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Session 6 - Genre and Synoptics

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Alright, today we're going to put on our literary detective hats and take a look at a really fascinating puzzle that sits right at the heart of the New Testament. We're talking about the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Let's dive right in.

So here's the mystery at the heart of it all. If you read Matthew, Mark, and Luke side by side, you'll notice something pretty strange. They tell a lot of the same stories, often in the exact same order, and sometimes they even use the exact same words.

But they also have some pretty big differences. So what in the world is going on here? Just look at this. And get this, this isn't a quote of something Jesus said.

This is the narrator's own voice, the author's description of events, and the wording in Matthew and Mark is nearly identical. Now, in any modern book, if two authors wrote the same thing like this, word for word, that would be, well, a huge red flag. So that's the big question we're tackling, isn't it? How do you explain these incredible similarities? It's a genuine literary puzzle, and scholars have been working on it for centuries, so let's start looking at the clues they've uncovered.

Okay, so our first clue, and this one is a biggie, is all about understanding the genre. To solve this puzzle, we have to play by the literary rules of the first century, not the 21st. They're just different.

See, if you go into this expecting a modern biography, you know, a detailed, blow-by-blow account with perfectly transcribed quotes, you're kind of reading it with the wrong lens. Ancient biographers had a completely different goal. A great way to think about it is that these authors were more like portrait painters than photographers.

They weren't trying to capture every single detail of every single moment. Instead, they were carefully selecting which events and teachings to include to paint a very specific portrait of Jesus, one that would communicate a powerful theological message. Here's a great analogy from scholar Dr. Dave Mathewson that really makes this click.

Think about the minutes from a meeting. An hour-long meeting might get boiled down to two pages of notes. And nobody accuses the secretary of being inaccurate, right? Of course not.

Their job is to capture the main points of the important decisions. And in the same way, an ancient biographer could summarize a long sermon, and it would be seen as a totally faithful and accurate account. Okay, so if these are theological portraits and not strict modern histories, that naturally leads to a pretty big follow-up question, right? Can we actually trust them? Are they reliable accounts of what really happened? Now, you've probably heard of C.S. Lewis's famous trilemma.

He made this argument that, based on the claims Jesus makes in the Gospels, you really only have three choices. He was either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord. Lewis's point was that calling him just a good moral teacher doesn't really work with what the texts say he claimed about himself.

But hold on. Before we even get to Lewis's argument, scholars say we have to seriously consider another possibility. What if the problem isn't with Jesus's claims, but with the accounts themselves? And that's the legend option.

The idea here is that maybe the Gospels aren't history at all, but a kind of theological fiction. That the stories were created or embellished over many years by the early church to make Jesus seem more and more divine. You know, the classic argument for this is the telephone game analogy.

You remember that game, right? You whisper a secret to one person, they pass it on, and by the time it gets to the end of the line, the message is totally mangled and completely different from where it started. But a lot of scholars push back on that analogy, and for a really good reason. It leaves out the eyewitnesses.

A better analogy would be a game of telephone, where every few people, the person who started the message stands up and says, "Whoa, nope, that's not what I said; it was this. The people who were actually there would have served as a living, breathing fact-check, keeping the story from getting too distorted. So while that debate about historical reliability is super interesting and definitely ongoing, let's get back to the literary clues.

This brings us back to our original puzzle. What is the direct literary relationship between Matthew, Mark, and Luke? Believe it or not, this puzzle has a name. It's called the synoptic problem.

Synoptic just comes from a Greek word that means to see together. And the problem is trying to explain how these three Gospels can be so incredibly similar, right down to the Greek phrasing. So how do scholars solve it? Well, the leading theory, the one most scholars land on today, is called Mark in Priority.

And it's a pretty simple idea at its core. Mark wrote his Gospel first. He's the original.

Matthew and Luke came along later and actually used Mark's Gospel as one of their main sources. And the evidence for this is pretty staggering. Check this out.

An incredible 97% of Mark's Gospel is also found in Matthew. Think about that. It just makes way more sense that Matthew and Luke would take Mark's shorter, punch-your-account and add their own material to it, rather than them both deciding to cut a longer story down in almost the exact same ways.

Okay, but that only explains part of the puzzle, right? What about all the stuff that Matthew and Luke have in common that you can't find in Mark? I'm talking about huge sections like the Sermon on the Mount and a bunch of Jesus' parables. Where did that come from? Well, this is where scholars propose a second source. They call it Q, which comes from the German word Quelle, which simply means source.

Now we don't have a copy of Q. It's a hypothetical document. But the theory is that it was a collection, probably mostly of Jesus' sayings, that both Matthew and Luke had access to. And all of this comes together in what's called the two-source hypothesis.

It's actually pretty elegant when you lay it out. Step one, Mark writes his Gospel. Step two, this collection of sayings, Q, is also circulating.

Then, Matthew uses both Mark and Q to write his Gospel. And Luke, working separately, also uses Mark and Q to write his. It's a theory that neatly explains both why they're so similar and where their differences come from.

Alright, let's pull all these threads together. We've talked about genre, reliability, and sources. So what's the big picture here? How should all this change the way we actually read these texts? Here's the most important takeaway.

The Gospels aren't a set of competing historical records that we have to try and mash together into one. The differences we see aren't bugs. They're features.

They're intentional. Each author is painting a unique theological portrait of Jesus for a very specific audience, highlighting the things that mattered most to that community. And you see it in the details, right? Matthew, for example, is the one who tells us about the Magi coming from the East.

Luke, on the other hand, focuses on the shepherds and makes a special point to show Jesus praying over and over again. These aren't contradictions. They're choices.

They are deliberate, artful decisions made by the authors to make a specific point. So I want to leave you with a question to think about. When you stop seeing the Gospels as just a single, flat story and start seeing them as four distinct, artful, and theological portraits, how does that change the way you read them? It's a perspective shift that can open up a much richer, deeper, and more fascinating story.