

The Synoptic Gospels: Overview

Gospels as a New Testament Genre

The noun 'Gospel' (Grk: *euangelion*) was originally used of 'news of victory' or 'the reward for the bringer of good news' (LXX 2 Sam 4:10, 18:22). In the NT it has several different usages:

- It was used frequently in Paul's letters to refer to the message about Christ (e.g., 1 Thess. 1:5, Rom 1:1-3). The 'Joyful tidings'.
- Mark uses the word to refer to the proclamation of Jesus 'about God' (Mk 1:14). This was something taught by Jesus that he called people to 'believe in'.
- Mark uses it at the beginning of his work ('The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ'). This was an unprecedented use of the term 'Gospel' to a particular genre of writing.

What kind of writing (*Genre*) is a 'Gospel'?

Scholarly interest has centred on whether or not 'gospel' was a completely new category (*sui generis*) or derived from other genres of the Graeco-Roman literary environment. This is important because genre is not just about style/content/form, but about interpretation- 'a work's genre inherently qualifies its interpretation' (Guelich 1991:174). Two basic schools:

1. **Analogical.** Gospels are analogues of other literary forms. Candidates suggested include:
 - a. Apocalypse (Perrin, Kleber)
 - b. Biography or bios (e.g. Talbert 1977, Burridge 1992) - Gospels are partly biography, but not typical biography. E.g. Mark: heavily selective, with no mention of early life and almost a third dedicated to the last week ('A passion story with a introduction'). Matthew & Luke add birth narratives, but John has a theological prologue.
 - c. History. Luke-Acts is probably the nearest to this type of writing, but it is not simple history. Luke sets life of Jesus in wider historical contexts, but 'orderly account' is not a series of events 'as they happened'.
 - d. Other suggestions: Socratic dialogues, Greek tragedy.
2. **Derivational.** Gospels are a new category with no precise parallel. But how did they come about and why are they unique?
 - a. Evolution of Christian proclamation (*Kerygma*). Form critics (notably Bultmann) stressed the way that the original message, centred on the death and resurrection, which was adapted according to the Church's mission. Guelich p188: Form is shaped by the content: gospel is 'essentially a "sermon" or the passion kerygma with an extended narrative'.
 - b. Creative genius of Mark. In reaction to form criticism, which undermined the role of the evangelists.

Opinion varies as to whether gospels are a distinct genre. Genre is not only about form and content, but also about *function*. *In this sense they are unique*: the aim of the Gospels seems to have been to persuade the reader that Jesus of Nazareth was 'the Christ, the Son of God' (eg Jn 20:31). Gospels are proclamation (***Kerygma***) written by believers that share characteristics of other kinds of writing of the period.

Canonical Gospels in relation to other gospels

First three Gospels are clearly different from John, which comes from a different tradition and will be dealt with separately. But all four Gospels share common features:

- Baptism of Jesus by John
- Teachings and sayings of Jesus
- Miracles and/or signs performed by Jesus
- Passion Narrative
- Resurrection

Gospels that didn't make it

There are other Christian writings that are called 'Gospels', but which were never serious candidates for inclusion in the Canon. Some (e.g., Thomas) may have been contemporary with the canonical gospels, but others were certainly much later.

- **Infancy Gospels.** James: Birth and childhood of Mary. Infancy Gospel of Thomas: miraculous stories of Jesus as a child.
- **Collections of sayings.** Gospel of Thomas.
- **Gnostic gospels.** Gospel of Philip and Gospel of Truth. Meditations on religious themes.

Other gospels are referred to in early literature but have been largely or totally lost. (Eg Gospel of Peter, and Jewish-Christian gospels of Hebrews, and of Ebionites).

Literary forms, Genre and Sub-genres

Ideas of genre can be applied at different levels, with no clear boundaries between them. A Gospel may represent a particular genre, but literary critics also talk of 'sub-genres' or 'literary forms'. These are units or structures within a text that have some affinity with conventional writing of the time. (NB Form critics tend to look at small units / **pericopes** that they try and trace to particular functions within the oral tradition of the early Church. These may or may not overlap with units recognised by literary critics.)

