

THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

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Scholars speculate about synoptic origins in an effort to create a scenario for the features of the first three gospels as a set. We do not have to settle on what actually explains the phenomena; we need only develop credible possibilities for explaining those features.

I. Introducing the Synoptic Problem

The “synoptic problem” addresses the relationship between Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The degree of their similarity calls for explanation beyond what happened. Their unusual similarity is then complicated by the differences between them. Evangelical perspective calls for minimizing appeal to contradiction to solve the question. The synoptic phenomenon is part of the “gospel problem” as a whole. In addition to the characteristics of all four gospels, the synoptic problem focuses on features shared by the first three. The following considerations highlight how alike they are.

A. The contrast between the synoptics and John. The similarity between the first three gospels is striking on any count, but laying them individually and collectively alongside John, highlights their own similarity and accentuates the difference between them and John. It draws attention to the variety that could have existed between all four.

B. The brevity of the gospels relative to the length of Jesus’ life and ministry. John remarks, “*The world itself would not hold the books that would be written*” (John 21:25; cp. 20:30-31). How is it that out of “*everything Jesus began to do and to teach*” (Acts 1:1), the synoptics have such a high proportion of the same incidents that form such a minority of what all happened?

C. The approximately equal length of the gospels and their shared pericopes. The equal length of the gospels may be due to standardized lengths of papyrus and parchment scrolls. It may represent a dimension that readers were accustomed to, which addresses the gospels’ usefulness. The teaching blocks seems too brief to recount whole sermons unless Jesus repeated his materials in set forms for the benefit of his apostles.

D. The same wording in multiple accounts even in narrative portions. Verbal similarity in the teaching material we might explain as the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus. Statements about what happened are less alike, but they still bear a greater likeness than we would expect in independent accounts.

E. There is a similarity in sequence, which could be explained from either a literary connection or historical foundation.

II. Guidelines for Solving the Synoptic Problem

A. Names associated with the gospels are correct. There is no *a priori* reason to start with the idea that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John did not write the gospels that bear their names.

We say that acknowledging that only Luke and John have much internal evidence useful for determining authorship. Luke combines with Acts to form a two-volume work, and within Acts the “we” passages place the author with Paul at Rome. If Paul wrote Colossians at Rome, from the names in Colossians 4 the “*beloved physician*” Luke emerges as the most likely candidate for writing Luke-Acts.

In the case of John, “*the disciple Jesus loved*” was in the upper room, hence, one of the apostles, and so distinguished from any apostle mentioned alongside that cryptogram. By elimination, John is virtually certain to be the author (21:20 + 24). A few items in Matthew and Mark fit with, but do not lead to, the conclusion that they were the authors. We depend on early Christian testimony about Matthew and Mark; so the issue in these two cases is not the reliability of scripture but of tradition. But we have no reason to reject the uniform witness of early Christian writers on such a purely historical matter as authorship.

B. Natural and supernatural factors combined to produce the synoptics. Regarding the **supernatural component**, we know that the writers had the assistance of the Holy Spirit. In the upper room the night before his crucifixion, Jesus promised the apostles that the Father would send the Spirit to teach them everything they needed to know and help them remember everything Jesus had told them (John 14:26; cp. 2:22; 12:16 as well as Luke 24:8). The Spirit’s assistance would apply as much to literary efforts as to oral proclamation. So, we do not have to find natural explanations for all the synoptic phenomena, nor do we have to reinterpret those phenomena as natural occurrences.

Not needing to reinterpret the synoptic phenomena, we can illustrate this way. Under normal circumstances people cannot recall word-for-word someone else’s presentation from a year or two before.¹ The gospels are not likely to have been written for some decades after what they record. Although the writers were orally delivering meantime what later they wrote down, natural recall is not a likely option for explaining the synoptic records. On the other hand, we could reinterpret the discourses of Jesus as “gists” of what he said—and we are inclined to do that for independent reasons; but we are not forced to do so, because the Spirit’s assistance could compensate for human deficiency. We could also imagine that they were as much the creations of the early church as they were accurate recollections of Christ’s actual presentations.

