NT Genres and the Synoptic Problem

Alright, let’s go ahead and get started. Let's open with prayer and then - we ended last class period, which was when – Monday, or something like that. It seems my whole week has been thrown off. But Monday we ended by talking a little bit about the diverse literary types or forms of literary genres in the New Testament. We began talking about the narrative which makes up the Gospels and the book of Acts, although Acts is a little bit different type literature than the Gospels. They resemble each other in that they are both narratives, depictions of certain characters and their speeches and certain events. We’ll look at two other dominant literary forms or literary types that make up the New Testament. And again we said what is significant about this is the New Testament contains literary forms and types that may or may not correspond to literary forms and types that we’re used to today. So we need to try to understand the mode in which authors were writing in the first century. What literary forms did they utilize and how might that affect the way we read and interpret certain Old Testament texts. So we’ll finish up discussing the narrative genre, talk a little about letters or epistles, and then one final literary type. Then we’ll start to inch our way into talking about the Gospels, although we probably won’t start talking about specific gospel texts or books until Monday. Hopefully we can start to introduce them today.

So let’s open prayer with prayer and then we’ll talk a little bit about the literary types of the New Testament. Father, we thank you for the privilege, the responsibility, of studying what is nothing less than your revelation to us. I pray that we’ll have a greater appreciation, awareness and understanding of the New Testament texts as they were produced in specific historical, cultural literary and linguistic contexts, while at the same time affirming that it continues to function for us today as nothing less than the word of
God. I pray that we’ll understand it from those perspectives in all its richness and variety. So we pray that you’ll guide our discussion today and give us the wisdom and insight into your revelation to us in Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Alright, we talked a little bit about narrative in preparation for looking at the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which we said are arranged or occur in the New Testament not in their chronological order, the order in which they were written, at least Matthew and perhaps Luke would've been written even after Paul's epistles and Paul's letters. But it's possible that Matthew, Mark and Luke were not even written in that order. But instead the New Testament is arranged more logically. But the four Gospels comprise what is a group of writings that fit the narrative genre and, as we said, it is important understand in the first century how that would've been looked at and how that would've been understood. In the first century narrative or biography, the Gospels fit, for the most part, very well within the category of first century Greco-Roman biographies. The difference between the Gospels and modern-day biographies is that the first century biographies, especially the Gospels, do not seem to be interested in giving you a blow-by-blow account or a detailed account of everything a person did in his or her life and everything they said. But instead the Gospels appeared to be far more selective. That is, the Gospels are actually written from a particular theological perspective, and we’ll look at that.

When we look the four Gospels, one of things we’re going to ask is: Why four Gospels? Why didn’t the early church just lump them all together into one grand narrative and historical account of the life and teaching and deeds of Jesus Christ? But instead the church allowed for different Gospels to stand. So that the Gospels are written by authors who have a theological point – something they want to get across – a spin on the gospel story and the account of Jesus life. What they do is - they're very selective in what they include and how they record it in order to get across their point. So one of the questions we’ll ask is, Why only Matthew and Luke contain the so-called Christmas story and why do only Matthew and Luke contain an account of Jesus’ birth where Mark doesn't seem interested in that and Luke - I'm sorry, John - seems to capture it in one very short statement
or verse at the very beginning of his gospel. And then when you compare Matthew and Luke, their Christmas stories are very different. Luke has shepherds coming to visit Jesus. Matthew says nothing about that. Instead he's more interested in about a year or so later having these Magi, these foreign astrologers, come and visit Jesus. So why did they do that? What's up?

What you can see is the narrative in the first century, or biography in the first century, especially as encapsulated in the Gospels, were not interested in giving you a detailed account of the person's life from birth to their death. Instead, they were far more selective in order to communicate the theological point they were trying to get across. Authors would be selective in the events they recorded and in often how they recorded them, therefore accounting for the differences you see between Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and also accounting for the fact that you don't have - except for a few short verses in Luke - you have nothing about Jesus’ early childhood in the Gospels, simply because they were not interested in telling you everything there was to know about Jesus.

The other thing to know about first century Greco-Roman biography was that when it comes to recording what someone said, their speech - in the first century it was far more common to summarize than it was to in putting something in quotations and giving a word for word account of everything someone said. Instead, it seems that first century writers were far more interested in summarizing the meaning and gist of what someone said - capturing the voice rather than the exact words that an author said.

