

## **16 The Synoptic Gospels & The Synoptic Problem**

The “Synoptic Gospels” is the name given to the first three canonical Gospels of the Christian New Testament (Matthew, Mark and Luke). The word means “with the same eye” and refers to the similarities between these three documents – they are extremely similar in many respects. Similarity in word choices and event placement shows an interrelationship.

The synoptic problem concerns how this interrelation came to pass and what the nature of this interrelationship is. Any solution must account for the similarities and differences in content, order, and wording. Possible answers speculate either a direct relationship (one Evangelist possessed one of the gospels) or indirect (two Evangelists having access to a shared source). The sources may be written or oral; single or multiple.

### *Proposed Solutions*

This section is a brief overview of current speculative solutions to the Synoptic Problem including scholarly thought first proposed in the 1800s and traveling back through traditional church history and church views citing the writings of the ancient church fathers. Most modern study focuses on the two-source hypothesis.

- The two-source hypothesis states that Matthew and Luke independently copied Mark for its narrative framework and independently added discourse material from a non-extant sayings collection called Q. Much work has gone into the extent and wording of Q, particularly since the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas which attests to the sayings gospel genre. Holtzmann's 1863 theory posited an Ur-Marcus in the place of our Mark, with our Mark being a later revision. Some scholars occasionally propose an unattested revision of Mark, a deutero-Mark, being the base of what Matthew and Luke used. Streeter (1924) further refined the Two-Source Hypothesis into a Four-Source Hypothesis, with an M and an L being a unique source to Matthew and Luke respectively, with Q and L combined into a Proto-Luke before Luke added Mark. While unique sources, such as M, L, or Semitic first editions, are interesting for form-critical purposes, they are quite peripheral to the Synoptic Problem as to how the canonical gospels are interrelated.
- The Farrer hypothesis posits that Mark was written first and Matthew used Mark, but that Luke used both, thus dispensing with Q.
- The Griesbach hypothesis or Two Gospel Hypothesis, holds that Matthew was written first, and Luke used it in preparing his gospel. Then, Mark conflated the two in a procedure that mostly followed where Matthew and Luke agree in order except for discourse material.
- The Augustinian hypothesis holds that Matthew was written first, then Mark, then Luke, and each Evangelist depended on those who preceded him. This position is in the closest agreement with Church Father testimony of the gospels' origins. John Wenham was considered one of the prominent contemporary scholars who supported the Augustinian hypothesis. Some scholars argue that the Griesbach hypothesis is merely another variant of this original hypothesis since they agree on their principal points.
- A variant of the Augustinian hypothesis that was popular mainly among Roman Catholic scholars in the first half of the 20th century and which is also advanced by Dr. Martin Brenner is that Matthew was written first, and copied by Mark and then Luke, but that Matthew was written in Aramaic, and when it was translated to Greek the translator liberally adapted some of the phraseology of the other gospels which were already in Greek.
- The Parker hypothesis (Parker 1953) argues that a proto-Matthew, probably written in Aramaic, in addition to Q, was written first. Mark would have followed proto-Matthew and added new elements of his own. It is argued that a Greek translator would have fused elements from Mark,

proto-Matthew, and Q in order to create a Greek Matthew close to the version we know. Independently, Luke would have written his gospel with these same sources (Mark, proto-Matthew, Q) added with other sources known by John, which would explain why Luke is the closest of the first three gospels to John.

Other theories usually posit more hypothetical and proto-sources. Generally their plausibility is in inverse relation to the number of additional sources. Boismard calls for *seven* hypothetical documents, one of them a form of Q.

A handful of researchers, such as Eta Linnemann, argue that each of the evangelists are independent of one another and that the apparent literary similarities are merely coincidental. This theory is in the character of the fundamentalist or literalist Christian belief that the whole Bible, including the Gospels, was inspired directly by the Holy Spirit and that therefore no intermediate or source documents between books are required because "all scripture is God-breathed" (II Timothy 3:16).

An argument made by many literalist and traditionalist scholars is that the degree of variation between any given passage of the synoptic Gospels is between ten and forty percent – which is *also* the figure which was considered to be a permissible variation (that is, people who were hearing the story and had heard it before would not complain about such a amount of variation) when telling a history orally; a history which had been passed on as a form of oral tradition. This hypothesis suggests that the Gospels are entirely independent of each other – each being a written form of the same oral tradition which is permitted to vary by the amount the synoptic Gospels do.

#### *Aramaic Primacy*

There are numerous testimonies, starting from Papias and Irenaeus, that Matthew originally wrote in Hebrew letters, which is thought to refer to Aramaic. The sixteenth century Erasmus was the first to express doubts on the subject of an original Aramaic or Hebrew version of the Gospel of Matthew: "It does not seem probable to me that Matthew wrote in Hebrew, since no one testifies that he has seen any trace of such a volume." It must be made clear that there are no copies of Matthew dating from antiquity written in either Hebrew or Aramaic of which we are aware.

Most number contemporary scholars, based on analysis of the Greek in the Gospel of Matthew and use of sources such as the Greek Gospel of Mark, conclude that the New Testament Book of Matthew was written originally in Greek and is not a translation from Hebrew or Aramaic (Greek primacy). If they are correct, then the Church Fathers such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Jerome possibly referred to a document or documents distinct from the present Gospel of Matthew.