In John 14, Jesus promised his apostles Holy Spirit assistance; so supernatural aid would clearly find expression in the first and fourth gospels—Matthew and John. (The fact that Matthew was the only apostolic synoptist may lie behind Augustine’s notion that he wrote first and Mark abbreviated his account.) But we infer that the apostolicity principle applies indirectly to Mark and Luke, because Mark served as the interpreter for Peter according to early Christian testimony, and Luke worked under Paul’s direction as the New Testament itself shows (Acts of Apostles). Since Paul was an apostle in the primary sense, we extend to him the same promises and rights as to the original twelve; he fulfilled the same role they did (cp. Galatians 2:6-10, e.g.).

The Spirit could have operated positively and restrictively. Restrictively he could have protected them from misunderstanding Jesus’ teachings, miswording their records of what he had said ad done, misexplaining his motives and thoughts, misidentifying connections between Old Testament predictions and Messianic fulfillments, misapplying content to their purposes of writing. Positively the Spirit could have given the evangelists awareness of things Jesus did when he was alone, intensified their memory of his ideas and words, guided them in

Selecting what was important for posterity and relevant to the purposes of each gospel and the needs of its audience.

Supernatural aid complements the **natural component** in solving the synoptic problem. Making the Spirit the whole explanation represents overkill. Not only should there be a realistic balance between supernatural and natural factors; but if we operate on the principle that God does not do for his people what they can do for themselves, we should assume that natural explanations account for as much as it can before we invoke supernatural ones. God's not doing for people what they can do for themselves correlates with his being more glorified by the less he does for them. Sufficiency operates here as a principle in divine-human interaction.

C. The synoptics present actual historical events. We see no reason to approach the synoptic problem supposing that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are like the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* much less *Agamemnon* or *The Trojan Women*. Synoptic events and sayings came from Jesus instead of in the early church. The gospels need not be creations by later Christians more than accounts of the historical Jesus. They are not literary productions that appropriate a historical core of characters and events to form a framework for presenting their own ideas. Unlike *The Last Temptation*, the synoptics purport not to project their authors' self-analyses, but to record the words and deeds of a person who radically moved them from such uncertainties to a personal relationship with Ultimate Reality historicized, concretized, incarnated before their very eyes, heard with their own ears, and touched by their own hands (Luke 1:3; John 19:35; 21:24). These are not myths in even the most wholesome sense of that term (2 Peter 1:16-21). They are not literary productions even to the degree that Job and Jonah seem to be in the Old Testament.

John claims to have seen the events he presents (John 19:32-37; 20:30-31; 21:24-25; 1 John 1:1-4; cp. John 20:24-29, etc.). Luke says that he interviewed ministers and eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1-4). Both Luke and John emphasize their concern for accuracy and their claim to represent it. The gospels derive from accurate eyewitness testimony about real historical events.

D. Inspiration applies at the point of inscription. Even as the synoptics do not have to be total creations by the Holy Spirit, so also they do not have to be productions "from scratch" by each writer. There is no objection to gathering information to produce the accounts. Using oral as well as written sources (Luke 1:1) is appropriate as long as some factor allows the writers to stand above total dependence on such sources. They could have researched matters not known by personal observation or divine revelation. That factor lies in their own awareness of what they recorded as well as the restrictive/protective/preventative work of the Spirit. We can envision their interviewing "*eyewitnesses and ministers of the word*," reading preliminary accounts of various things Jesus did, and even using other canonical gospels in preparing their own. Using sources does not mean blindly depending on them. Any natural activity could have preceded final production as long as supernatural oversight occurred at the point of writing.

