hardly be true. Probably, he was not aware of it, as it seems that Luke and Matthew had their own source about it, with Matthew’s source being the more detailed. Of more significance is the context in which the prayer is given. In Matthew it is given as part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount as an example of how to live. However, in Luke it is presented in response to the disciples’ request about how they should pray. This example serves to emphasise the different theological purposes of the authors.

3. A good example of how differences between the Gospels can be understood in terms of theological perspectives is the Sermon on the Mount passages. Matthew (ch.5-7) has grouped material together to present Jesus as a new lawgiver, re-creating the Sinai event, all of relevance to his Jewish readers. However, Luke (ch.6) has no such concerns and, ironically, presents much of the same material being given on the plains around Tyre and Sidon.

4. Many of the differences in narrative can be readily explained in terms of theological objectives. Thus, Luke’s placement (ch.4) of Jesus’ rejection in the synagogue of Nazareth at the outset of his ministry avoids an excuse being available for the Jews to reject Jesus once his ministry is underway, which is probably why both Matthew and Mark place this event midway through Jesus’ ministry. But, many other differences in narrative can not be easily explained. If Matthew and Luke used Mark’s Gospel as a basic source why do they both describe the calling of the first 4 disciples after Jesus begins his preaching in Capernaum, when Mark places it before? Also, what could the significance be of Luke (ch.4) illogically placing the cure of Simon’s mother-in-law before the calling of the first 4 disciples when Mark (ch.1) places it after. Similarly, why does Matthew (ch.8) describe it as taking place even later?

These and other such issues demonstrate the complexity behind the formation of the Synoptic Gospels and their subtly different aims.

Questions For Reflection

1. Why are the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke so similar in content?
2. Who do you think Matthew’s Gospel was primarily written for?
3. Why is it that the same event is sometimes reported differently in these Gospels?
The So-Called Synoptic Problem

The first three canonical Gospels are often referred to as the Synoptic Gospels, because they are very similar in content and often identical in wording. The word ‘synoptic’ means ‘at a glance’ or ‘side by side’ to reflect this. The fact they are so similar raises the question why is this so? This is what scholars term the ‘synoptic problem’. In particular, the question is asked whether one of the Gospels had priority over the others, in the sense that it was written first and used by the authors of the other two Gospels as a source for their own.

In the early Church, Papias (c.125 AD) thought Mark’s Gospel was written first, and that it was based on the preaching of St. Peter. This view would tend to be supported by Justin’s reference in the mid 1st century to Mark’s Gospel as ‘Peter’s Memoirs’.

However, by the time of St. Augustine of Hippo, it was generally accepted in the Church that the correct order of writing was Matthew, Mark and Luke, with Mark’s simply an abbreviation of Matthew’s and Luke using both (and later, John using all three).

Modern scholars see the formation of the Gospels as a very complex issue indeed but two main theories persist:

The Two Source Theory proposes an early draft of Mark’s Gospel being used by both Matthew and Luke independently of each other but who also used a second (now unknown) collection of Jesus’ sayings or logia.

The Four Source Theory came into favour to help explain more effectively the similarities and differences between the three Gospels. This theory proposes that the final version of Mark was used by both Matthew and Luke who, working independently of each other also had access to a collection of Jesus’ sayings as well as to another unique source of their own.

The modern view, then, is to see Mark’s Gospel as the first. However, the early Church tradition about the priority of Matthew may be correct if, as supposed, there was an early Aramaic version of that Gospel. Matthew’s Gospel is one that contains many references to Old Testament prophecies, and its purpose may well have been to help in the conversion of more Jews to belief in Jesus as the Messiah. As such, an early Gospel written in Aramaic is a distinct possibility.

Similarities and Differences in the Same Stories

Where the authors of the Gospels used the same source then this would explain many of the similarities between the Gospels. The differences can sometimes be explained by proposing a separate source and by the fact that as individuals they would use their own style of writing, their own words and expressions. However, not all differences can so easily be explained.

1. In the story of the healing of the blind man Bartimeus at Jericho (Mark 10), Mark state that this was when Jesus was leaving the city. Luke (ch.18) does not name the blind man but states the miracle occurred when Jesus was entering the city. In Matthew (ch.20) there are two blind men and they are healed when Jesus is leaving Jericho. Matthew’s version states that Jesus called them to him, but in Mark Jesus asks that Bartimeus be called, while in Luke Jesus orders that the man be brought to him. Such differences do not alter the overall nature and purpose of the account but they are intriguing nonetheless.

2. The differences are more pronounced in the account of giving of the Lord’s Prayer. It is recorded in the form we are acquainted with in Matthew (ch.6) but less so in Luke (ch.11) and not at all in Mark. Does this mean that Mark (as the first Gospel) was not aware of it or, if so, did not think it important enough to include? The latter can