus' birth and pre-birth, mentions the shepherds visit to the baby Jesus and a picture of Jesus' childhood. Luke also gives a longer account of Jesus' resurrection appearances to his disciples. Luke also spends a lot of time on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem leading up to his passion.

The differences between the synoptic accounts have led to various problems which theologians have sought to resolve. The primary criticisms used to accomplish this task have been source criticism, form criticism and redaction criticism.

- Source criticism pertains to the written records or sources used by the gospel writers.
- Form criticism attempts to determine the influences that affected the gospel material while it was being passed on by word-of-mouth and how the material was affected.
- Redaction criticism investigates the way the author's personal theology and bias affected the way he organised and recorded the historical gospel materials.

Although these critical methods have been of some help, it cannot evaluate the hand of God which inspired each writer in the way he did.

John's gospel was written some time after the synoptics and it is said that he considered all that had been written about the Christ and determined it would be more appropriate to write an account that reflected a different perspective rather than simply rewriting the same story. John focuses more on the Christology of Jesus: his divinity; his unique relationship and oneness with the Father and the Holy Spirit; and his role as the Eternal Word.