In fact, if Jesus spoke largely in Aramaic and the Gospels are written in Greek, then we actually have a translation of what Jesus said. In fact, as we talked about in a number of my classes, if you sit down and read Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in a modern-day translation, it takes you roughly 10 minutes or so to read through, depending on how quickly or slowly or contemplatively you read it. I really doubt Jesus spoke for 10 minutes on that day. More likely, the Sermon the Mount is an accurate and adequate summary of what it was that Jesus said and what Jesus was trying to get across. So there are times in the Gospels where perhaps the authors do contain exact wording or close to the wording especially if Jesus spoke in Aramaic and our Gospels are in Greek, then we have
Greek translations of what Jesus said. But outside of those instances, probably most of Jesus’ speeches are more summaries, accurate and adequate summaries, of what it was Jesus said. In the first century, no one would've thought any different.

It might be a little bit analogous to, for example, a faculty meeting at Gordon, the minutes are roughly two or three pages long, yet the meeting lasts for an entire hour. No one would fault the secretary at a board meeting for summarizing in the minutes what someone said, as long as it accurately and adequately conveys what was said. The minutes will pass and no one will think a second thought. That may be a little analogous to sometimes what we’ll find in the Gospels - summaries of what Jesus communicated and what he taught, though, again, accurate and adequate summaries. So we’ll look at that when it comes to how that affects the way we read the Gospels.

The second genre is epistolary. This may be one that we’re more familiar with, but even then first century epistles could deviate from what we do when we write epistles today. Epistles in the first century were a very common way of communicating just about any kind of information. They could be used for business transactions; they could be used for even philosophical tracts and anything in between. So you could use a letter to frame and communicate just about any kind of information. What most people overlook is the very last book of the Bible--the book of Revelation--is actually a letter. It's framed in the form of a letter. So a letter could be used in the first century to communicate just about any kind of information.

It was fairly well stylized as well. That is, it had a fairly common format that a writer in the first century would follow. So when you look at Paul's letters, for example, most of them, although they deviate in significant ways, they--for the most part--follow a very common first century format and way of writing. We actually have a number of letters that have been uncovered written during the first century that can testify to what first century letters looked like. In Paul's letters, although they’re more than that, they’re nothing less than common first century letters, where you could communicate about anything in the form of a letter. A couple of things about letters: 1. a letter often functions as well as kind of a surrogate for the presence of the speaker. So you would write a letter if you had
something important to say to someone and you could not be in their presence, a letter would be a substitute for that. So the letters were often substitutes for Paul's apostolic authority and he expected the readers to take them with the same seriousness with which they would take Paul were he present to address them in person. So letters could function as a substitute for the presence of the speaker.

The other thing, too, is in the same way that there are different kinds of letters today, there were different types of letters in the first century. There are a couple letters that Paul writes that resemble very common types of first century letters. That actually makes a little bit of a difference in the way you read and interpret the letter. We’ll look at that when we get to it. But again, letters were a very common way of communicating. Paul didn't make up these letters or the letter format. He was just following a standard way of communicating information in the first century Greco-Roman environment. And this kind of epistolary genre is also reflected in probably the book of Hebrews to some extent, 1 and 2 Peter, and John's letters and Jude, and as I said, even Revelation actually is in the form of a letter.

The last literary type that only really comprises one book and that’s the book of Revelation is an apocalypse. We’ll talk more about this when we get to the book of Revelation at the end of the semester because I'm convinced understanding the literary genre of this book is crucial and essential for avoiding the way Revelation has often been treated and sometimes abused. Again, we need to understand that the book of Revelation was received by the author and written in a very common literary form in the first century along with the letter, a literary form that we've labeled as an apocalypse. Basically, an apocalypse was a first person autobiographical account of a visionary experience. So when you read the book of Revelation it begins in chapter 4, John says, “I saw heaven opened” and John then is told to come up and he goes to heaven. That was common in apocalypses written roughly from 200 BC to 280 AD, roughly 200 years before and after writing the book of Revelation. So you can actually find English translations of a number of these apocalypses. I can point you in the direction of that if you're interested.