III. Aspects of the Synoptic Problem

The task is to account for similarities and differences in length, selection, sequence, and wording. *Length* applies to the size of the gospels and their parallel pericopes. Something must explain the fact that the gospels are neither pamphlets nor full-length books; there are no three-page summaries, on the one hand, or New-Testament-length books, on the other.

Selection accentuates the high proportion of common events that together comprise a small percentage of what happened. Selection also includes the material common to all three synoptics, the material common to the first and third, the small amount peculiar in each one, and the large amount peculiar to John's account. John seems deliberately to have "written around" the synoptics.

Sequence addresses the fact that there is agreement, not only in the order of the pericopes but also within their sub-units. With minor exceptions Matthew and Luke never agree against Mark even though Matthew departs the Mark-Luke sequence in favor of a topical arrangement in some cases. Luke 9:51-18:14 shows no parallel blocks with Matthew and Mark, even though pieces here and there in that block does parallel the first two synoptists.

The *wording* of accounts is often very close, particularly in the teaching sections and to a lesser degree in the historical connections between them. These similarities are more evident in the Greek original than they are in translation.

Students of this issue need to see a balance between similarities and differences across the synoptics. Some scholars seem to get so caught up in highlighting the likenesses that they undersell the differences. In reaction, evangelicals stress the differences so as to downplay the likenesses. There is no value in skewing the facts either way. There is nothing to hide and everything to face head on.

Finally, the best solution to the synoptic problem invokes mechanisms that account for similarities and differences conjointly. Reasons given for similarities must be appropriate to accounting for differences at the same time. Picturing the authors as slavishly copying the same written sources predicts a result too high in verbal agreement. Picturing them as independent workers predicts results too dissimilar. Instead, we look for a complex of processes that yields an appropriate combination of difference and likeness.

IV. Factors Particularly Relevant to Solving the Synoptic Problem

A. First-century Mediterranean cultures were more oral than the paper-and-ink cultures in the nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first century Western world. Manuscripts of the Koran were at one time corrected against the memory of a Muslim sage. Some African cultures like those in the story of *Roots* have had special individuals whose role is to preserve in their memory the history of their tribe. The oral-culture factor looks away from trying to account for the synoptic phenomenon solely or primarily by writing-based mechanisms. If the written medium is primary, we are more inclined to assign a deliberate reason for each difference.

B. Rabbinic religious instruction relied heavily on memorization. Centuries passed before the Talmudic, Mishnaic, and Midrashic materials came into writing. That helped communicate a distinction between Torah and tradition, canon and interpretation, statutory law and case law. In other connections, scholars have suggested that Matthew divided his genealogy of Jesus into three sets of fourteen to make memorizing it easier. Presumably he dropped out the omitted names to get the scheme to work better. Similarly, the lists of apostles are always in three sets of four with the same person first in each set. The practice is reminiscent of "Every good boy does fine" for the lines of the treble clef, or "My very eager mother just served us nachos" for the order of the planets from the sun outward. Perhaps in part the synoptic pericopes are so short and so similarly worded because they are summaries that required less to remember and crystallizations that were easier to memorize. At any rate, as in John and Acts, the synoptic

accounts are too short for what Jesus would have said in a three-and-a-half-year ministry and often too short for what he would have needed to say to an original audience. (Perhaps Jesus himself delivered his material in brief segments as a capable rabbi dealing orally with common people in unstructured, open-air circumstances.) We can have some idea of what full accounts would look like from the fact that twenty to nearly fifty percent of the gospels deals only with the triumphal entry till the ascension, a period of just seven weeks.

C. A few decades elapsed before apostolic preaching about the life of Jesus was reduced to writing. Luke himself illustrates this oral-then-written pattern when he writes so that Theophilus might know the certainty of things wherein he had been orally instructed (Luke 1:3-4, κατηχήθης < κατηχέω, cp. “catechism”). Inscripturating Messiah’s life and ministry loosely coincided with the beginning of the (1) **Gentile mission**, which created a more widespread need for reliable accounts that could be multiplied and studied between apostolic visits. Acts outlines the progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome after the manner of the Lord’s commission to evangelize “*Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth*” (Acts 1:8; cp. Luke 24:47).