The Gospels fall under the broad category of **Narrative**: they proclaim by telling the story of Jesus. (There is surprisingly little overt comment on the story). Within these narratives there are various literary forms, or sub-genres (e.g. Achtemeier et al 2001:74-81):

1. **Genealogy** in Matthew and Luke
2. **The Symposium** (Table talk) A pattern for Luke?
3. **Type scenes** Events that have a predicable, or expected pattern
4. **Parables** Difficult to define clearly. A story from everyday life with hidden meaning.
5. **Passion narratives** May link with other literary forms depicting the 'vindication of the innocent sufferer'.

Source Criticism: the origin of the Synoptic Gospels

The **Synoptic Gospels** share a common core, with nearly identical wording. Of 661 verses in Mark, 90% are found in Matthew and over 50% in Luke. There are striking similarities in language, style and order. This raises the issue of how each gospel was derived: the **synoptic problem**. This has entertained scholars for centuries... and will continue to do so!

Traditionally, Matthew thought to be the first Gospel, and Mark a summary. But in 19th century, the opposite view was put forward- and Mark became widely accepted as the first gospel and source for the others- hence massive increase in interest.

The theory of **Markan priority** is accepted by most scholars who see evidence in:

1. Common subject matter of Matthew and Mark and of Luke and Mark.
2. Common usage of language within the shared sections.
3. Meagre agreement of Matthew and Luke against Mark
4. Rare constructions and unusual words. Mark's 'odd' style is sometimes retained, but where 'improved', always Matthew or Mark or Luke or Matthew and Mark.

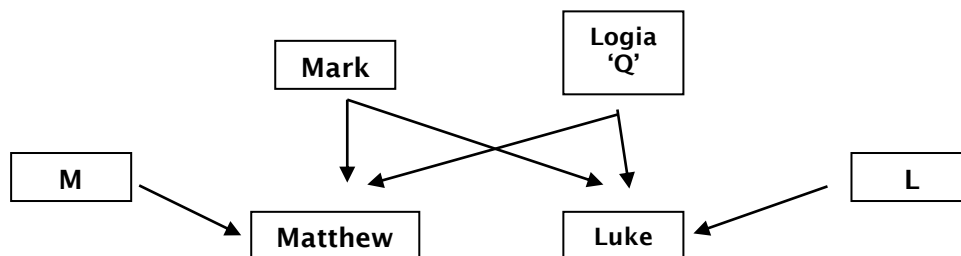
But evidence is disputed by some and there are long-standing theories that suggest Matthew came first (Griesbach first suggested this in 18th century).

The sayings source Q

Analysis of the shared bits of Matthew and Luke that are *not* in Mark (some 200 verses) suggests that both writers had access to a collection of mainly teachings of Jesus. This *hypothetical* source is designated **Q** (=Quelle, German for source or spring) or the **Logia** ('sayings') **source**. Although there is no documentary evidence for the existence of Q (and some scholars vehemently deny it ever existed), there has been a great deal of study seeking to identify the exact contents and origin (see Theissen 2003 chapter 3). May have been collections of sayings used by early itinerant evangelists.

The Two & Four Source Hypotheses

If theories of Markan priority and existence of Q are correct, the simplest way of explaining the Synoptic Links would be that Matthew and Luke independently drew on Mark and Q ('Two Source').



Streeter (1926) suggested that Matthew and Luke may have also drawn on sources derived from their author's particular church communities, and that Luke may have existed as 'Proto Luke', a combination of L and Q prior to adding Mark.

Source Criticism and Form Criticism

Both methods rely heavily on detailed analysis of the text. NT Source criticism arose first as an attempt to explain the origin of different parts of the synoptic gospels. It relies on comparing parallel passages, the exact phrasing of each text, style, language use etc.

Form Criticism followed work on the OT psalms (Günke). It looked for units of tradition based on their function as oral sayings. These pericopes were assigned to particular categories, e.g.:

1. Pronouncement Stories

Mark 2:15-17 *And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax-collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples - for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax-*

collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard this, he said to them, '**Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners**'.

2. Miracle Stories

Mark 1:21-28

Setting They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as scribes.

Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God'.

Account of cure But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

Outcome of cure They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching - with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him. At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

3. Short Sayings without a Framework

Proverb

Matt. 6:24 No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth (Greek: mammon).

Judgement Saying

Matt. 7:1-2 Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.

4. Parables

Matt. 13:33 The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.