

The Synoptic Gospels

A Harmony

When one turns to the Gospels in the hope of establishing a chronological record of the words and work of Christ a variety of scholars present their view, but no general agreement is established.

As one deals with the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) there are questions concerning when a given message or action took place, since the order of the three Gospel writers seems to differ from time to time. Many examples could be selected.

Matthew	Mark	Luke
8:2 – 4	1:40 -45	5:12 – 16
12:1 – 8	2:23 – 28	6:1 – 5
19:13 – 15	10:13 – 16	18:15 – 17

Some scholars seek to defend the difference in the order of these passages by saying that the teaching of Jesus was repeated and thus recorded by one of the Gospel writers in a different time sequence. Other scholars readily admit that the writers might have combined some situations with others because of subject or that the event in question would certainly follow the order they have selected. The Gospel writers, after all, presented their work as being “according to Matthew” or Mark or Luke. This is how they understood and perceived that it happened.

When seeking to compare these Gospels with John one finds a great contrast. On 23 occasions all four Gospels report the same story. We need to remember that John wrote his Gospel much later, recollecting the teaching of the disciples by Jesus. Much of the Gospel presents the teaching of Jesus as: a question is asked of Jesus and Jesus then goes into a rather lengthy explanation. This is not the only message of John’s Gospel, however, since he, like the other Gospel writers, spent a great deal of time on the last week in the life of Jesus along with the resurrection. The great emphasis on the last week of Jesus’ life is found in each of the Gospels.

In spite of this there are scholars who seek to harmonize all four Gospels. It is the contention of most scholars, however, that only the first three Gospels can be harmonized, though scholars differ in the order, some using Matthew as the major example of the order, others using Mark or Luke.

The four Gospel writers each tell their story but it must be remembered that they are Gospels. They are dealing mainly with the words and works of Jesus. There are sizable gaps in the picture of Jesus they represent. As the result of the extensive emphasis on the last week of the life of Jesus these Gospels surely cannot be called a “Life of Christ.”

Often the desire to harmonize the Gospels is based on a desire to prepare a “Life of Christ.” Since these are Gospels, and not biographies, much is missing from the story of the life of Jesus. Almost a century ago there was a great movement to produce a “Life of Christ.” Two of these writers whose “Life of Christ” was popular, and are still in print, were James Stalker and Frederic William Farrar. They sought to fill in the gaps in the record of the life of Jesus by reporting about how life was lived in that day, and implying that these were surely the activities of Jesus. It must be said that their books provided a deepened understanding of how life was lived in that day, which was valuable.

Some time later the popular movement by scholars was a quest for the “Historical Jesus.” While this study again added to the general understanding of circumstances in the life of Jesus within the political and social background of the day, and sought to relate this to the 20th Century, it too was limited in its success by the gaps provided by the Gospels and the history of the time. Some of these scholars were able to point out the recognition of Jesus’ messages in the changes in culture, social and political outlook, and life. Scholars, despite all their studies, still ended up with the Gospels, and little else, as the result of their studies.

This moves us back to a look at the words of the Gospel writers. These are the materials we have and the basis for our consideration and understanding. We need to look at these messages in the light of ancient Judaism and discover the difference in the teaching and life of Jesus as compared with, for example, the sects within the Jewish social pattern. When we do this we see the importance, not only of the teachings of Jesus but also the importance of the views and understandings of Matthew, Mark and Luke. (The same is true also for John but that Gospel is not within the realm of this study.) This study can enlarge the realm of our understanding and give us new insights into the attitude and teaching of Jesus, and the significance of the last week in his life which is emphasized so greatly by these writers. Jesus is seeking to clarify and redirect the thought patterns and understandings of the people who listen to him. He is moving from obedience to the Law as the requirement for being right with God. He is moving people in their understanding in the direction, not by solving one’s spiritual problems through obedience of the sacrificial system. His direction is to lead people to accept personal responsibility before God and to look at their relationship with their fellow believers in the light of “morality” and “ethics” rather than simply providing demanded offerings and not accepting personal responsibility in one’s relationship with God.

Granted: we are living in a different time and in a different culture, but the needs of humanity remain the same and the approach to Christianity must be guided and directed by those teachings that have been with us over the years, the teachings, and the life, ministry and death of Christ.

All attempts to establish a **HARMONY OF THE GOSPELS** meet with questions on the part of scholars. What comes where is difficult to determine. The following is a

Harmony I found on the internet that is quite detailed. The addition of John's Version of the Good News is not important to our study but you will note that those times when all four Gospels have the same basic story are marked.

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