The suggestion that Matthew or one of the other apostles took notes on what Jesus said and did is possible, but we wonder about that likelihood. His disciples had little reason at the time to prepare for writing later accounts of his life for long-term use after his ascension. They probably thought that he would never leave: “*Messiah abides forever*” (John 12:34).

Prior to the martyrdom of Stephen, (a) the first stage of proclamation took place largely confined in Palestine—Jerusalem, Judaea, and Samaria. The main exception was the conversion of Diasporic Jews during pilgrimages to the Jerusalem feasts—people like the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39) and Ananias of Damascus (Acts 9:10-19; note also the disciples of John later in Ephesus: Acts 19:1-7). Many events and teaching segments would not have been witnessed by people of Judaea, for example, if they took place in Galilee, Samaria, Perea, the Decapolis. Even if they occurred nearby, people would not necessarily have observed them.

(b) The general persecution that surrounded Stephen’s death initiated a second stage of evangelism. Paul’s systematic persecution of Christians not only created the adverse effect by spreading the gospel more uniformly throughout Judaea and Samaria (Acts 8:1-2); it spread it more significantly among Jews outside Palestine, particularly in Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch (Acts 11:19). So a need arose for crystalized instruction not only in Palestine at an early date, but more so later with the mission to the Diaspora and the subsequent Gentile mission. In the latter two cases, there would have been a special need for knowing what had happened during Messiah’s incarnation.

(c) In Antioch, however, a third stage began when “*men of Cyprus and Cyrene . . . spoke to Greeks also*” (Acts 11:20). These Gentile “godfearers [σεβόμενοι, sebomenoi]” were non-proselytes who became a bridge to the pagan world. With Paul’s missionary activity, this third stage began in earnest (Acts 13:1ff.). Since Gentiles were so far removed geographically and timewise from the “Christ events” in Palestine, their need to learn what had happened there was more acute, especially when coupled with the next observation.

The approaching death of the primary witnesses of the resurrection brought a more urgent demand for written accounts of Messiah’s ministry (Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; 4:33; cp. 1 Corinthians 15:3-8ff.). Records were needed that could serve as (2) **written functional equivalents to oral apostolic witness of the resurrection**. The whole New Testament canon became the functional equivalent of apostolic testimony (note 2 Peter 1:12-14; 3:1-2; cp. Jude 17). That is one reason apostolicity along with catholicity became canonical principles. The

centrality of the resurrection in the apostles' witness explains the distinctive structure of gospels. The synoptics are resurrection-centered and marked by apostolicity. So we should expect the solution to the synoptic problem to begin with apostolicity. For that reason, we propose the scenarios that conclude this essay.

Writing the gospels to replace direct apostolic witness does not have to imply an unexpected delay in Christ's return, as scholars often do. Recasting the writing in this light unnecessarily implies a misexpectancy for his soon second coming. The New Testament does not give reason to think that the apostles misunderstood "*the blessed hope*" in some way that affected their proclaiming and writing. In one place, Paul even reminds the Thessalonians that Christ's return was not immediate (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12). In the New Testament and subsequent church history, there has been an intentional ambiguity about the time of his return, which creates tension between a sense of immediacy and the fact of not yet. Meantime, the death of individual believers serves for them as the equivalent of the parousia.

D. Among early Christian writers Mark was known as "the interpreter of Peter" (Papias as cited by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* 3:19:15). Papias, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Jerome all associate Mark with Peter in the production of the second gospel. From the New Testament, we also learn that Mark worked with Paul at the beginning and end of Paul's Gentile ministry (Acts 13:4-13; 2 Timothy 4:11). Justin Martyr (*Trypho* 106) refers to Mark's peculiar words "Boanerges," that is, 'Sons of Thunder'" (Mark 3:17), as appearing in the "Memoirs of Peter" (*ἀπομνημονεύματα Πέτρου, apomnēmoneumata Petrou*); is that his label for Mark's Gospel?

