

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Synoptic Problem Paper

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NBST 510

New Testament Introduction

by

Stuart D. Smith

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History of the Synoptic Problem

The Synoptic Problem is the problem of the interrelationship between the New Testament books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke; collectively referred to as the Synoptic Gospels. Due to the similar content, wording, and order of events that is common across these three Gospels, they are called “synoptic” which means “to see together, to have the same view or outlook.”¹ The Synoptic Problem is a study that dates back to the early Christian church as early as the fifth century.² Saint Augustine was studying the interdependencies and shared content of the Gospels when he wrote *The Harmony of the Gospels* in the 400s.³ In 1794, Eichhorn “offered a full exhibit of the parallels in the gospels and materials peculiar to each...”⁴ In the early 1800s, Dr. Herbert Marsh of Cambridge University translated Michaelis’ *Introduction* and added his own work “Dissertation on the Origin and Composition of the First Three Gospels.”⁵ Many other scholars have written on this subject in modern times as well. Essentially, the Synoptic Problem is the study of which gospels were written first, and which (if any) drew on others for source material. Additionally, the problems posed deal with how much material from the Synoptic Gospels is independent vs. interdependent. Modern scholars have a number of theories regarding the Synoptic Problem. Some believe that the “history of the Synoptic research reveals

1 Andreas J. Kostenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 158.

2 Ibid., 165.

3 St. Augustin, *The Harmony of the Gospels*, ed. M. B. Riddle, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 1, no. 6, 122.

4 Donald Wayne Riddle, “The Aramaic Gospels and the Synoptic Problem”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 54, no. 3 (Sep. 1935): 127.

5 Ibid.

that the [Synoptic] problem is practically insoluble.”⁶ Yet the debate continues even into the 21st Century.

Saint Augustine’s early view was that the order in which the Gospels appear in the Bible was the order in which they were written.⁷ This supposes that Matthew was written first; Mark was written second and relies on Matthew as a source; and finally Luke was written last and relies on both Matthew and Mark. Few modern scholars support the Augustinian view.⁸ J. J. Griesbach first proposed the *Two-Gospel Hypothesis* in 1783, wherein he posited that the Gospel of Matthew was written first, followed by the Gospel of Luke, and then the Gospel of Matthew.⁹ Griesbach’s theory has both its supporters and detractors. “Recent debate on the Griesbach hypothesis has centered on the question as to whether or not it can be ‘falsified’”, yet Fee contends the “real question is, which theory best explains the phenomena.”¹⁰ The *Markan Priority* theory contends that the Gospel of Mark was written first, and Matthew and Luke relied on Mark for source material.¹¹ This view was championed by Lachmann when, in 1835, “he observed that the order of periscopes in Matthew and Luke is very similar when Mark also contains the periscope and that the order of periscopes in Matthew and Luke is often different if Mark does not contain the periscope.”¹² Finally, the *Two-Document Hypothesis* is the theory that

6 Gordon D. Fee, “A Text-Critical Look at the Synoptic Problem”, *Novum Testamentum* 22, no. 1 (Jan 1980): 12.

7 Kostenberger, et al., *The Cradle*, 165.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Fee, “A Text-Critical Look”, 14.

11 Kostenberger, et al., *The Cradle*, 168.

12 Ibid.

Mark and a missing document called “*The Gospel of Q or Q Document.*”¹³ The name Q is derived from German word *Quelle*, which means “sources.”¹⁴ The theory, which dates back to Eichhorn and Marsh in the 1790s and Credner in the 1830s, contends that both Matthew and Luke used Mark and *Q* as source material.¹⁵ These three modern theories of the Synoptic Problem comprise the bulk of the scholarly opinions regarding the interdependent and dependent nature of the first three Gospels of the New Testament. The aforementioned *Augustinian View* and the *Farrier-Goulder Hypothesis*, which suggests Luke relied on Matthew and Mark as sources, are outliers that do not enjoy widespread support among modern scholars.¹⁶

Comparison of the Gospels

There are both similarities and differences between the Gospels. In reviewing these, scholars often use a Gospel Synopsis, which is a method of placing similar passages in a side-by-side comparison to more easily study them.¹⁷ However, this method is not necessarily required, and one can understand the differences and similarities between Matthew, Mark, and Luke by simply reading the Gospels.

There are many similarities in wording among the Gospels, particularly with the sayings of Jesus.¹⁸ There are also similarities in the order of events. There are many pericopes, or “self contained units of narrative” in the Gospels, and they are arranged remarkably similar in each of

13 Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 618.

