



## An Introduction

### Exploring the Gospels in parallel

These notes are designed to give background information to help those leading each of the six studies. Edward Adams, who wrote these notes, from time to time refers to passages in his book [Parallel Lives of Jesus: Four Gospels, One Story \(SPCK 2011\)](#) where he goes into greater detail about certain aspects of each story. You might wish to refer to these passages for extra insights.

Parallel Lives of Jesus: Four Gospels, One Story by Edward Adams (SPCK 2011)

Available at: <http://www.spckpublishing.co.uk/shop/parallel-lives-of-jesus/>

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The suggested approach is to ask each participant to read the stories in each of the Gospels prior to the group meeting. Then, at the meeting, to work from the side-by-side readings as you explore each of the questions below.

Following these questions will allow you to explore how reading in parallel adds a greater depth to our understanding of these passages.

- i. What are the common elements in each of the stories?
- ii. What are the differences in each of the accounts?
- iii. How do we see Jesus in each account?
- iv. What different emphases do the writers give to the episode?
- v. What might we take from each account to help us in our discipleship?

### ***An introduction***

The four Gospels are four parallel accounts of Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection. They tell the same general story and have a number of particular episodes in common (such as the feeding of the five thousand and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem). The first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, relate many more of the same incidents.

It has long been recognized that there is much to be gained by reading the Gospels side-by-side, using a Bible study aid called a 'synopsis'. A synopsis arranges the Gospels in parallel columns so that they can be 'viewed together' (as the word 'synopsis' literally means). Since the first three Gospels have such a large amount of common material, not only shared stories but also shared teachings of Jesus, they are particularly conducive to this arrangement, and this is why there are known collectively as the 'Synoptic Gospels'.



Reading the Gospels comparatively (or 'horizontally') enables readers to see more clearly similarities and differences between them and thus to have a better sense of the distinctive themes and interests of each of the Gospel writers.

But the exercise can be unsettling – when readers are confronted with apparent contradictions between parallel accounts of a specific incident. Take, for example, the death of Jesus. According to Matthew and Mark, Jesus' final words on the cross were, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' In Luke, though, Jesus' last words are reported as, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit', and in John, Jesus' dying utterance is, 'It is finished.' There appears to be a fairly fundamental disagreement here. Reading the Gospels comparatively throws up many such anomalies, and this is one of the reasons why the Gospels are rarely read in this way in church.

One response to variations between parallel passages is to try to harmonize them. For example, the classic way of handling the varied Gospel testimony to what Jesus said as he was being crucified is to conflate Jesus' sayings from the cross in all four Gospels into an ordered set of seven. But while the tradition of the 'Seven Last Words' has value as an Easter meditation, it subverts the intentions of the evangelists.

It is theologically important for Mark that Jesus' last words should be a cry of abandonment, and to have it superseded by a cry of triumph and a prayer of entrustment, as in the 'Seven Last Words' tradition, is to undermine Mark's emphasis. In each Gospel, Jesus' dying statement serves a certain theological purpose, and its contextual significance is compromised when it is placed in a framework that no single Gospel supports. Harmonization has a place in the study of the Gospels, but as a general rule the urge to reconcile differences across parallel passages should be resisted. The four Gospels have been preserved for us in our Bibles as four individual texts. God speaks through their individuality as well as through their unity. By smoothing out the differences between matching passages, we may miss the particular point that each evangelist wanted to make.

In the study of narrative (narratology) a distinction is drawn between 'story' and 'narrative'. 'Story' is *what* is told and 'narrative' is *how* it is told. 'Story' is the basic set of connected events, while 'narrative' is how these events are presented, interpreted and elaborated in discourse, such as a written text. The same story can be narrated in numerous ways – from varying viewpoints, with different stresses and diverse agendas. Think of how the same news story is reported in different newspapers or on different news websites.

The distinction between story and narrative can be helpful when approaching parallel Gospel accounts of a specific incident. One can look for a common story across the accounts but recognize diversity in how that story is told. Since each telling usually has something unique to offer, having a diversity of tellings is a blessing rather than a curse.





In practice, the story-narrative distinction is a theoretical one: a story is always embedded in a narrative and does not exist independently in some pure form. The distinction does not, therefore, give us any insight into how the Gospels were composed (as if the evangelists were independently working with pure stories about Jesus and embellishing with their own narratives). It is generally accepted that the shared content of the three Synoptic Gospels stems from Matthew and Luke drawing extensively on Mark. So, similarities and differences across parallel passages in these three Gospels are to be explained in terms of Matthew and Luke's dependence on and editing of Mark.

In what follows, the study guides will look at six Gospel episodes.....

1. The baptism of Jesus
2. The feeding of the five thousand
3. The walking on the water
4. The transfiguration
5. The death of Jesus
6. The discovery of the empty tomb