E. Luke belonged to the Pauline circle. He would have heard "the apostle to the Gentiles" recount to Gentile and Diasporic audiences the events of Jesus' life. We assume that both Paul and Peter and other missionaries beyond Palestine would need to familiarize people with Christ's work, not only as a part of the polemic for Christianity, but for Christian growth after conversion.

F. According to the "we passages" in Acts, Luke the physician was with Paul during his two-year incarceration at Caesarea. During that time he could have interviewed "*the ministers and eyewitnesses of the word*" (Luke 1:2-3). That could have something to do with the lengthy section of "new material" in Luke 10-17. He could have gone to Jerusalem to interview Mary, whom Jesus in his dying moments had committed to John's care (at least for the immediate time; John 19:25-27) and whose residence would have been in the holy city even if she lived with either of her sons James or Jude after their conversion. That may account for Luke's presenting the birth narrative from Mary's viewpoint while Matthew presents it through the eyes of Joseph. It may help account for the amount of material dedicated to the events surrounding the death-resurrection of Jesus. Those occurred in Jerusalem, and more resource people would have been available to interview there. Luke could have had contact with Philip, "a minister of the word," who seems to have used Caesarea as his home base for twenty years or more (Acts 8:40 + 21:8-9).

G. At some point the gospel materials were translated from Aramaic to Greek. Jesus surely conducted his ministry in the language of the common people. Even though Palestine was to some extent trilingual (John 19:20), his practice of identifying with the masses would have meant using Aramaic in normal situations. Throughout the synoptics and John, recurring Hebraisms indicate that the synoptics are translation Greek. No Aramaic records of Christ's life have come down to us even though Papias (cp. Irenaeus, Pantaenus, and Origen) did say that Matthew first wrote his *Logia* (gospel?) in Aramaic and people translated as best they could. The

striking similarities and noticeable differences between the Greek synoptics become even more intriguing because they record in one language what happened in another. We can hardly say that verbal likenesses are due to full, exact quotations of Jesus' original presentations, because that would require identical translations in something of the way Jewish tradition said the seventy-two Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Old Testament into the Greek Septuagint. Besides, the brevity of the individual sections shows that they are summaries. The synoptics present inscripturated proclamation that involved (a) summarization, (b) crystallization, (c) memorization, and (d) translation.

H. Many written narratives existed before Luke wrote his gospel (Luke 1:1), and Luke knew about them and may have consulted them. Apparently he considered them inadequate for his own purposes. Since he wanted to write "*in an orderly fashion*" (1:4), these narratives may have lacked orderliness. His desire to trace things "*accurately*" (1:3) may imply that he was not sure they were wholly reliable. "*Tracing the course of all things*" (1:3) may suggest that they were not as complete as Luke wanted his account to be. Those written pieces may have recorded only what their authors witnessed. Whether he would have included Mark (and/or Matthew) among these narratives we cannot know. Mark lacks a birth narrative for both Jesus and John the Baptist. Matthew and Mark both begin with John's ministry without explaining who he was, where he came from, how he related to Jesus, or when his ministry began. (This might imply that their audiences already knew such information or that it was already available—in Luke?). Luke has much more didactic material than Mark (or even Matthew). Since considering Mark inadequate would not have meant considering it erroneous, Luke could have used it as a beginning point. Papias mentions a "sayings source" Matthew wrote. If such things were available that concentrated on the teachings of Jesus, Luke may have included some of their contents as well. Since he wrote about what Jesus "*did and taught*" (Acts 1:1), his own purpose was bigger than Mark's—who emphasized historical presentation—and that of sayings source(s). Luke's goal was larger than either of these. With him there was awareness, if not use, of written sources.

