

Did the events in the Bible actually happen?

Why does the Bible tell different versions of the same stories?

What if everyone told the same story?

Car accidents happen every day. Imagine an officer arriving at the scene of an accident, only to hear everyone tell the exact same story in the exact same way. This would be remarkable, and the officer would almost certainly suspect that these witnesses talked to each other to get their stories straight.

Each person has a different perspective. The driver of one car slammed on his brakes, while the other driver spilled coffee and swerved. Each says the other “came out of nowhere.” A nearby pedestrian watched the whole incident, anticipating the accident. And the tire tracks on the road tell the officer that one driver was speeding. So what’s the truth?

Each person’s story represents a different interpretation based on a particular vantage point. The police officer talks with each witness individually in an attempt to construct an accurate picture of what actually happened. And the true story begins to take shape—unless the stories don’t mesh at all.



Activity

Describe this field from the perspective of a farmer, a scientist, a general, and a child. Then try to combine all perspectives to make a complete description of the field. Write a short description of the field, including all four perspectives.

Biblical Perspectives

Wouldn't you tell someone?

Luke 9:28-36 tells of Jesus' transfiguration, when the apostles Peter, John, and James witness Jesus in the company of Elijah and Moses. Three of the four Gospel texts tell this story, and they're all remarkably similar in detail—so similar that one might wonder if they were written together.



Essentially, these apostles see Jesus' clothes become dazzling white, they see him with Moses and Elijah, and God speaks to them to identify Jesus as the Son of God. But at the end, there is a huge question: Why don't the apostles tell anyone? It all seems a little bit strange. One would suspect that if Jesus made himself known, word would spread quickly.

Maybe not. Imagine overhearing someone at the coffee shop telling his buddies that he had just seen Jesus transfigured and heard the voice of God. The buddies would think the storyteller is crazy—and that's before he shares the news about seeing Elijah and Moses. It was probably hard to believe, even for those who were there. They may not have believed their eyes and ears, thinking instead that they were dreaming. Quite simply, they may have lacked faith in what they saw. This may be why the apostles didn't say anything.

Talk It Over

1. Why didn't they say anything? Did the apostles fail in their calling to spread the good news?
2. Were you to have these apostles' experience, whom would you tell? What do you think this person would advise you to do? Would you do it?

What were they thinking?

The Gospel of Matthew also tells of Jesus' transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13), and it details things a bit differently. Of



course, Jesus' clothes still becomes dazzling white, he's still in the company of Moses and Elijah, and the voice of God still speaks to the apostles.

Yet, in this account the reader uncovers one critical piece of information: Jesus told the three not to tell anyone of what they witnessed. No longer, as in Luke, does the reader wonder about why the apostles didn't say anything, and no longer does the reader doubt their faithfulness. Christ then reveals that he will die at the hands of the people, and he orders them not to tell anyone.

That leaves the reader wondering why the disciples didn't disobey Jesus or why they didn't question Jesus' directive to keep the story secret. It must have been difficult for the disciples to know that Jesus was about to be sentenced to death and not be able to plan with other followers a way to stop it.

For most, the impulse wouldn't be to sit idly by and allow it to happen; it would be to try to stand up for the beloved teacher. It was no different for the apostles. At some point, however, each of these apostles had to make a conscious decision to obey Jesus, even though they didn't understand why.

Talk It Over

1. Discuss a time when a friend wanted to be helped but didn't want to ask. Did you help this friend? How do you think the disciples felt?
2. Compare the account of the transfiguration in Luke to Matthew. What are the similarities? What are the differences?



Point–Counterpoint

Jesus was all right, but his disciples were thick and ordinary. It's them twisting it that ruins it for me.

—John Lennon¹²

The human qualities of the raw materials show through. Naivety, error, contradiction, even (as in the cursing Psalms) wickedness are not removed. The total result is not 'the Word of God' in the sense that every passage in itself, gives impeccable science or history. It carries the Word of God.

—C. S. Lewis (1898–1963)¹³

Question

Do the variations in the Gospel accounts diminish the validity of the accounts?



My Life

Why does the Word of God vary?

Many people view the Bible as one document, with one message, comprehensively from one holy source. But the books of the Bible weren't written that way. They were written individually—some by unknown sources—and assembled by councils and theologians over several centuries. Some of the Gospels may have been based on others. That's one explanation why the Gospels tell different versions of the same stories.

After every reading, many congregations respond by saying, “The Word of the Lord.” And that's exactly what the Bible is. But human beings, in separate places and contexts, wrote it. So how can it be the one, holy word of the Lord?