14 Ibid.

15 Kostenberger, et al., *The Cradle*, 170.

16 Ibid., 172.

17 Ibid., 159.

18 Ibid.

the Synoptics.¹⁹ Another area of similarity between the Synoptic Gospels is the use of parenthetical and explanatory material. When the Gospel writers included similar or nearly identical comments, statements, and phrases to explain or amplify on information, “this strongly implies literary dependence between the Gospels.”²⁰ Finally, there are several similarities in the Old Testament quotations used between the Gospels. These can take the form of strict Hebrew to Greek translations, exact reproductions from the Septuagint, or paraphrasing from a Gospel writer.²¹

There are other similarities that are found between two, but not all three, of the Synoptic Gospels. For example, Matthew and Luke contain a genealogy of Jesus Christ, yet Mark does not. Matthew and Luke also contain a birth narrative of Jesus, Mark does not. In other areas, the Synoptics differ in such a way that certain elements of the Gospel story are included in one, but not the other two. For example, all three Synoptics contain a pericopes regarding the calling of the first disciples. Matthew 4:18-21, Mark 1:14-20, and Luke 5:1-11 all outline how Jesus called Peter, James, and John while they were fishing on the Sea of Galilee. However, Luke goes into much more detail, describing how Jesus suggests the place their nets leading to a miraculously large catch of fish. Luke is also different from Matthew and Mark in that he opens with a specific purpose for his Gospel. Luke 1:1-4 contains an introduction to Theophilus and Luke’s statement that he has “carefully investigated everything from the beginning” and he has the

19 Kostenberger, et al., *The Cradle*, 161.

20 Ibid., 162.

21 Ibid.

desire to “write an orderly account.”²² Matthew is the only one of the three Synoptics that contains the pericope regarding the Guards’ Report. Matthew 28:11-15 outlines how the chief priests bribed the soldiers to say that the disciples stole Jesus’ body. It is clear that all three of the Synoptic Gospels have much shared content, and there are also differences as well.

Homicide Detective J. Warner Wallace describes this phenomenon as “eyewitness variability.”²³

As a detective, Wallace points out that eyewitness testimonies will contain both points of agreement and disagreement. Eyewitness testimonies are “messy” and “filled with idiosyncrasies and personal perspectives along with common retellings of familiar stories.”²⁴

We should expect no less, even with the divinely inspired writers of the New Testament and the Synoptic Gospels.

Who Was First?

Perhaps, this side of eternity, scholars will never come to a consensus as to which is the best theory regarding the Synoptic Problem. In studying the various hypotheses for this paper, the author believes that *Markan Priority* is the best theory that answers the Synoptic Problem. This is for several reasons. Mark is the shortest of the Synoptic Gospels, thus it would seem that Matthew and Luke would feel compelled to expand and amplify on Mark’s brevity. Luke clearly intended to write a longer, more historically focused document (*cf.* Luke 1:1-4). Despite its brevity, Mark’s Gospel does actually contain longer pericopes than Matthew and Luke.²⁵ Mark’s

²² Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

²³ J. Warner Wallace, *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2013), 82.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Kostenberger, et al., *The Cradle*, 168.

shorter book is due to the fact that it has less overall material than Matthew and Luke.²⁶ Matthew is much more theological than Mark²⁷, thus it follows that Matthew, who was one of Jesus' twelve disciples, may have been compelled to write on theological matters which were absent in Mark's account. Additionally, "Mark's translation is occasionally rough and disjointed."²⁸ While this is pure speculation on the part of the author, it could be that John Mark, the "'interpreter' of Peter"²⁹, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was compelled to "get the message out" quickly in response to the rapid spread of Christianity after Christ's ascension. Then later, Matthew and Luke followed with their more sophisticated and theologically rich Gospels. Matthew and Luke rarely contradict Mark in the order when the pericope is contained in Mark; however, they often disagree when then pericope is not contained in Mark.³⁰ Finally, *Markan Priority* does not rely on the *Q Document*. It is strange that, if it exists, "Q" still remains missing. Since God is perfectly able to preserve the Bible, including a vast array of copies of the Gospels that exists today, it is difficult to accept that "Q" was an actual historical document on which one or more of the Synoptic writers relied. As one scholar asks, "Is there any level of evidence that is internal to the literary accounts of the gospels that would be considered' plausible in showing that a document which is no longer extant stood behind Matthew and Luke as a common source?"³¹

26 Kostenberger, et al., *The Cradle*, 168.

27 Ibid., 179.

28 Donald Wayne Riddle, "The Aramaic Gospels and the Synoptic Problem", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 54, no. 3 (Sep 1935): 130.

29 Kostenberger, et al., *The Cradle*, 229.

30 Ibid., 168.

31 Paul Foster, "Is It Possible to Dispense with Q?", *Novum Testamentum*, 45, no. 4 (Oct 2003): 337.

Conclusions

The Synoptic Problem, while not technically a *problem*, is an interesting historical and textual issue to study. Scholars from Saint Augustine to those in the halls of modern academia have studied the issue extensively. The three generally accepted theories, the Two-Gospel Hypothesis, Markan Priority, and the Two-Document Hypothesis, all have their supporters and opponents. Each has certain compelling points, yet each also falls short in certain key areas. On balance, the Markan Priority is the most compelling theory that provides the best way of looking at the Synoptic Gospels. “Generally, differences between the Synoptics can be more reasonably explained when one assumes Markan priority.”³² