SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

SESSION HANDOUT

The Synoptic Gospels

SPEAKER Tom O'Toole

DATE October 2026

GOT A QUESTION?

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Intro to the Gospels

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What Is a Gospel?

"The Christ-story is used as the vehicle for attempting to change the reader's understanding of God, the world, and self in light of what Jesus has done. Thus the purpose of the Gospels is to proclaim the good news of what God has done in and through Jesus Christ so that people will respond by repentance. A key difference separating it from a mere biography is that it demands a response from the reader." (Ray Lubeck)

The Bible gives four distinct tellings (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John): like several witnesses to the same person, each emphasising different details, sitting together to build a fuller picture of who Jesus is.

The Synoptic Gospels

- 'Syn + optic' = seen together: Matthew, Mark and Luke share a lot of overlapping material and wording. John stands apart, written later.
- Why so similar? Mark was written first; Luke and Matthew had a copy and used it (among other sources) for their own gospels.

"Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." (Luke 1:1–4)

Authors, Dates & Audience

- Mark (50–65): John Mark, Peter's account, a fast-paced book ('immediately' ~40 times). Probably for believers in or around Rome.
- Matthew (50–70): Matthew/Levi, a much more Jewish audience in mind, with heavy emphasis on Old Testament fulfilment.
- Luke (59–63): a doctor who was part of Paul's ministry team. Goes together with Acts. Outward looking, gospel to the gentiles, inclusion of outsiders and the marginalised.

The synoptics don't just share material: sometimes they tell a story in almost exactly the same way, and sometimes they tell the very same event quite differently. Two examples worth looking up:

New Wineskins

Told in almost exactly the same way in each gospel:

Mark 2:22; Matthew 9:17; Luke 5:37–38

Temptation in the Wilderness

The same story, but each gospel tells it a little differently:

Mark 1:12–13; Matthew 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13

Mark: A Journey of Discovery

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Two Titles

For each verse: what is it, who is saying it, and what is the OT background?

Son of God

Verse	What is it?	Who's saying it?	OT background?
1:1			
3:11			
5:7			
14:61			
15:39			

Son of Man

Verse	What is it?	Who's saying it?	OT background?
2:10			
2:28			
8:31			
10:45			
13:26			
14:41			

The Disciples' Journey

- Early chapters set out the thesis: Son of God.
- Coming to learn through miracles: power over sickness, death, nature, evil spirits, and teaching.
- Pivotal moment is Mark 8:29: 'You are the Messiah.' Often a term of misunderstanding in Mark (see 8:29, 12:35, 13:21, 14:61, 15:32).
- But then to clarify what this means, particularly the nature of 'Son of Man':
- Mark 8:31: 'He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.'
- Mark 10:45: 'For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

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Matthew: A Fulfilment of Promise

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Painting a Picture of Jesus

- Fulfilment of promise (genealogy); Emmanuel 'God with us' bookends the gospel (Christmas story and Great Commission).
- True king of the Jews: confrontation with Herod and Pilate, nothing in between. Shown through the lens of Moses: like him, and greater than him.

The Shadow Kingdom

- Kingdom of God (including the parables): God's rightful authority established on earth, proclaimed in words and enacted through the miracles.
- Contrast with the religious leaders of the day: a 'shadow kingdom.' Sermon on the Mount lays out the ethic: outward conformity, performative religion, wolves in sheep's clothing.
- Chapter 23's eight woes answer the eight beatitudes. As its outflow: 24:1–2, 'not one stone left on another,' and the house built on sand (7:24–27) picture the fall of that shadow kingdom.

Jesus as the New Moses

In Matthew	Exodus Echo
2:16–17	
3:13–17	
4:1–11	
5:1–2, 21, 17	
8–9	
9:36	
14:13–21	
17:1–13	

The Five Teaching Blocks

Each ends 'when Jesus had finished saying all these things' — echoing the five books of the Torah.

5–7
Sermon on the Mount

→

10
Mission Discourse

→

13:1–52
Kingdom Parables

→

18
Community Discourse

→

23–25
Woes & Olivet Discourse

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Luke: A Gospel of Inclusion

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Mary's Song, as a Frame for the Whole Gospel

To pick up some of Luke's themes, we use Mary's Song (the Magnificat) as a lens: each verse below previews something worked out across the whole gospel.

Joy	v.47 '…and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.'	2:10–11; 15:6–7, 32; 19:37; 24:52
Mercy	v.50 'His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.'	7:47–50; 10:36–37; 15:20; 18:13
Scatters the proud	v.51 '…he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.'	7:44–47; 14:7–11; 18:9–14
Lifted up the humble	v.52 '…but has lifted up the humble.'	7:6–10; 14:12–14; 19:1–10; 23:40–43
Filled the hungry	v.53 'He has filled the hungry with good things…'	5:29–32; 9:10–17; 14:21–24; 15:22–24; 24:28–31 Robert Karris: Jesus is always going to, at, or coming from a meal.
Sends the rich away empty	v.53 '…but has sent the rich away empty.'	6:24–26; 12:13–21; 16:19–31; 18:18–25

Luke's gospel gives particular focus to:

- Individuals
- The poor
- Women
- Children
- The sick and disabled
- Gentiles and Samaritans
- Tax collectors and sinners

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Cross and Resurrection

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Matthew: A New Kind of King

- The arrest (26:52–54): ‘Put your sword back in its place.’
- The cross (27:39–44): ‘If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.’ Mirrors the language of the temptation narrative.

Mark: Darkness and Aloneness

- We move from Jesus' outward authority to the inward, psychological and spiritual cost. Everything is stripped back before the new reality emerges from the wreckage.
- Peter insisted he would never fail, even to death, but it takes just a simple question from a young female slave.
- Darkness and aloneness, bearing wrath (15:33–34). Not just Peter but creation itself is coming undone. He cries ‘Eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani,’ quoting Psalm 22.

Luke: Restoration & Solidarity

- The arrest (22:50–51): mending the enemy.
- The march to the cross (23:27–31): weeping for Jerusalem.
- The crucifixion (23:34): advocating for the accusers, ‘Father, forgive them.’ The thief on the cross (23:39–43): entry to paradise.

The Resurrection: Vindication

- Matthew: confirmation of Jesus' authority.
- Mark: even with the incomplete ending we get the reversal of Jesus' scandal. The message to the women: ‘Tell his disciples and Peter.’ Naming Peter shows his failure is not the final word.
- Luke: reality of Jesus' presence. Women are the first to hear the news, in a world where their testimony was legally inadmissible. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus explains the Scriptures and breaks bread.

My Reflections

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What struck me most from this session

Questions I still have / one thing to take away