

Synoptic Gospels

What does the word 'synoptic' mean?

There are several definitions of the word 'synoptic'; however, in reference to the gospels, synoptic takes the following meaning: presenting or taking the same or common view.

Which three gospels are known as the Synoptic Gospels?

Highlight, underline, or mark the similarities in these passages. Select one color for words and phrases consistent in all three texts, and another for words and phrases that only appear in two of the three.

Matthew 3:16-17

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Mark 1:10-11

And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Luke 3:21-22

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Matthew 16:15-16, 20

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” [...] Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

Mark 8:29-30

And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.” And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

Luke 9:20-21

Then he said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered, “The Christ of God.” And he strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, [...]

Matthew 26:26-29

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

Mark 14:22-25

And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

Luke 22:17-20

And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, “Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

Were you already aware that these gospels had similarities? Do the differences cause problems?

Why are the synoptics so similar in some areas?

There are multiple theories as to how we ended up with three gospels by three different authors with such specific commonalities.

- **Markan Source:** 93% of Mark's content is utilized in either Matthew, Luke, or both. However, the way Mark is written does not appear to be abridged, and Mark is considered the earliest of the gospels, generally speaking, which makes it likely that Matthew and Luke utilized Mark's content in their own gospels.
- **Q Source:** Another theory is that rather than copying directly from Mark, all three gospels borrowed from some common other source that is not included in the Bible. This source may have been a single document, a collection of documents, or even oral traditions. *We have no physical copy of what may have been the Q source, this theory is primarily to make sense of the pattern of differences and commonalities in the three synoptics.*
- **Other Theories:** Other theories exist that all three gospels were written with influence from one another or that Matthew is the primary gospel and Mark utilized both Matthew and Luke for his gospel. The Markan Priority is the most widely accepted theory, however.

Why does this matter?

- Because Matthew, Mark, and Luke are so similar, some critics will say that we don't actually have three different witnesses to Jesus, but one with two copies.
- The differences are then criticized as conflicts.

However, if we go back to our three genres for the gospels, this highlights something significant. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are not just acting as individual witnesses. They are also acting as...

In comparison, over 90% of the book of John is unique when compared to the synoptic gospels.

Seven Sayings of Jesus on the Cross

Quote	Reference	Context/Reason
	Luke 23:34	
	Luke 23:43	
	John 19:26-27	
	Matthew 27:46 & Mark 15:34	
	John 19:28	
	John 19:30	
	Luke 23:46	

Reflection

Why do you think God may have inspired three different but similar accounts of Jesus' life instead of just one?

What do the similarities between Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us about Jesus and the recorded events?

How does seeing the same event from multiple perspectives help us in seeing the fullness of Jesus' mission?

Dive Deeper

If you want to keep studying on your own this week, check out these resources:

- Four Portraits, One Jesus by Mark L. Strauss (\$30 on Amazon)
- BibleProject's video on the Gospel (<https://bibleproject.com/videos/euangelion-gospel/>)
- Get the handouts at DeeplyBiblical (<https://deeplybiblical.com/gospels/>)