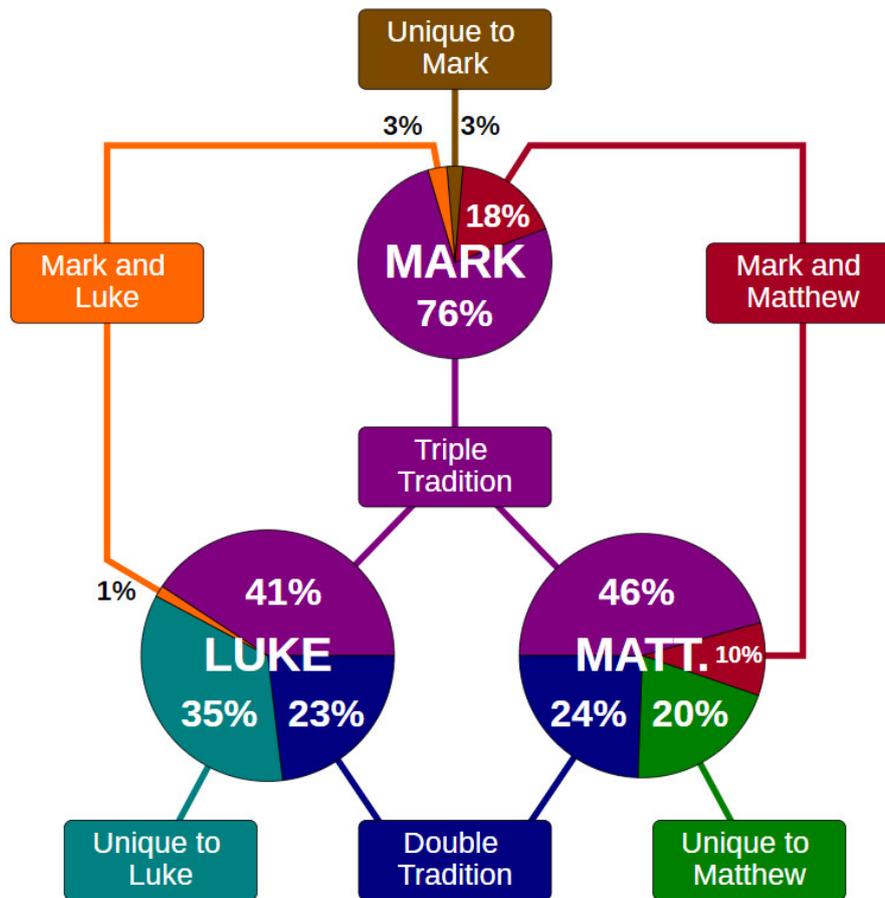


# Differences between the Synoptic Gospels<sup>1</sup> and an Indication of their Inter-relationships and Common Sources

(figure 1)<sup>2</sup>



1. Material shared only between the Gospels of St Matthew and St Luke is commonly referred to as “Q”. This material *may* have once existed as a written text, but if it did it is now lost. Most of “Q” records sayings of Christ rather than an account of any of his deeds, (see <http://www.crivoice.org/Q.html> for the contents).
2. The current consensus is that Mark is the core gospel, the first perhaps to be written down, since the other two gospels are so dependent upon it with clear textual overlaps. The fact that some Fathers assumed that St Matthew was the first gospel should not concern us unduly since such issues are not part of dogma.
3. St Mark’s Gospel has very little text (3%) not shared with either Matthew or Luke or both of these. As Papias relates, the Gospel was written by John-Mark at the behest of St Peter whose recollections it contains.
4. Before the written canon emerged, individual Gospels or combinations of them were probably specific in used to each community and assembled into a definitive collection of 4 gospels no later than the end of the first century. St Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202) has the first recorded reference to there being 4 gospels rather than any other number. (<https://classicalchristianity.com/2011/11/12/st-irenaeus-on-the-four-gospels/>)
5. St John’s Gospel is not dependent on the Synoptics although there are some parallels with material in Luke. St John plans his material around 7 Signs. There is little reference to the Kingdom of God and the chronology of the Last Supper places it in the Days of Preparation for Passover rather than at the Passover Meal.

<sup>1</sup> This article primarily references the Synoptic Gospels although there is a link to the contrast with St John’s Gospel at the end.

<sup>2</sup> [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Relationship\\_between\\_synoptic\\_gospels-en.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Relationship_between_synoptic_gospels-en.svg) (details of licence and attribution for fair use)

# Explaining the Reasons for Gospel Differences

We need to be aware of the differences between the Gospels when dealing with the same material or settings and why these may be important rather than problematic. An understanding of the origin of the Gospels and how we should handle the different ways in which they present the Christian story is useful.