But the point is John's book of Revelation is not unique. It didn't just come out of the
blue. He's following a very common method of writing for receiving a revelation from God, but then recording it for his readers known as apocalypse. Basically it is a first-person account of a visionary experience and it's usually communicated in very highly symbolic language. It is communicated in the symbols of strange beasts and images and things like that. And the key is to try to sort out what's the background of these images. What do they mean? What would they have communicated to the first century readers? Not so much what they seem to mean to us in the 21st century. So we'll talk more about Revelation when we get there. But at least in the New Testament, it is the only example of an apocalypse. However it's not the only example of an apocalypse in the first century. It was a very common, a fairly common, literary type that the readers would've been familiar with when they first heard it read to them.

Alright, so that's just a little bit of a flavor of the diversity of literary types. Even within this literature, there are diverse kinds of literary types. Some of them we’ll look at. For example, we’ll spend some time looking at the parables--what's a parable? One of the common forms of Jesus’ teaching. Again, the parable would have been a very common literary form or means of teaching in the first century. So Jesus, however distinct his teaching and content is, the form of it would've followed what would've been common and recognizable among first century listeners and readers. So I we’ll talk when we come to different books we’ll ask the question how does the literary genre or literary type affect the way we approach this book and the way we read it?

Now to zoom in a little bit closer, I want to start to talk more specifically about the Gospels before we start examining the specific texts themselves: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. I just want to make some observations overall in regard to how we approach them. One issue is can we trust our Gospels? By that I mean can we trust that when we read the Gospels that they provide us with accurate and reliable accounts of what Jesus did and what Jesus said? Or should we understand them as more fictional, or as the church's fabrication of what they thought Jesus did and said or what they wanted to make Jesus out to be doing and saying? So can we trust the Gospels? That is, do they, to some extent, give us reliable and accurate accounts and information of Jesus’ teaching and the things that he did?
You're probably aware of C.S. Lewis's well-known trilemma. I think he argued for this in a book several years ago, before *the Great Conversation* class, you had kind of the freshman seminar type class known as *Christianity, Character and Culture*. One of the books you read, the first one I think, was C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. Some of you perhaps read that. I think it’s there he argues for what has been called Lewis’s trilemma. That is, when you read accounts of Jesus in the Gospels and what Jesus claims, Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic, or he was Lord. That is, Jesus was lying about who he was when Jesus claimed to be the son of God and claimed to die for the sins of humanity and that he would raise again. Jesus was either lying, or perhaps Jesus was just out of his mind, he was a lunatic, he didn't know what he was talking about. He was so flipped out that what he was saying had no basis in reality at all. Or Jesus was who he claimed to be--he was Lord. And of course Lewis argues that it’s the latter. The problem is Lewis left a fourth one out and that is in fact a question that you have to ask before you ask these three, and that is whether the Gospels are legend. One could claim that Jesus was Lord as he claimed to be, but the Gospels are fictional legendary accounts not to be taken seriously. So one has to deal with that question before we can deal with Lewis’s liar, lunatic or Lord.

In fact, there have been a number of attempts to ask the question, Who was Jesus? So that's the first question your notes. Who indeed was Jesus? A very popular way, in fact this was made popular not long ago by a book that looked like this--Dan Brown's *The da Vinci Code*--but I think we’ve referred to this before--but what Brown was saying really was a popularized version of what is often being done in academic circles and that is to see Jesus or to see the Gospels not as historically reliable accounts or historical accounts about Jesus, but following a more legendary or fictional type of genre- so that the Gospels are not meant to give us an historical account of who Jesus was and what he said, but instead the Gospels, in Brown's view and in the view of others, more reflect the theology of the early church. In other words, it is the early church’s theologizing and thinking that made Jesus out to be Lord. In fact, a lot of scholars think that we can know virtually nothing about Jesus. If you stripped all the husks away, the historical kernel at the center of the gospel, basically all you know about Jesus was he was some man in the first century wandering
around Palestine teaching nice things and was finally put to death for what he believed. That’s about all we can know about Jesus. Everything else is basically this little kernel of Jesus has been overladen, kind of blown out of proportion, based on the faith of the church. In other words, the Gospels don't reflect who Jesus was. They reflect who the church believed he was and what the church taught he was and what the church thought he was. So Jesus really was not the son of God who died for the sins of humanity and raised from the dead, who came from heaven, and was God incarnate. Instead that’s a more reflection of the faith of the church. That’s who the church thought he was. But when you strip that away all you have is just a human being who taught nice things in the first century and was put to death for what he believed. So the question is: Are the Gospels more of a reflection of the Church's faith and who they thought Jesus was or do the Gospels actually provide us with reliable and historically verifiable information of what Jesus taught and who he actually was? That is, can we trust the Gospels? Do they provide us with an accurate portrait of Christ and who he was and what he did? Or are the Gospels simply a reflection of the church's theology, their faith, their thinking and their reflection on who the church made Jesus out to be? That’s also wrapped up with another question in your notes reconstructing church history. Along with this portrait of Jesus that we can know virtually nothing about him except what the church made him out to be and what they believed him to be is often church history reconceptualizing him to look like this.

Actually in the first three or four centuries of the early church, there was no one view of Jesus Christ. There were different Christianities. You’ll notice in your notes I have an individual named Bart Ehrman's name and at the side the title of one of his works that is Lost Christianities –plural. So what he’s saying and what a lot of scholars are saying is that Christianity was very pluralistic in the first century. There was no one dominant view of Christianity or of who Christ was, and it was only later when that finally emerged. That was several centuries later the winners, most powerful decided here's what Christianity is going to look like and here's what we’re going to say about Jesus Christ. And so again, what we find in the Gospels is simply one reflection of one element of Christianity and who they thought Jesus was. But it's not the only one and it’s certainly not the dominant one
according to this view.

Now how do we evaluate that? First of all- I don’t know if I have this in your notes or not, first of all, by way of evaluation, it seems to me when you read the New Testament, it's simply not true that Christianity tolerated a variety of perspectives and there was no interest in the correct view of Christianity or incorrect view of Jesus Christ. Read through the New Testament documents and notice how interested they are in preserving the truth as opposed to falsehood, or error. We’ll see that a number of New Testament documents were actually written in response to deviant views of Christ or deviant views of the Christian life. So it's simply untrue that the church had no interest in what was true or that it simply tolerated a diversity of opinions of very early on. Already in the New Testament documents themselves, you find a concern for what was true as opposed to a false view of Jesus Christ. Second, this viewpoint also seems to be operating with this false dichotomy between history and theology. As if a New Testament writer who was writing theology, could not have been writing history, is often how it goes. But again that seems to me to be an illegitimate approach to understanding the New Testament, especially gospel writings. Just because they wrote theology, just because they had a certain perspective and ideology that they are trying to communicate, it did not necessarily mean that they distorted the facts or played fast and loose with the facts. So it's not true that just because someone is writing theology that therefore they’re not interested in history. Again we've seen that the New Testament authors are not just writing history documents, they are writing theological documents. They’re interested in portraying Christ in a certain way. But at the same time, it's not necessary to conclude therefore they must've gotten history wrong or they weren't interested in a historically accurate account of Jesus’ teaching and what he did. So it's incorrect to draw such as disjunction between history and theology as if they can't coexist.

Finally, the church, there is evidence, as you read the Gospels, was interested in accurately portraying the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Not least of all would've been the reliance on the presence of eyewitnesses in the first century, that at least one gospel writer, Luke, clearly tells us that he relies on them for the writing of his gospel. He clearly mentions the presence of eyewitnesses that he relied upon when he wrote his gospel. So the
presence of eyewitnesses and other indicators seem to suggest that the church was interested in the Gospels are reporting the theological the significance of Christ, his life, death and teaching. At the same time, they are also interested in accurately preserving what it was Jesus did and taught rather than fabricating an account that only reflected what the church believed and not necessarily what Jesus himself taught and thought.