I. The gospels are interpreted history. Like any "history," the gospels present neither a "stream of consciousness" nor an exhaustive record. Their theological purposes explain selection and arrangement as well as some explanatory inserts. The very process of selection implies interpretation. The writers chose events that were representative of what Jesus did and said, that were direction-setting in his unfolding ministry, that could engender and confirm faith (John 20:30-31; Luke 1:4), that highlighted Jesus as fulfilling Messianic predictions, that fit with the nature of a gospel (ministry emphasis) and their apostolic functional equivalency (resurrection emphasis), and furthered the purpose of a gospel and the distinctive purpose of each gospel for its audience.

V. Factors Applied to Synoptic Similarities and Differences

A. Similarities

Similarity in selection across the gospels comes from the need to stress (a) *Jesus' fulfillment of Messianic predictions* and to highlight (b) *events surrounding his death-resurrection*. Both emphases have apologetic force.

Similarity in sequence and wording between the synoptics comes in part from what happened. These eyewitnessed events and teachings came into the synoptics from (a) *natural memory*, (b) *inspired memory* (John 14:26), and conceivably (c) *notes by observers*. In regard to this last possibility, it has been suggested that Matthew as a tax collector may have been inclined to make such notations. There were even shorthand systems that scribes like him could have used. There are analogies with other people who accompanied important figures like Alexander the Great and kept logs of what transpired. Jesus' apostles would have had even greater respect for the importance of Jesus as Messiah than Xenophon had for Alexander the Great.

Similarity in wording could have been further enhanced by *crystallization through apostolic repetition*. That would have occurred unconsciously to some extent, but there could have been “*thumb-nail*” digests deliberately prepared for memorization purposes. There was precedent for this in rabbinic pedagogy presumably used by teachers like Gamaliel with men like Saul of Tarsus. That could have been Paul's project with Luke during the incarceration in Caesarea; that could have issued in the Gospel of Luke and spread to the other gospels if we are inclined to adopt Lucan priority among the synoptics. A similar process could have originated with Peter and issued through Mark into his gospel, and the other synoptics followed that lead. Matthew may have been the source of the crystallization, which then spread to the other two synoptics. These three suggestions could correlate with corresponding theories about the priority of each of these writers. Maybe sayings sources (*logia*) were collections of such crystallizations. A combination of these processes rounds out a list of possibilities for the origin of the synoptics as we know them. As a “*rabbi*,” *Jesus himself may have originally delivered his teaching in memorizable manner* and culturally relevant fashion. His model prayer is a case in point (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4), even as John had evidently taught his disciples memorized prayers (Luke 11:1), or sketches for prayer. Jesus’ extensive use of parables and vivid imageries likewise speaks of an approach to teaching informed by the culture’s predominantly oral society. Similarity in wording is greatest in the teaching material, but not exclusively there, because close wording appears also in the historical splices between didactic blocks and in historical pericopes that have little sayings content.

We do well not to overdo oral crystallization. We must be prepared to have it account for unusual phenomena like the μή + aorist imperative (vs. aorist subjunctive) prohibition formula that occurs on only three occasions in the New Testament, and two of those are in the parallel accounts of two synoptics. Matthew 24:17-18 (= Mark 13:15-16 = Luke 17:31²) is one occasion; Matthew 6:3 (the other occasion) has no parallel.

B. Differences

Differences in selection, order, and wording come from the different concerns Matthew, Mark, and Luke had. Different purposes relate to different destinations, or audiences, and their needs. *Deliberate change* from oral or written sources in front of them would mean omitting certain things, adding others, and changing what was before them. John especially, but Luke as well, makes statements about the Logos and deeds of the Messianic Son of God that accentuate his corporeality. John did this, we suppose, to combat Gnostic influences in the Gentiles churches at the time he wrote in Asia (Ephesus?). Mark’s Gentile destination may have caused him uniquely to include the phrase “*house of prayer for all nations*,” the Old Testament text cited in connection with the cleansing of the temple (Mark 11:17). Matthew uses “kingdom