1. The Gospels never themselves claim to be exhaustive accounts of everything Jesus said and did<sup>3</sup>, quite the contrary. Redaction criticism enables us to see how the material might have been selected and presented, but we should be aware of any unexamined assumptions of biblical commentators. This is a useful guide: - [https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/nt-interpretation/nti\\_11.pdf](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/nt-interpretation/nti_11.pdf)
2. No scribe accompanied Christ and the Disciples on their travels writing down everything that was said and done. Aside from the fact that this is nowhere referred to in the New Testament, if such a scribe had performed this work there would have been one Gospel handed down, not four.
3. Papias,<sup>4</sup> a reliable early witness, (albeit a chiliast), relates that John-Mark wrote down for him St Peter's recollections of Christ's teachings and actions (maybe because St Peter was illiterate).
4. In antiquity and in the absence of universal literacy, accurate storytelling as a reliable vector of transmission of important sayings, speeches and events usually preceded any written record. In the case of the Gospels, there was no pressing need to write down the content of memorised and circulated oral tradition until the Apostles themselves were approaching old age or death.

The fact that three Gospel accounts (the Synoptics) are so closely in textual agreement, particularly in the use of both [Mark / Peter] and [Q / Matthew=Luke] <sup>5</sup>, underscores the reliability of Holy Spirit inspired and handed down oral tradition. Nonetheless, differences are readily discernible (as we might expect) in parallel accounts between the Synoptics. Where relevant, (rather than incidental or unimportant), these differences can be very enriching for our understanding of the Gospel.

5. The desire to "explain away" the differences and any attempt to harmonise these differences is misguided and counter to the evidence of the historical record. Islamic critiques of our Scriptures often identify these differences as evidence of distortion or unreliability,<sup>6</sup> whereas in fact the existence of different original manuscripts<sup>7</sup> and the retention of differences in the accounts testify to the Church and the Synagogue's honesty in relation to historical data.
6. The Gospels are the divinely inspired and authoritative accounts, originally in oral tradition, of Christ's birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension, together with his teaching and works. As such, they are as much a work of the Apostles in the Church as they are of God Himself. It lies within the Church's own Tradition therefore to make sense of the differences that we find within the canonical texts of the Four Gospels. Sometimes those differences matter, often they do not. Armed with this information and approach we can then proceed to evaluate the discrepancies.

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<sup>3</sup> John 20:30-31; 21:25

<sup>4</sup> For more detail on the witness of Papias see here: <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/papias.html>

<sup>5</sup> figure 1, page 1

<sup>6</sup> Caliph Uthman on the other hand commanded variant manuscripts of the Qur'an to be burned. See here for the history: [http://harvardhouse.com/quran\\_purity.htm](http://harvardhouse.com/quran_purity.htm)

<sup>7</sup> See here for a complete listing of the manuscripts : [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_New\\_Testament\\_uncials](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_New_Testament_uncials)

## The Resurrection Appearances – a notable example of differences in the accounts: (figure 2)

Event	Matthew 28:1–8	Mark 16:1–8	Luke 24:1–10	John 20:1–8
When?	at dawn	just after sunrise	very early in the morning	while it was still dark
Who comes first?	Mary Magdelene and the other Mary	Mary Magdelene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome	Mary Magdelene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others	Mary Magdelene
What do they find?	earthquake with angel who rolls back the stone	stone rolled away	stone rolled away	stone removed from the entrance
Whom do they see?	angel sitting on the stone	young man in white robe, sitting on the right	two men in clothes that gleamed like lightening	no one
What do they do?	ran to tell his disciples	fled from the tomb, afraid to say anything	told what had happened to the Eleven and others	ran to tell Peter and the disciple, the one Jesus loved
What happens next?	Jesus met them		Peter goes to the tomb to investigate	Peter and the other disciple investigate
What is the third scene?	guards report to chief priests and are bribed		story of two disciples on Emmaus road	Mary sees two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Peter H. Davids, F. F. Bruce and Manfred T. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 507.

### Why the to-be-expected varying accounts should not concern us .... and, therefore, why they should not be forced into a single harmonised account:

1. The historical truth is more important than a contrived single account which would almost certainly distort the true historical record. Christianity is committed to history not self-serving ideology or propaganda.
2. Variant historical witnesses, especially in highly emotionally charged or stressful circumstances, are to be expected and indeed, even welcomed as constituting together a more authentic *collective* witness.
3. Variant accounts are proof positive of a lack of collusion on behalf of multiple witnesses.
4. The saving event, the Resurrection, is in common with all the witnesses and is not itself compromised by varying accounts. The stories told of the appearances are bound to have valuable personal references and in the hands of the gospel redactors, theological reflections also about the significance of Pascha for faith.
5. There are other discrepancies between the Gospels, some only apparently so, some actually so. Very few, if any, materially affect Christian theology. A comprehensive list (argued by a non-Christian sceptic) may be found here: - <http://www.biblicalcatholic.com/apologetics/ShreddingTheGospels.htm> A response to those challenges may be found here: - <http://www.biblicalcatholic.com/apologetics/DefendingTheGospels.htm> An explanation of the differences between the Synoptics and the Gospel of St John may be found here: <https://bible.org/seriespage/2-major-differences-between-john-and-synoptic-gospels#:~:text=Major%20Differences%3A%201%20Omission%20by%20John%20of%20material,of%20symbolism%20and%20double%20meaning.%20More%20items...%20> (Note: The Greek font does not transpose correctly)