

The Synoptic Problem and the Theory of Mark's Priority

Lecture by Steve Gregg

The “synoptic problem” is the difficulty of explaining the literary relationships among the first three books in the New Testament, commonly referred to as the “synoptic [means “seeing together”) gospels.”

The similarities among these gospels are thought to be too great to be explained other than by literary interdependence. It is widely believed that Mark was the earliest gospel, and that Matthew and Luke used Mark as one of their sources in writing their gospels.

1. Agreement of general content and wording shared among the gospels.

Mark's gospel has 661 verses. Of these, 606 verses appear (sometimes abridged or reworded) in Matthew's gospel, and 380 appear in Luke. There are only 31 verses that appear only in Mark, having no parallels in Matthew or Luke.

2. Agreement in the order of the pericopae (individual story units).

All the material in the synoptic gospels can be reduced to 172 sections (or pericopae). Of these sections, Mark's gospel has 84; Matthew has 112; and Luke has 123.

Matthew and Luke generally follow the arrangement of these sections as they appear in Mark. However, they do not necessarily follow the same order as each other in the arrangement of material not found in Mark.

With reference to the order of the sections:

Matthew and Mark sometimes agree against the order in Luke;

Luke and Mark sometimes agree against the order in Matthew; but

Matthew and Luke never agree against the order in Mark.

This suggests to many that Mark was the stable original, which the others generally followed, but from which the others sometimes varied in different ways from each other.

3. Agreement even of parenthetical material.

Matthew 9:6/ Mark 2:10

“he said to me paralytic...”

Matthew 24:15/ Mark 13:14

“let him who reads understand”

Mark 5:8/ Luke 8:29

“for he had commanded the unclean spirit...”

Matthew 27:18/ Mark 15:10

“for he knew that it was out of envy...”

Matt.22:23/ Mark 12:18/ Lk 20:27

“who say there is no resurrection”

Material in Matthew and Luke that is also in Mark is mostly historical narrative (stories)

Material in Matthew and Luke that is not in Mark is mostly sayings and discourses of Jesus

The “Two-Source Theory” is that Matthew and Luke had two primary sources for their writing:

1) They used Mark (or “Ur-Mark,” an earlier draft) for most of the narrative accounts; and

2) They had another (now lost) source for the sayings and discourses (usually called “Q”).

Challenges to the Two-Source Theory:

This view is contrary to the tradition passed down by the early church fathers, who believed that Matthew's gospel was written first (in an Aramaic edition, later translated into Greek), and that Mark wrote his gospel to preserve in writing the preaching of Peter, whom he accompanied (1 Peter 5:13).

Papias (bishop of Hierapolis at the end of the first century) wrote:

“Matthew composed the Oracles (*logia*) in the Hebrew dialect, and everyone translated as he was able.”

“Mark, being the interpreter of Peter, whatsoever he recorded he wrote with great accuracy, but not, however, in the order in which it was spoken or done by our Lord, for he neither heard nor followed our Lord, but as before said, he was in company with Peter, who gave him such instruction as was necessary, but not to give a history of our Lord's discourses.”

(both citations from Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 111:39)

1. Why would Matthew, an apostle who witnessed the events, depend upon Mark's work?
2. Did Luke use Matthew and/or Mark? (Luke 1:1-3)

There are many evidences of the independence of the accounts of each gospel...

Luke differs from Matthew in significant ways:

1. Luke differs from Matthew in the birth narratives, the genealogy of Christ, the location and content of the Sermon on the Mount;
2. There are significant differences in Matt.2:14-15/ Luke 2:39 and Matt.28:7,10,16/ Luke 24:49 that do not appear to reflect Luke's familiarity with Matthew or vice versa;
3. Luke omits passages from Matthew that would serve Luke's interest in Gentile inclusion:
 - a. The visit of the Magi (Matt.2:1-15)
 - b. The kingdom taken from Israel and given to others (Matt.21:43/ Luke 20:17)
 - c. The gospel to be preached to all nations (Matt.24:14/ Luke 21:12-26)

Luke omits entire section between the feeding of the 5000 and Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 14:22—16:12/Mark 6:45—8:26)

Luke includes a block of nine chapters (9:51—18:14) which no other gospel includes.

Luke says “about eight days” (9:28) where Matthew (17:1) and Mark (9:2) say, “After six days”

Tentative solution: The preaching of the apostles (for 20+ years before the writing of any gospels) tended to standardize the wording and relating of the story of Jesus. This explains the similarities in the written records, which may not have followed the oral tradition rigidly, and each author had his own recollections and sources as well.