We raised the question at the beginning: Can we trust our Gospels? And again, before C.S. Lewis's trilemma, Jesus was either liar, lunatic or Lord, we have to ask: Could the Gospels have been legend? I suggested to you that instead, we can trust our Gospels. First of all, would've been the presence of eyewitnesses that could have been consulted to keep the tradition and the teaching and writings in check. So the presence of eyewitnesses would've made it difficult for mere fabrications to be passed off as true in the first century, especially in the Gospels. In fact, sometimes I use this example, and I borrowed this example from Craig Blomberg, who will be my colleague at Denver Seminary when I teach there next year, but Craig Blomberg, who’s well-known, I had referred to his book in your notes as a very helpful resource for the historical reliability of the Gospels. A common analogy that a lot of scholars used to show that the Gospels were not legendary material, inaccuracies, etc., would've crept in is the game of telephone conversation. You’ve probably played that in some setting although probably not here at Gordon. But when it started and I whispered something in your ear that no one else could hear and you pass it on. If we had time we could do it and you could see how it works but by the time it got to the back, it usually ends up being something completely different than what I said and everybody has a good laugh because it ends up sometimes ridiculous. It's not even close to what I said. That’s often seen as an analogy to what happens with the Gospels. And as you know, it is true that most of the material that we have in the Gospels was for the most part passed down orally. There is evidence that some of it would have been written down, that the Gospel writers would've had access to some written material. But a lot of the teaching of Jesus would've been passed down orally, and that’s difficult for us sometimes to conceive of in our highly electronic and technological age where everything is passed on by e-mail or something like that or on Facebook, whatever. But in the first century, a lot of
information would've been passed down orally, and a lot of Jesus’ teachings would've been preserved and passed down orally. In fact, Paul tells us, that’s how he received the gospel, it was passed on to him orally. But some used this analogy of the telephone, that is if I were to whisper something you and you pass it on and by the time it gets to the end of the room, it sounds ridiculous. Some would say that's what happened the Gospels. As they got passed around, things would have been added and maybe misunderstood. By the time it finally gets to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John what they write is obviously going to be embellished and added to and very different from what actually happened.

Craig Blomberg says the only problem with that analogy is that a better analogy would be because of the presence of eyewitnesses, and perhaps even other written material to keep it in check. A better analogy would be if every seventh person I said, “Now stand up and tell me what I said,” and if they're wrong I could correct them. Then it started with seven more and I tell that person, “Stand up and tell me what you heard,” and if it were incorrect then I would be able to correct them to ensure that the end product was largely going to be correct and an accurate reflection of what I said.

So the presence of eyewitnesses probably played a significant role in keeping the tradition in check from simply becoming a free-for-all and an inaccurate portrayal of who Jesus was. The agreement between the Gospels, while many are quick to point out the so-called discrepancies or differences in the Gospels, what is interesting are the similarities and the agreements between Matthew, Mark, Luke and John that point to a rather stable tradition rather than an uncontrolled passing down of material. The fact that a lot of the information can be confirmed historically. I’ll point you to a book that will answer some of those questions. When we realize and when we allow for the nature of the Gospels themselves, again when we consider and take into account the fact that the Gospels are not trying to give you a blow-by-blow account or word for word exactly everything Jesus said. They're not trying to give you a detailed biography of everything Jesus said. When we realize that the writers can summarize Jesus’ speech, when we realize that sometimes they can draw out the significance of what Jesus meant and the significance of the things Jesus did. When we measure them in light of what was acceptable standards of writing in the first
century, then it seems to me that the answer to the question, Can we trust our Gospels? is a 
resounding, yes. I've listed a book at the bottom of the page, one of the most helpful books on 
the historical reliability of the Gospels, is a book by Craig Blomberg that goes through 
and examines a number of passages, especially passages in the Gospels that apparently 
contradict or seem to conflict. He provides plausible solutions that demonstrate that there's 
no need to call into question the trustworthiness of the Gospels. There's no need to see them 
as mere fabrications or only reflections of what the church thought, only reflections of the 
faith of the church, and not rooted in historical reality. That's The Historical Reliability of 
the Gospels by Craig Blomberg. Unfortunately, the date 1987 was the original publication. 
It has been revised in the last couple years, so there is a revised version and I just haven’t 
updated my notes yet to reflect that.

Alright, any questions so far? There's a lot more that could be said. I’ve summarized 
in a very painfully brief way. Any other questions? Again, I recommend you look at 
Blomberg's book if you’re interested in pursuing this more. [Student Comment] Sure, that 
would certainly be the case. I'm just thinking if I'm going to respond to someone that 
doesn't think that's the case, then it really wouldn't get me anywhere to say this was written 
by the inspiration of Holy Spirit and therefore it's accurate for someone that doesn't believe 
that. I’ll look at some of these other things, but certainly I would agree ultimately that 
behind all this lies God's spirit guiding the writers, as even one of the Gospels claims is the 

