

The Synoptic Gospels

NIV Study Bible

A careful comparison of the four Gospels reveals that Matthew, Mark and Luke are noticeably similar, while John is quite different. The first three Gospels agree extensively in language, in the material they include, and in the order in which events and sayings from the life of Christ are recorded. (Chronological order does not appear to have been rigidly followed in any of the Gospels, however.) Because of this agreement, these three books are called the Synoptic Gospels (*syn*, “together with”; *optic*, “seeing”; thus “seeing together”). For an example of agreement in content see Mt 9:2–8; Mk 2:3–12; Lk 5:18–26. An instance of verbatim agreement is found in Mt 10:22a; Mk 13:13a; Lk 21:17. A mathematical comparison shows that 91 percent of Mark’s gospel is contained in Matthew, while 53 percent of Mark is found in Luke. Such agreement raises questions as to the origin of the Synoptic Gospels. Did the authors rely on a common source? Were they interdependent? Questions such as these constitute what is known as the Synoptic Problem. Several suggested solutions have been advanced:

1. *The use of oral tradition.* Some have thought that oral tradition had become so stereotyped that it provided a common source from which all the Synoptic writers drew.
2. *The use of an early Gospel.* Some have postulated that the Synoptic authors all had access to an earlier Gospel, now lost.
3. *The use of written fragments.* Some have assumed that written fragments had been composed concerning various events from the life of Christ and that these were used by the Synoptic authors.
4. *Mutual dependence.* Some have suggested that the Synoptic writers drew from each other with the result that what they wrote was often very similar.
5. *The use of two major sources.* The most common view currently is that the Gospel of Mark and a hypothetical document, called *Quelle* (German for “source”) or *Q*, were used by Matthew and Luke as sources for most of the materials included in their Gospels.
6. *The priority and use of Matthew.* Another view suggests that the other two Synoptics drew from Matthew as their main source.
7. *The priority and use of Luke.* A similar view suggests that the other two Synoptics drew from Luke as their main source.
8. *A combination of the above.* This theory assumes that the authors of the Synoptic Gospels made use of oral tradition, written fragments, mutual dependence on other Synoptic writers or on their Gospels, and the testimony of eyewitnesses.
9. *Complete independence.* Some hold that the Synoptic writers worked independently of each other. According to this view, the similar—sometimes even verbatim—choice and order of words and events are best explained by the infallible guidance of the Holy Spirit on the authors.

DATING THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

- **Assumption A**

Matthew and Luke used Mark as a major source

View No. 1:

Mark written in the 50s or early 60s a.d.

(1) Matthew written in late 50s or the 60s

(2) Luke written 59–63

View No. 2:

Mark written 65–70

(1) Matthew written in the 70s or later

(2) Luke written in the 70s or later

- **Assumption B**

Matthew and Luke did not use Mark as a source

View No. 1:

Mark could have been written anytime between 50 and 70

View No. 2:

Mark written 65–70

(1) Matthew written in the 50s (see Introduction to Matthew: Date and Place of Writing)

(2) Luke written 59–63 (see Introduction to Luke: Date and Place of Writing)