

What Is the Source of the Four Gospels?

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The four Gospels of the New Testament share a number of similarities, but also differ from one another. Some Bible critics emphasize similarities to suggest that one writer copied from another; others focus on differences to argue that the Bible contradicts itself. Works of academic theology often attribute the similarities to a hypothetical source document called “Q.” From this supposed original, they say the text of the New Testament evolved over time. What, then, is the Bible? God’s inspired and inerrant Word, or just the words of men?

The historic Christian teaching is that each of the Gospel writers were individually inspired by the Holy Spirit and that they all had similar source materials, including especially eyewitness testimony. (Acts 1:8; cf. 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:21) St. Augustine concluded that Matthew wrote first, then Mark, then Luke. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all used a similar pattern. Because of this, these three Gospels are called the “**Synoptic**” Gospels (Greek: “see together”). John, sharing less material in common, focused more on Jesus’ teachings and the events of Holy Week. The four differ, without contradiction, each offering an historical account of the *same* Jesus.

During the past 250 or so years, some scholars have drawn attention to a “synoptic problem”: How can it be that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all use very similar language, to tell the same story, and yet sometimes give unique details in their individual accounts? Another curious observation is that, while all three have *similar* material, Matthew and Luke include *additional* details in their Gospels that are not found in Mark’s Gospel. Why is this?

While these questions may be innocent enough, the field of Biblical Criticism seeks to scrutinize the text of the Bible from an arrogantly “rational” perspective rather than humbly following the Bible’s own text that affirms its inspiration and inerrancy. The starting point for Biblical Criticism is not a firm belief in the Bible as a reliable document, preserved from the early church, but rather, a critical assumption that the Bible has been written by a process of gradual elaboration. Since Matthew and Luke are longer accounts, critics assume that they must be elaborations based on Mark’s Gospel, and therefore Mark had to have been written first. They also assume that the Gospels do not report eyewitness accounts, but second-hand, word-of-mouth retellings,

like the “telephone” game children play.

One famous theory from this school of thought is called “Quelle Theory.” (“Quelle” means “source” in German.) This theory posits that Mark wrote his Gospel first. Then, Matthew and Luke wrote based on Mark as well as an additional source, dubbed “Quelle.” This hypothetical proto-Gospel document supposedly included the “oracles” of Jesus, written down in Aramaic.

To back up this argument, critics point to an obscure statement by one early church father, Papias of Hieropolis (A.D. 60–130), who wrote, “Matthew compiled the oracles of the Lord [Jesus] in a Hebrew manner of speech, and everyone translated them as he could.”

Papias’s statement had long been understood to mean simply that Matthew wrote his Gospel down in Hebrew (Aramaic) first, and that others translated it into their own languages. Most seminaries today instead deploy the Q hypothesis to deny inspiration and inerrancy. But, apart from Papias, no other church father mentions anything like Q. Wouldn’t such an important document, recording the sayings of Jesus, have been mentioned at least once by at least one other early church father? Indeed, among the 5,000+ surviving Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, not a single copy of “Q” has been found.

The most troubling aspect of the Q theory is not lack of evidence, but rather the reason why the theory was proposed at all. Critics presumed that the Bible is an error-prone human book and that the Gospels were not eyewitness accounts. These two assumptions are merely that, assumptions. Sure, Matthew may have initially taken notes in Aramaic, but speculations about a hypothetical Q document carry no weight against *preserved manuscripts* of the actual New Testament, which state often that *eyewitnesses* heard Jesus speak and saw Him alive, resurrected from the grave as the world’s Savior. (Matthew 10:18; Luke 1:2, 24:48; John 1:7, 19:35, 21:24; Acts 1:8,22, 2:32, 3:15; 1 Corinthians 15:3–6; 2 Peter 1:16, 1 John 1:1–4)

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