

The Unity of Scripture: An Examination of Differing Accounts

Abstract:

When engaging in biblical study individuals may encounter differing accounts of Scripture within the broader biblical metanarrative. However, one may propose that while these textual differences do exist, the unity and/or continuity of the Christological message is not negatively impacted nor negated as it remains as God's enduring revelation in written form. An example of this may be seen in the four accounts of the Lord's Supper in that while the said passages possess textual/stylistic differences which relate each accounts' specific context – author, intended audience, reason of writing and historical/cultural setting - the overarching message remains unchanged. It is then from this perspective that one may acknowledge that an individual's ability to comprehend Scripture is foundationally rooted in and/or associated with one's view regarding the canonization and function of Scripture within Christianity.

Keywords: The Lord's Supper, Gospels, Unity and Diversity, Scripture, Canonization and Function of Scripture, Textual Differences, Christological and/or Christology.

Introduction

Within this paper, one will be presented with an inquiry pertaining to how differing accounts of Scripture are able to maintain continuity within the biblical metanarrative. The first section will address an individual's ability to understand Scripture based on the development of one's view regarding the process of canonization and the function of Scripture within the Christian faith. This will be followed with an examination of the concepts of unity and diversity within Scripture through an analysis of the accounts of the Lord's Supper and the subsequent impact concerning one's interpretation of the four Gospels, showing in conclusion the unity of Scripture, despite the presence of textual differences.

Understanding the New Testament Scriptures

When engaging in biblical study within the New Testament it is beneficial to possess a general understanding surrounding the 'establishment' and/or canonization of the Scriptures as this provides the necessary background

context for proper interpretation and sound doctrine.¹ To establish this foundation, individuals should seek to determine how the Scriptures are defined and what their role is within the Christian tradition.

Stemming from Christianity's Jewish history, the practice of defining a canon was adopted within the Christian tradition as the written (apostolic) tradition emerged and the early church sought to compile a "list of sacred writings that [were] consensually received by the worshiping community as authorized teaching and reliable recollection of the history of revelation"² which would serve as the standard of belief and conduct³. Acknowledging the Hebrew Bible as a divinely inspired text, the early church under the guidance of God began the process of canonizing the textual documents of what constitutes the current New Testament based primarily on the criterion of divine inspiration and the possession of apostolicity⁴ – "authorship by an apostle or by an apostolic associate and thus a date of writing within the apostolic period"⁵. This process was completed by the fourth century with the agreement of virtually all dioceses of Christian believers,⁶ thus establishing an "authorative record and interpretation of God's self-revelation through Jesus Christ"⁷ which was to function in conjunction with the Old Testament as "the chief source and norm of Christian theology"⁸.

Differences and Similarities Among Biblical Accounts

From this perspective, God is recognized as utilizing select individuals to be His means of recording His revelation to humanity.⁹ In doing so, God chose individuals who possessed personal particularities (e.g. their individual psyches, intelligence, social location/historical placement) to communicate His divine

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1. Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 59-76; Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 5th ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 101-114; Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 25-35; John Rogers, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Bible*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 36-58, 110-133.
 2. Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology*, New York, NY: HarperCollins Publisher, 1992), 756; cf. 176.
 3. Gundry, 102.
 4. Ibid., 103; Oden, 177; cf. 552, 755-756; Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 108; D. A. Carson, ed., *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 585.
 5. Gundry, 104.
 6. Oden, 177; cf. Larry R. Helyer, *The Witness of Jesus, Paul and John: An Exploration in Biblical Theology*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 48.
 7. Gundry, 104; cf. Oden, 208.
 8. Oden, 177; cf. 842; Helyer, 48.
 9. Oden, 553.

plan and purpose to a unique audience.¹⁰ Consequently, this resulted in textual/stylistic differences within the various biblical texts; however, these differences neither interrupt nor distort what God originally intended to communicate.¹¹ This may be seen in that “the believing church ecumenically consents to the premise that the Spirit has so reliably protected this recollection and transmission of Scripture that no truth to salvation has been lost.”¹² The root of such cohesion may be identified in Jesus himself as He is the unifying, personal center of the diverse writings throughout Scripture which presents the unified and complete revelation of God’s will and purpose.¹³

The Accounts of the Lord’s Supper

An example of textual diversity among the unity of Scripture may be seen when one examines the four accounts of the Lord’s Supper.¹⁴ In studying these passages, one must seek to employ a methodology which utilizes both horizontal and vertical thinking as this provides the means to: (1) “compare the ways in which the different Gospel writers treat certain passages”¹⁵ and (2) interpret the specific passage “in light of the overall structure and themes of the Gospel despite the nature of any parallel accounts that appear in other Gospels”¹⁶.

This said, through implementing the above methodology the following may be observed regarding the accounts of the Lord’s Supper. These accounts were retrospectively conceived from a post-Easter perspective and as such they are “summarily expressive of the significance of the person and work of Jesus”¹⁷ (see Appendix A and B). With the tradition of the Last Supper based on the words of the earthly Jesus, the central theme and/or center of Jesus’ message may be identified in the motif of ‘the kingdom of God.’¹⁸ It is then within this context that the “notion [motif] of the new covenant appears in the New Testament for the first time”¹⁹ as prior to this recognition the motifs/terms ‘kingdom of God’ and

10. Oden, 553.

11. Carson, 584; Oden, 553; cf. 2 Peter 1:21, NASB.

12. Oden, 552; 2 Timothy 3:16, NASB.

13. Helyer, 48-49; Oden, 330; John 1:1-5, NASB.

14. Matthew 26: 26 - 29; Mark 14: 22 - 25; Luke 22: 15 - 20; 1 Corinthians 11: 23 - 26, NASB.

15. William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: HarperCollins, 2017), 514-515; cf. Fee and Stuart, 140-148.

16. Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, 516; cf. Fee and Stuart, 140-148.

17. Petrus J. Grabe, *New Covenant, New Community: The Significance of Biblical and Patristic Covenant Theology for Current Understanding*, (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Publishing, 2006), 103; cf. Oden 365-386, 414-415.

18. Grabe, 84, 102; Helyer, 125-158; Powell, 81; Oden, 325-327; Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18; 1 Corinthians 11:26, NASB.

19. Grabe, 103.

‘covenant’ were naturally associated within Jewish thought²⁰. Consequently, it is from this perspective that Jesus “envisioned his death as a self-giving that created a covenantal bridge for the in-breaking of the kingdom of God”²¹ and thus establishing the ‘new covenant.’ By instituting the Lord’s Supper, Jesus supplants the temple sacrifices with a new ‘cultic’ activity²² where his death becomes the “foundation of the Christian interpretation of the eschatological covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31”²³ which served to weave the motif of the ‘new covenant’ into that of ‘atonement’ and/or substitution²⁴. Proceeding from this understanding, full agreement exists between the four accounts concerning their understanding of the meaning of the Lord’s Supper as each: (1) “underscores the role of the historical Passover events in the Last Supper,”²⁵ (2) possesses “an eschatological orientation,”²⁶ specifically as it pertains to the sealing of the covenant through Christ’s death²⁷ and (3) emphasizes the soteriological and ecclesiological significance of the sealing of the covenant within the context of the Lord’s Supper²⁸.

In light of the above, one may acknowledge that both the Pauline and Synoptic Gospel accounts share a number of similarities as demonstrated by the identification of the primary motifs of the ‘kingdom of God,’ ‘covenant,’ and ‘new covenant’ (in addition to the other shared motifs of ‘blood,’ ‘substitution,’ ‘thanksgiving’ and ‘praise/thanksgiving’).²⁹ However, it must also be noted that differences exist between the accounts as “certain motifs connect Luke and Paul, while other motifs are common in Mark and Matthew”³⁰ or are limited to a single account. This said, due to space limitation and the in-depth nature of examining the motifs and textual difference of the Lord’s Supper accounts, an analysis of the noted elements is located in Appendix C and D.

20. Grabe, 97, 102.

21. Grabe, 102.

22. Grabe, 99; cf. Luke 22:24-26; 1 Corinthians 11:24-26, NASB.

23. Grabe, 103.

24. Grabe, 97-100.

25. Grabe, 105.

26. Grabe, 105; cf. 71, 73, 77; Fee and Stuart, 151-153; Oden, 768, 797.

27. Grabe, 72-73, 78-79, 101.

28. Grabe, 105; cf. 72, 77-82, 106-107; Oden, 415, 701.

29. Grabe, 70; cf. John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 1117-1326, 1589-1590.

30. Grabe, 70; cf. 68, 103-104; MacArthur, 1117-1326, 1589-1590.

Four Gospels, One Message

Taking into consideration the Christian tradition concerning the unity of Scripture as a whole in conjunction with having examined the accounts of the Lord's Supper, one is presented with an example of how harmony may exist despite the presence of textual differences within the context of parallel Scripture passages. Through applying the same interpretive methodology to the four Gospels, an individual may acknowledge that while each presents a unique picture of Jesus through "highlight[ing] different aspects of the life of Christ"³¹ (see Appendix E) the books nevertheless reflect "the one unified message from Jesus"³² through recording the facts about, recalling the teachings of, and bearing witness to the Messiah³³. This said, the four Gospels are to be understood as standing side by side as each is equally valuable and authoritative.³⁴

Conclusion

In light of the above, one may deduce that Scripture possess a unique quality rooted in its divine inspiration. Through utilizing select individuals, God recorded His revelation to humanity in a manner which accommodated the distinct characteristics of the human authors and their audience, while maintaining the "unity that coheres in Jesus himself."³⁵ This unity may be acknowledged in the accounts of the Lord's Supper and the Four Gospels in that despite textual differences, the unity of the Christological message remains as God's enduring revelation.³⁶

31. Klein Blomberg and Hubbard, 518; cf. Powell, 96.

32. Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, 510.

33. Fee and Stuart, 135; cf. 134.

34. Fee and Stuart, 134.

35. Oden, 330.

36. Grabe, 68; Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, 510; Powel, 96.

Appendix A:

Parallel Reading of the Lord’s Supper Accounts (NASB)

Matthew 26:26-29	Mark 14:22-25	Luke 22:15-20	1 Corinthians 11:23-26
<p>“²⁶While they were eating, Jesus took some <u>bread</u>, and after a <u>blessing</u>, He <u>broke it</u> and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘<u>Take, eat; this is My body.</u>’</p> <p>²⁷And when He had <u>taken a cup</u> and <u>given thanks</u>, He gave it to them, saying, ‘<u>Drink from it, all of you;</u> ²⁸for this is <u>My blood of the covenant</u>, which is <u>poured out for many</u> for forgiveness of sins.</p> <p>²⁹‘But I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine <u>from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in <u>My Father’s kingdom.</u>’</u>”</p>	<p>“²²While they were eating, He took some <u>bread</u>, and <u>after a blessing</u> He <u>broke it</u>, and gave it to them, and said, ‘<u>Take it; this is My body.</u>’</p> <p>²³And when He had <u>taken a cup</u> and <u>given thanks</u>, He gave it to them, and they all drank from it.</p> <p>²⁴And He said to them, ‘This is <u>My blood of the covenant</u> which is <u>poured out for many.</u>’</p> <p>²⁵Truly I say to you, I will never again <u>drink from the fruit of the vine</u> until that day when I <u>drink it new in the kingdom of God.</u>”</p>	<p>“¹⁵And he said to them, ‘I have earnestly desired to <u>eat this Passover</u> with you before I suffer; ¹⁶for I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled <u>in the kingdom of God.</u>’</p> <p>¹⁷And when He had <u>taken a cup</u> and <u>given thanks</u>, He said, ‘Take this and share it among yourselves; ¹⁸for I say to you, I will not <u>drink of the fruit of the vine</u> from now on until the <u>kingdom of God</u> comes.’</p> <p>¹⁹And when He had taken some <u>bread</u> and <u>given thanks</u>, He <u>broke it</u> and gave it to them, saying, ‘<u>This is my body</u> which is given for you; do this <u>in remembrance of Me.</u>’</p> <p>²⁰And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, ‘This cup which is <u>poured out for you</u> is the <u>new covenant in My blood.</u>’</p>	<p>“²³For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took <u>bread</u>;</p> <p>²⁴and when He had <u>given thanks</u>, He <u>broke it</u> and said, ‘<u>This is My body</u>, which is <u>for you</u>; do this <u>in remembrance of Me.</u>’</p> <p>²⁵In the same way he <u>took the cup</u> also after supper, saying, ‘<u>This cup</u> is the <u>new covenant in My blood</u>; do this as often as you drink it, <u>in remembrance of Me.</u>’</p> <p>²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, <u>you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.</u>”</p>

Appendix B:

General Overview of the Lord’s Supper Accounts Context

Context	Matthew 26:26-29	Mark 14:22-25	Luke 22:15-20	1 Corinthians 11:23-26
<i>Proposed author</i>	Matthew	Mark	Luke	Paul
<i>Potential date of writing</i>	60-65 A.D.	55-65 A. D.	60-62 A. D.	55 A. D.
<i>Intended audience</i>	Jews in an urban and prosperous setting.	Roman believers, particularly Gentiles who were previously familiar with and predisposed to the Christian message.	Theophilus and a broader, culturally diverse, Hellenistic audience.	The church/believers in Corinth.
<i>Purpose</i>	To demonstrate that Jesus is the Jewish nation’s/Israel’s King and Messiah.	To present the person, work and teachings of Jesus through depicting Jesus as the authoritative Son of God and suffering servant of the Lord who announces God’s reign.	To give an ordered account of Jesus’ life and present the image of Jesus as the one who’s words and deeds liberated the oppressed.	To address the worship problems, specifically the abuse of the Lord’s Supper within the Corinthian church.

Context	Matthew 26:26-29	Mark 14:22-25	Luke 22:15-20	1 Corinthians 11:23-26
Immediate literary context	<p>26:1-5 Religious leaders plot to kill Jesus.</p> <p>26:6-13 Woman anoints Jesus with perfume.</p> <p>26:14-16 Judas agrees to betray Jesus.</p> <p>26:17-19 Disciples prepare for the Passover.</p> <p>26:20-25 Jesus predicts Judas' betrayal.</p> <p>26:26-29 <i>The Lord's Supper.</i></p> <p>26:30-35 Journey to the Mount of Olives; Jesus predicts Peter's denial.</p>	<p>The Lord's Supper is in the part of Mark's Gospel that deals with Jesus' suffering, death and the empty tomb (14:1-16:8).</p> <p>14:1-2 Conspiracy of Jesus enemies.</p> <p>14:3-9 Anointing of Jesus at Bethany.</p> <p>14:10-11 Betrayal by Judas.</p> <p>14:12-16 Passover preparation.</p> <p>14:17-21 Jesus prediction of betrayal.</p> <p>14:22-25 <i>Lord's Supper.</i></p> <p>14:26-31 Journey to the Mount of Olives; Jesus predicts Peter's denial.</p>	<p>The Lords Supper is founded among the Passion and Easter narratives (22:1-242:53) and is preceded by the account of the Sanhedrin plan to kill Jesus (22:1-2) and Judas' betrayal (22:3-6).</p> <p>22:7-13 Preparation of the Supper.</p> <p>22:14-20 Execution of Supper.</p> <p>22:21-38 Conversations in the form of farewell speeches to those who attended the meal.</p>	<p>11:11:17-22 Discusses abuses in the Corinthian praxis of the Lord's Supper.</p> <p>11:23-26 Lord's Supper.</p> <p>11:27-32 Warning against participating in the Lords Supper in an unworthy manner.</p> <p>11:33-34 Closing summation.</p>

Source: Adapted and compiled from Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 5th ed, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 149-327; Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 119-204, 289-308; Petrus J. Grabe, *New Covenant, New Community: The Significance of Biblical and Patristic Covenant Theology for Current Understanding*, (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Publishing, 2006), and John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 1117-1326, 1589-1590.

Note: The historical context of the Lord's Supper accounts was not included due to spatial limitations; however, it was consulted.

Appendix C:

Motifs in the Accounts of the Lord’s Supper (NASB)

Motif	Matthew 26:26-29	Mark 14:22-25	Luke 22:15-20	1 Corinthians 11:23-26
Covenant	v. 28 “My blood of the covenant”	v. 25 “My blood of the covenant”	v. 20 “the new covenant”	v. 25 “the new covenant”
New covenant			v. 20 “the new covenant”	v. 25 “the new covenant”
The kingdom of God	v. 29 “in My Father’s kingdom”	v. 25 “in the kingdom of God”	v. 18 “until the kingdom of God	v. 26 “until he comes.”
Until that day	v. 29 “until that day when”	v. 25 “until that day when”	v. 18 “from now on until the”	
Blood	v. 28 “my blood”	v. 24 “my blood”	v. 20 “in my blood”	v. 25 “in my blood”
The blood of the covenant	v. 28 “My blood of the covenant”	v. 24 “My blood of the covenant”		
Substitution	v. 28 “for many”	v. 24 “for many”	v. 19, 20 “for you”	v. 24 “for you”
Thanksgiving	v. 26 “after a blessing”; v. 27 “given thanks” [Thanks giving is connected to the bread and refers to the cup with a different verb for thanksgiving.]	v. 22 “after a blessing”; v. 23 “given thanks” [Thanks giving is connected to the bread and refer to the cup with a different verb for thanksgiving.]	v. 17, 19 “given thanks” [Thanksgiving is linked with the bread and cup.]	v. 24 “given thanks” [Thanksgiving is linked with the bread.]
Outpouring; Future aspect of the (coming/consummation of) kingdom of God	v. 29 “I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in..”	v. 25 “I will never again drink form the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in...”	v. 18 “I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until...”	v. 26 “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.”