case, that God's Spirit is guiding the writers so what they would produce, without taking 
of compiling a bibliography. But at the same time, you're exactly right in realizing that the 
Holy Spirit worked through that process so that the end result is nothing less than God's 
word to us. One other thing to say about the Gospels, just in general, and that is when you 
read Matthew, Mark and Luke in particular, John is a little bit different. When we get to 
John's Gospel, the fourth gospel, we’ll ask the question why that looks so different than 
Matthew, Mark and Luke. You find, not only is the language a lot different, but you find a 
lot of accounts and things that Jesus taught in John that you find nowhere Matthew, Mark 
and Luke. So I ask the question, Why is John so different from the other three Gospels? But
the question I want to focus on is: Why are Matthew, Mark and Luke, the first three Gospels, so similar to each other? Hopefully you've kept up with your New Testament reading and that means you’ve hopefully been through Matthew, Mark and Luke already. Hopefully there is a sense of déjà vu as you read it, that is, by the time you get through Luke, it's like, I’ve seen this material twice already. It almost gets repetitive sometimes because Matthew, Mark and Luke have fairly extensive overlap between them. Not only in the content they convey, but in the order. Even at times in the wording, the way the Gospels are phrased, and the way things are put together. So this is what is known or what scholars call--and hopefully you’ve picked this up from your text book--what scholars call the synoptic problem. That is, the synoptic problem is a term that refers to what is the relationship between Matthew, Mark and Luke. How do we account for the fact that these three Gospels, when seen together, hence “synoptic”—to look at or seen together—when seen together, these three Gospels resemble each other very closely? How do you account for that? How do you explain the similarities between Matthew, Mark and Luke? Again it's not just the order of events and that they include some of the same material, but down to the exact wording of several sections of Matthew, Mark and Luke. But when Matthew, Mark and Luke are referring to a certain event or certain saying of Jesus, the wording is almost identical. It is so close that if I got three research papers from you that were as close as Matthew, Mark and Luke are in wording, I’d probably call you up and ask what's going on because I would suspect some kind of collaboration. So the question is: How do we explain the similarities between Matthew, Mark and Luke?

Here's one example, this is the verse that leads up to Matthew, Mark and Luke all record Jesus’ transfiguration. Remember about halfway through each of the Gospels, Jesus goes up on the mountain with the Peter, James and John and he's changed or transfigured before them. This is known as the “Transfiguration” in all three Gospels. The verse leading up to that in Matthew 17:1, “And after six days, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother and led them up a high mountain by themselves.” Now I want you to notice this is not a quotation of Jesus. You might be able to argue sometimes, “Well if they were similar in the quotations of Jesus, that just meant they had access to the same material.
They were all quoting Jesus fairly word for word,” But this is not a quotation. This is part of Matthew's own narrative. He wrote this, he’s not quoting someone else's word. This is his narrative account leading up to the events of Jesus being transfigured. Here's Mark 9, “And after six days, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain by themselves.” It's interesting, though, I can’t remember what translation I am following, this may be my own. But I am trying to also reflect what the Greek text would look like as well. We see Mark and Matthew, and less significant this is not a quotation of what someone is saying, these are the narrative comments of the authors themselves. Here's Luke. “Now about eight days after this”--notice Luke uses eight days; right now we are not going to go into why he does that--“he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray.” So Luke does have it a little bit different, but still it's interesting that he roughly has the same order of the reference of the eight days, the mention of Peter, James and John, though he switches James and John, and then the fact that he went up a mountain. But Luke adds that he went to pray, which interestingly Jesus praying is a very common theme in Luke you find emphasized over and over. So that may account why Luke has it and the others don't. But how are we to account for this? And this just isn't this verse; it's all over Matthew, Mark and Luke. Again, if I had three papers that had the extent of verbal similarity that I find in these three verses, I would have to have a conversation with you and maybe the Dean to figure out what happened, or I could have you submit it to Safe Assign and have it catch it or something like that. But again, this is not just these three verses; this is widespread throughout Matthew, Mark and Luke.