Theologian C. S. Lewis says the Bible “is not ‘the Word of God’ in the sense that every passage in itself, gives impeccable science or history. It carries the Word of God.”¹⁴ Lewis knew that faithful people inspired by God wrote the Gospels. Even if the stories overlap, and even if they were copied from each other, they are all part of a trajectory of Christian belief that shapes the way we think about God. Ultimately, Lewis reminds us that Christ, the Word of God, is carried in the Bible.

Talk It Over

1. What is the Word of God? And what does it mean that it was written by different people at different times?



Quote

We are not to make the Torah into God Himself, nor the Bible into a “paper pope.” The Bible is only the result of the Word of God. We can experience the return of the Word of God in the here and now, . . . but we should never think of the Bible as any sort of talisman . . . that we need only open and read to be in relation to the Word of God and God Himself.

—French philosopher Jacques Ellul¹⁵

Synoptic Problem

The synoptic problem is the analysis of the three Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) that share remarkably similar descriptions of the same events. This is remarkable because rarely do biblical reporters use the same words to describe the situations. There are several different hypotheses about the order of the books that try to explain why they share such close descriptions. The most popular include the Two-Source Hypothesis and the Two-Gospel Hypothesis.

Two-Source Hypothesis (2SH): This hypothesis argues that Mark was written first, with much of its narrative material being copied by Matthew and Luke in the crafting of their Gospels. This accounts for the stories that appear in all three Gospels. Sayings and other materials, which are similar

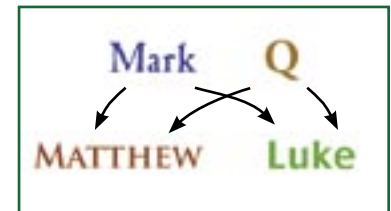


Fig. B.3.a. Two-Source Hypothesis



between Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark, are attributed to an unknown source. This unknown is called “Q,” from the German *quelle*, meaning “source.”

Two-Gospel Hypothesis (2GH): This hypothesis argues that Matthew was written first, and much of its material was copied by Luke. Then Mark merged some of the material from the other two books as he assembled his Gospel account, adding some items of his own. This explains why some descriptions are the same, word for word, including Jesus’ “dazzling white” clothes of his transfiguration.

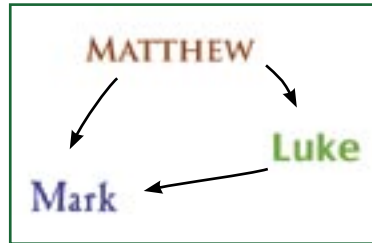


Fig. B.3.b. Two-Gospel Hypothesis

Review

The transfiguration narrative appears in three Gospels known as the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). The story is remarkably consistent (synoptic means “having a shared view”), but varying degrees of detail leave readers with different questions. In Luke, it is unclear why the disciples don’t tell anyone about what they have witnessed. In Matthew, it seems that it must have been difficult for the disciples to follow Jesus’ difficult request of silence. Ultimately, the differences in detail about the transfiguration shed more light on the situation.



It may not be surprising to learn that the shared consistency of the Synoptic Gospels suggest that they may be based on one another or, at least, informed by each other. This doesn’t cast doubt on the Bible’s capacity to instill faith and spread Christ’s message, but it does raise the issue about where the material all comes from. In the end Christians affirm that the words of the Bible exist to spread the Word of God, a real Person and a real God, by retelling and repeating these foundational stories of the faith.

Challenge

Find a parable in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. Then find the same parable in the other two Gospels. Compare and contrast the details.

Prayer

Oh God, grant me the wisdom to know that your word is a person. Help me so that when I read the words of the Bible, I don’t merely see words. Help me to see you. Amen.



Quiz

1. What is valuable about a variety of perspectives?
 - a. They lend credibility to a story.
 - b. They offer different insights and commentaries on situations.
 - c. It depends on how you see it.
 - d. All of the above
2. Did Jesus tell the apostles not to talk about the transfiguration?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. It depends on which gospel you're reading.
 - d. Nobody knows.
3. Why do the Synoptic Gospels provide a variety of perspectives?
 - a. God told the Gospel writers different stories to confuse the rest of us.
 - b. They don't. The writing changes, but the stories are the same.
 - c. Because the life of Jesus is seen differently, even if similarly, by different people, including the Gospel writers.
 - d. The three writers got together and decided how to make things more interesting.
4. Who said that Jesus' clothes turned "dazzling white"?
 - a. Matthew
 - b. Mark
 - c. Luke
 - d. All of the above
 - e. None of the above
5. If you saw Christ transfigured before your eyes, what would you do?
 - a. Run to the nearest coffee shop and tell everyone you see.
 - b. Curl into the fetal position for comfort.
 - c. Offer to build Christ some tents, so that he and his two friends can live there forever.
 - d. Keep quiet, thinking yourself to be delusional.

Answers: 1. d, 2. d, 3. c, 4. d, 5. That one is up to you.