Motif	Matthew 26:26-29	Mark 14:22-25	Luke 22:15-20	1 Corinthians 11:23-26
Reason for Outpouring – Body/Bread			v. 19 “for you”	v. 24 “for you”
Reason for outpouring – blood/cup	v. 28 “for many”	v. 24 “for many”	v. 20 “for you”	
Exhortation to ‘do this in remembrance of Me’			v. 19 “in remembrance of me”	v. 24, “do this in remembrance of me”; v. 25 do this as often as you drink in remembrance of Me”
The cup			v. 20 “the cup” [twice]	v. 25, 26 “the cup”
‘as often’ plus conjunctives				v. 25 “as often as you drink it in remembrance of me” v. 26 “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes”
The Forgiveness of Sin	v. 28 “for forgiveness of sins”			

Source: Adapted and compiled from Petrus J. Grabe, *New Covenant, New Community: The Significance of Biblical and Patristic Covenant Theology for Current Understanding*, (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Publishing, 2006), 68-70 and John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 1117-1326, 1589-1590.

Appendix D:

Summary of the Differences of the Lord’s Supper Accounts

Difference	Mark/Matthew	Luke/Paul
Passover Feast	Mark 14:12-16, 26a and Matthew 26:17-19 refer to the Feast in the framing verses.	In Luke 22:15-18, 19-20 the Feast is closely connected with the passing of bread and wine. In 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 Paul does not explicitly mention the Feast.
Meal Order	A meal exists to satisfy hunger; however, it occurs <u>before</u> the passing of the bread and the passing of the wine.	A meal exists to satisfy hunger <u>between</u> the passing of the bread and the passing of the wine.
Formulation of Words Spoken During the Lord’s Supper	A) Both the covenant and atonement motifs are integrated in the interpretation of the cup. B) there is an allusion to Exodus 24:8 and Isaiah 53:12 concerning the “blood of the covenant” and to whom and why it is “poured out.” C) Speaks of the blessing of the bread and thanksgiving for the cup. D) The phrases “This is my body” and “This is my blood of the covenant” are acknowledged as parallel statements.” E) The command of remembrance is missing.	A) The covenant motif is associated with the interpretation of the cup whereas the atonement motif follows the interpretation of the bread. B) The atonement motif “for you” and about a “new covenant” is spoken about in the sense of Jeremiah 31:31-34. C) Only mentions thanksgiving for the cup and bread. D) The phrases “This is my body” and “This is my cup” are juxtaposed. E) In Luke the command of remembrance appears only after the interpretation of the bread whereas in 1 Corinthians it is found twice with the expansion “whenever you drink of it” after the interpretation of the cup.

Source: Adapted and compiled from Petrus J. Grabe, *New Covenant, New Community: The Significance of Biblical and Patristic Covenant Theology for*

Current Understanding, (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Publishing, 2006), 104-105 and John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 1117-1326, 1589-1590.

Appendix E:

The Four Gospels and Their Portraits of Jesus

Gospel	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Audience	Jews	Romans	Hellenists	Greek World
Portrait of Jesus	Jesus is the Messiah/king who fulfills testament prophecy and expectations.	Jesus is the authoritative Son of God	Jesus is the perfect Son of man who came to save and minister to all people through the power of the Holy Spirit.	Jesus is the fully divine Son of God in whom we should believe to receive eternal life.
Key Verses	Matthew 16:16; 20:28	1:1; Mark 10:24; 15:34	Mark 1:1; 8:27; Luke 19:10	John 20:31
Key Words	Fulfilled	Immediately	Son of Man	Believe; Eternal Life

Source: Adapted from *Nelson’s Complete Book of Bible Maps & Charts*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996), 296 in John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 1114.

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