The question is what's going on and how do we explain this? This is what is known as the synoptic problem. How do we explain the relationship between Matthew, Mark and Luke, three documents that reveal such striking similarities down to not only the order of events, but the wording, even the wording itself? There have been a number of attempts and this is under the “Who is using who?” your notebook. The first one is that some suggested that despite this similarity, the Gospels are actually independent of each other. That is, they were written independently with no knowledge of each other. There's a couple ways to understand this. Some have attributed this simply to the inspiration of the Holy
Spirit because Matthew, Mark and Luke were inspired by the Holy Spirit, which I believe in. Does that account for the similarities? The problem with that view is what about the differences? Did the Holy Spirit get tired out and Luke didn't quite get everything that the Holy Spirit was trying to say? So it doesn't explain some of the differences that you find in Matthew, Mark and Luke. So, yes, I affirm the Holy Spirit inspired these documents, yet does that account for the similarities between Matthew, Mark and Luke?

Another approach is that Matthew, Mark and Luke had access to a common oral tradition. Remember we said most of the gospel material was passed along orally until it was finally committed to writing in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Some have suggested Matthew, Mark and Luke were independent of each other, but they just drew on the same oral tradition that was passed on to them, and that accounts for the similarities between Matthew, Mark and Luke. It's possible. However, most New Testament students and scholars prefer to see some kind of a literary dependence or relationship. That is, somebody wrote one of the Gospels first and the other two utilized that gospel, or some kind of explanation like that. That is, one or more of the Gospels was using one or more of the other Gospels. There was some kind of copying or borrowing or relationship between Matthew, Mark and Luke, and that account for the similarity in wording. Again what's significant about this is this is narrative. This is not a quotation of some speech. This is the narrative comment of the authors themselves. So the common explanation is there is some kind of relationship literally. One or more of these writers are dependent on another one.

Now there's been different ways this has been explained. Number two in your notes- St. Augustine. One of the early church fathers, St. Augustine thought, and this might account for the order of the Gospels in your New Testament, Matthew, Mark and Luke, St. Augustine thought that Matthew was written first. I don’t know if I have this in my notes. St. Augustine thought that Matthew was written first and Mark was written second and used Matthew as one of his sources, and then Luke was written third, and Luke actually borrowed from both Mark and Matthew. So Matthew was written first, the first gospel he wrote on his own, Mark came along and wrote his gospel using Matthew as one of the sources, as his basis. Then Luke wrote third and when he wrote, he used both Matthew and
Mark as his main sources. That view probably accounts for why you have the Gospels in the order they occur: Matthew, Mark and Luke. That's one possibility.

The dominant view that most people seem to hold to today though looks like this: Mark was the first gospel written and Matthew and Luke both use Mark as their basis. So Mark wrote his own; it was the first gospel written, and then Matthew and Luke would have both have had access to Mark and they used Mark as kind of the basis for writing their own gospel. That is the most common way of understanding these differences. So Mark would have been written first, Matthew and Luke both used Mark independently of each other. Matthew and Luke perhaps didn't know each other was writing the gospel. They weren’t relying each other, they were writing independently but they both had access to Mark. And that's what explains the similarities between Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Now, I want to jump ahead to this chart. You'll notice the second thing in your notes under “Mark wrote first” this chart is going to show you a common way of understanding the relationship between the Gospels. Mark would've been written first and I’ll explain this in a moment. Then Matthew and Luke would have separately and independently utilized Mark. Now you might ask: Why would they borrow Mark? We’ll look at that in just a moment, but one well-known writer very early in the second century and the church actually describe Mark as a close associate and an interpreter of Peter. So given the prominence of Peter, remember he was one of the persons that went up on the mountain when Jesus was transfigured in this text that we just showed. So given the prominence of Peter, if Mark is the interpreter of Peter and a close associate of Peter, given the stature of Peter in the first century, that may have been enough reason why Matthew and Luke would want to use his gospel as the basis for their own. So Mark was written first; Matthew and Luke then follow Mark.