of heaven” in ten places where the Mark and Luke parallels have “kingdom of God.” Matthew may have stressed to his Jewish audience that the Messianic “kingdom” was not a political, geographical, national one as they had expected. At any rate, his almost uniform usage of “kingdom of heaven” has to be a deliberate change from any sources he had (or *vice versa*). Matthew’s terminology has to change Jesus’ actual wording. Jesus did not use both expressions simultaneously. Matthew chose to express the sense of Messiah’s words rather than the words themselves. The differences in wording would be deliberate changes by the second writer. They could also be due to translation differences from an Aramaic original, whether written or oral. They could be variant expressions of a common crystallized oral tradition, whether in Aramaic or Greek.

Similar material repeated on different occasions may account for similar, though different, entries. Scholars infer that the Parable of the Pounds in Luke 19:11-27 and the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30 are two forms of the same story that grew up in the early church. But Jesus himself could as easily have told similar parables for similar reasons on different occasions. The mustard seed imagery appears twice in Matthew’s gospel but with different applications (13:31-32; 17:20; cp. Paul’s use of the foundation figure on two occasions in teaching somewhat different lessons: 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; Ephesians 2:20-22). People in Galilee would have needed to hear the same things Jesus taught in Judaea, Perea, or Samaria, and *vice versa*; so there is *prima facie* reason to think that repetition occurred in the teaching material and that these similar presentations could be conflated, or “melted together,” in later presentations by his disciples, who had accompanied him to all these places. Quite a bit of the material in Luke 10:1-18:14 amounts to snatches and pieces that show up in other settings in Matthew and Mark.

Differences in sequence may be due to *topical interest*, as when Matthew relative to Mark and Luke re-sequences pericopes in chapters 4-14. *Difference in stress* could explain some dissimilarities. John (2:13-22) puts the cleansing of the temple at the front of Jesus’ ministry rather than at the end (Matthew 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-18; Luke 19:45-48), perhaps to set a tone for the radical dissimilarity between Mosaism and Messianism. There could have been two cleansings.

Memorized oral crystallization implies undesigned difference. It offers a mechanism for alteration that does not have to be intentional. It affords greater flexibility in wording and tends to keep accuracy at the level of concept more than words, especially since translation from Aramaic to Greek occurred at some point. If synoptic interdependency or dependency on common sources happened in the written medium, then word-level precision would be greater than in the oral medium. We would look more for reasons for dropping something, reordering, rewording, or adding; but writing from memory does not predict as much concern for such precision. Expression is more approximate, and ideas are more clearly the point. Memorizable digests could even provide for true interdependency in that one preacher might hear another make the presentation in a way that affected his own way of saying it, and his could at another time affect that other person’s wording. Such a thing could not easily have happened in writing. Finally, oral crystallization could mean that, instead of slavishly reproducing a standardized digest prepared, say, by Peter, an eyewitness like Matthew might lapse into his own accounting or add in information around that other layout.

In summary, similarity in order could have resulted from (1) actual order, (2) fixed oral tradition, (3) literary interdependence, vs. (4) topical re-arrangement. Similarity in wording could have come from (a) actual words, (b) oral fixation, or (c) written crystallization.

Differences in sequence and wording could come from (1) free rendering of Aramaic originals by independent synoptists, (2) free expression from memory of fixed oral tradition regularized in Greek, (3) conscious change from oral or written sources because of different purposes relative to different readers. Different selection could have come from (a) different oral and written sources, and (b) different purposes. The synoptics show a combination of differences and likenesses without contradiction.

