



Synoptic Gospels

The Synoptic gospels found in the New Testament are the three gospels according to Mark, Luke and Matthew. While each gospel is named after a person, the actual author is unknown. Each gospel originated within a community either led by, or having a strong association to the designated name. The actual gospel was most probably written and edited by a number of authors over an extended period of time.

The word *synoptic* comes from the Greek word meaning “with one eye” and refers to the parallel between the three gospels in terms of their narrative similarity in outlining Jesus’ ministry, their common use of sources and their similar literary structures. These similarities become obvious when the three gospels are laid beside each other for comparative purposes. The fourth gospel in the New Testament, John, comes from a different tradition and is literarily and structurally dissimilar to the other three.

The commonality across the three synoptic gospels is due in large part to their respective developments. While no concrete evidence has been found to throw light on the order or manner in which the gospels were constructed, since the nineteenth century ***the two-source hypothesis*** has been supported by most scripture scholars.

This hypothesis proposes that Mark was the first of the three to be written around the time of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (70CE). Matthew and Luke were written in separate communities, around 85 or 90 CE, but both drawing on Mark as their key source. Additionally, both of these gospels used a long-lost collection of Jesus’ sayings commonly referred to as “Q” from the German word *Quelle* meaning source, as well as material particular to their own gospels often referred to as “M” and “L” respectively.

While each of the three gospels has similarity in their structure and sources, each differ in their theological perspective, reflective of issues and concerns particular to their own communities. For example, at the end of the first century CE, Matthew’s Christian community was dealing with their separation from their Jewish roots, so this gospel is eager to highlight the continuation of God’s promises to Israel through the person and ministry of Jesus.