Now, another interesting thing you find when you read the Gospels is there's a lot of material in Matthew and Luke that you don't find in Mark. For example, the Sermon on the Mount; there is no record of the Sermon the Mount in Mark, yet both Luke and Matthew have it, and at points the wording, again, is very close. Now, there's other places where Matthew and Luke have material that is very similar and you find it nowhere Mark. How
do you explain that? Well scholars have concocted what is called Q- the word “Q” simply stands for the German word “source”. There's disagreement as to whether this was written or whether it was oral or whatever. I'm not interested in figuring that out, in fact scholars have speculated they’ve even come up with the type of community that produced “Q.” They kind of pile speculation on top of speculation. All I mean by this is that “Q” simply stands for the material that you find in Matthew and Luke such as the Sermon the Mount. And you find it nowhere in Mark. Or the birth narrative; the narrative of Jesus’ birth that is found in Matthew and Luke but you don't find in Mark. Again, scholars use the word “Q” to designate that. So what this suggests then is that Mark was written first, perhaps reflecting the teaching and preaching of Peter as a close associate of Peter. Given that, Matthew and Luke would've used Mark as their primary source in constructing their own gospel, and Matthew and Luke also had access perhaps to another document or a another body of information that scholars call “Q” that would account for the material you find in Matthew and Luke like the Sermon the Mount but you don't find it anywhere Mark. So again, the purpose of this is--I'm not interested in it in arriving at a firm conclusion--it is just important you know that when you read the Gospels why are they so similar? What's going on? How do we explain the similarities between Matthew, Mark and Luke?

Now back to the reasons for seeing Mark as the first gospel- why do most people think Mark was written first? First of all, Matthew and Luke often seem to smooth Mark over. When Mark writes in a way that may be a little awkward or in a way that could be misunderstood, you often find Matthew and Luke smoothing him over often to clarify. For example, in one place Jesus is in a conversation with a rich young ruler and the rich young ruler calls Jesus, basically, something like good teacher, and Jesus in Mark Jesus replies, “Why do you call me good?” What could be implied from that? That Jesus isn’t good. “Why do you call me good? I'm not,” which is not what Mark meant, but might be taken that way. Matthew, interestingly, says, “Why do you ask me about what is good?” perhaps, again, to try to clear up a potential misunderstanding. That may not be the only reason Matthew says that, but there's examples like that where Matthew and Luke seem to condense or smooth Mark, or Matthew and Luke seem to condense or smooth Mark over.
That's what you would expect. You would expect if Matthew and Luke were borrowing Mark, you would expect they would condense or smooth things over. You wouldn't expect that someone would complicate something, or make it rougher or potentially misunderstood. So that’s one of the reasons why many think Mark was written first.

Another reason is most of Mark is found in both Matthew and Luke. 97% of Mark's Gospel gets reproduced in Matthew and almost 90%, 88%, gets reproduced in Luke. And again, that’s what you’d expect. Matthew and Luke would use most of Mark, but then they would include other material as well. That's another thing that a lot of scholars point to in order to argue that Mark was written first.

The differences from another one when Matthew, Mark and Luke are parallel, when you look at all three of them; that is, when you compare Matthew, Mark and Luke, Matthew and Luke almost never disagree against Mark. Matthew and Luke almost never both at the same time deviate from Mark. But sometimes Matthew and Mark do from Luke, and Luke and Mark differ from Matthew. This is just a complicated way of saying if Matthew and Luke are borrowing from Mark, this is what you’d expect; that together they would never disagree or deviate from Mark in some way. So this is just another reason why, when you compare the three Gospels, you almost never find Matthew and Luke departing from Mark in the same way. They say that's what you would expect, if Matthew and Luke are utilizing Mark.

So, in conclusion, I'm not going to assume a certain view of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Instead, what I think is more important for us to do is when, we compare Matthew, Mark and Luke, is to notice how they differ from each other; to notice what it is each of the Gospels seems to emphasize over against the others. Again, when I compare Matthew and Luke, their Christmas story, why does Luke have the story of the shepherds but Matthew doesn't? Instead, Matthew includes the story of the Magi, or so-called wise men, coming to Jesus and seems to not know about or care about the story of the shepherds. Why is that? How do we account for that? When you go back to our example here, when I compare these three, why does Luke have “eight days” instead of six, and why does he mention that they went up to pray when the other gospel writers don't? So that's what I'm more interested in
doing. When we have three writings that speak on and talk about the same topic, it's important to ask, Why is it that they present it in the way they do? What are they trying to get across? When we compare Matthew, Mark and Luke, what are the theological distinctives of each of the Gospels that stand out and are emphasized, either that the other Gospels don't, or at least to the degree that the other Gospels do.

So that’s how I am going to approach the Gospels as we start to move to Matthew, Mark and Luke. At times, we’ll look at specific texts, but I'm more interested in focusing on what the theological themes are that you find Matthew or Mark or Luke emphasizing in the way they organize their Gospels and the way they emphasize certain things in the way they portray Jesus, etc. So starting on Monday, we will

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