VI. Possible Scenarios

The long years of orally recounting the life of Jesus in the apostles' witness combines with the greater oral character of first-century Jewish culture and the Rabbinic tradition of memorization as a learning technique. We suppose that there were three steps in the formation of the synoptics. (a) The events occurred in the presence of eyewitnesses (with some notes conceivably taken, natural memory plus the enhanced memory later added). (b) They were told and retold in the apostolic preaching. With this process came unconscious and deliberate summarization and crystallization that produced memorizable digests. (c) The gospels were written to multiply the apostolic witness, replace that witness at the time of their impending death, aid in the Gentile mission, and perhaps serve a liturgical purpose.

Oral crystallization of memorizable pericopes allows for several possible scenarios. The crystallization could have been done by Jesus himself in some cases (model prayer, e.g.), by Peter, by Matthew, by Paul. The crystallization could have been a combination of unconscious and deliberate work. One scenario could trace the process through Peter, thence to Mark and the other synoptists. Another could trace it through Paul, then to Luke, and the other two synoptics. Matthew and Luke would not derive from Mark's gospel necessarily but from common awareness of crystalized episodes. Centering the apostolic witness, hence the synoptics, on Peter is natural because he was the unofficial spokesman for the twelve, as the gospels and early chapters of Acts show (cp. Galatians 2). He witnessed Jesus' whole ministry, and by personality he was the central proclaimer of record in the early years of the emerging church. The drawback is that his background would not make him the most likely one to cast the form of proclamation in Rabbinic style. Centering the apostolic witness on Paul has the advantage of his known familiarity with Rabbinic style, but offsetting this advantage is his not being an eyewitness of (much of) Jesus' ministry. Moreover, he was converted a few years after the proclamation had been going on, and he could not operate in Palestine because of Jewish threats against his life. Approaching the process through Matthew could account for Papias' statement that he wrote a *Logia*, which may have been a sayings source rather than his gospel as we have it. What has come down to us may be a later effort of his to present a more complete record. Combining the different possibilities gives us perhaps the best order of complexity to correspond with the complex phenomena we are trying to account for.

A summary of scenarios would include several history-based approaches: (a) Jesus himself presenting short, memorizable, materials used by the apostles and eventually written down (But many cases seem too short for the assumed setting they record.); (b) note-taking by someone like Matthew as he accompanied Jesus during his ministry, with the resultant writing of a gospel based on these notes; (c) oral crystallization of originally longer material combined with deliberate condensation of accounts for memorization purposes and ultimate writing of this material—the process could have begun with Peter and gone through Mark to the

other synoptists, or begun with Paul and gone through Luke to the others (or with a note-taking Matthew on to Mark and Luke), and it could have been combined with research of witnesses and previous documents. We are setting aside a (d) process that goes on primarily in the written medium, because such a process would predict even more similarity than we see across the synoptics. We are especially setting aside an unhistorical approach—(e) any scenario that assumes the content of the synoptics came from the preaching of the early Christian community more than, or rather than, the actual words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth.

In suggesting this set of interacting scenarios, we imply several points that bear on the nature of scripture and God-breathedness. (1) Each gospel does not have to be written “from scratch.” The use of oral and written sources is no problem as long as protection from error exists at the point of inscription. (2) The gospels do not have to be totally independent productions. A synoptic newly being written could intentionally repeat/use or deliberately write around the previously existing ones. (3) The accounts do not have to represent the exact words of Jesus. (They cannot because of the translation variable.) It is sufficient for them to represent his ideas. (4) The gospels do not have to present all the concepts that Jesus said in a particular case. Even as they do not contain every incident of words and deeds so also within each pericope they may be digests of his presentation. (5) The presentations do not have to represent the whole of each individual concept on a given occasion. They may dip down inside what he said and verbalize as his words a part of the idea he originally expressed.

¹Under hypnosis people can do remarkable things, but these men did not hypnotize each other to get these results. Altered states of consciousness may provide models for the Spirit’s assistance or media through which he worked, but such natural phenomena are not themselves the actual mechanisms we call inspiration/God-breathedness. Total recall and the sound equivalent of photographic memory do not strike us as sufficient likely causes.