A smaller number of scholars (including, however, the Roman Catholic Pontifical Biblical Commission) believe the ancient writings that Matthew was originally in Aramaic, arguing for Aramaic primacy. These scholars normally consider the Peshitta and Old Syriac versions of the New Testament closest to the original autographs. There are a number of elements of the Greek Matthew which are constructed in such a manner that it seems more likely that the Gospel was originally written in Aramaic.

#### *Literary phenomena in the synoptic gospels*

Ninety-four percent of Mark's content is found in Matthew, and seventy-six percent of Mark is found in Luke. This material constitutes the Triple Tradition. The Triple Tradition is largely narrative but contains some sayings material. Since so much of Mark is Triple Tradition, some scholars combine it with the rest of Mark and talk about a Markan Tradition instead. In addition to the Triple Tradition, Matthew and Luke share content not found in Mark, called the Double Tradition. This content is mostly composed of sayings (mainly by Jesus, but some by John the Baptist) but includes at least one miracle story (the Centurion's Servant) as well.

Agreement in the order of the content is the strongest indication of a documentary dependence, especially when the agreement touches topical arrangements instead of chronological (e.g., both Matthew and Mark relate the death of John the Baptist in a flash-back). Therefore most scholars have not found purely oral theories plausible. The pattern of order is quite different between the Triple and Double traditions.

In the Triple Tradition, the order (or arrangement) of the pericopes (a set of verses which form one coherent unit or thought, thus forming a short passage suitable for public reading from a text, now usually of sacred scripture) is largely shared between Matthew and Mark or Luke and Mark or among all three. It is rarely the case that Matthew and Luke agree against Mark in arranging the Triple Tradition. This formal property suggests that Mark is a middle term between Matthew and Luke. Specifically, the following scenarios are logically possible:

**Indirect relationship.** If Matthew, Mark and Luke are independent revisions of a common source, then this Ur-Gospel in order is best represented in Mark. In fact, this Ur-Gospel can be thought of as an Ur-Marcus. (Lachman 1832; Holtzmann 1863).

**Direct relationship.** Butler showed that Lachmann's conclusion does not hold up if any gospel is directly related to another. He found that three (later expanded to four by Farmer 1964) situations were possible

- (1) Markan priority. Matthew and Luke copied Mark in Triple Tradition. (Two-Source Hypothesis, Farrer Hypothesis)
- (2) Matthean priority. Luke copied Mark who copied Matthew who was first (Augustinian hypothesis)
- (3) Lukan priority. Matthew copied Mark who copied Luke who was first (Few adherents).
- (4) Markan posteriority. Mark conflated Matthew and Luke (Griesbach Hypothesis)

There is an additional fact about the arrangements of the Triple Tradition: Mark's order is almost always supported by either Matthew or Luke. This lends strength to the Griesbach Hypothesis [scenario (4)], but that support is weakened by Tuckett's mathematical observation that the relatively rare deviations of either Matthew or Luke from Mark's order means that this observation is not statistically significant. Tuckett's model may be criticized for assuming randomness on part the later redactors (departures from a source are equally likely), but since Matthew's deviations are toward the beginning and Luke's are towards the end, it is not surprising that both Matthew and Luke rarely re-ordered the same Marcan pericope.

The agreement in order within the Double Tradition, however, is much weaker, mostly in the Sermon on the Mount/Plain, leading scholars to favor an indirect relationship for the Double Tradition. Thus, Matthew and Luke copied independently a sayings collection called Q. On the other hand, there is enough order in Q to argue that Q is a documentary source. Those other theories which do not hypothesize a shared sayings source usually assume that Luke copied the Double Tradition from Matthew.

A close comparison of the wording within the Triple Tradition shows that Matthew and Mark are usually quite close, with Luke being somewhat further. To the extent that Luke agrees in wording at all with the other two, it usually is with both or with Mark. Luke's agreements with Matthew against Mark, the minor agreements, are less frequent but not insignificant.

The role of the minor agreements is significant in as much as they suggest that Luke and Matthew might not be independent from one another. However, culminating in 1924, Streeter was able to show, to the satisfaction of most of the scholars of the time, that these "minor agreements" are largely trivial, coincidental, or attributable to textual corruption. Streeter's work allowed the Oxford School to replace the Ur-Markus of Holtzmann's 1863 Two-Source Hypothesis with the canonical

Mark.

Griesbach's explanation of Mark's redactional procedure predicts that Mark should more agree with the Evangelist he currently is copying. Overall this is true, but often Mark prefers Matthew in areas he should be more like Luke.

As with other ancient texts, the fact that Mark's wording is usually fuller than either Matthew's or Luke's can be taken as buttressing either the priority or the abridgment arguments. In the priority perspective, the later writers simplified Mark's narration in their borrowing; in the abridgement argument, Mark would have amplified the other writers. Mark is also felt by some to be more "primitive" than either Matthew or Luke, thus arguing for priority, though there are also arguments for Matthean priority (e.g. being more Jewish), or that if Mark were editing two gospels together, his Greek might become more choppy and poor. This area of the synoptic problem has thus been riddled with reversible and inconclusive arguments, illustrating the often subjective character of such interpretations.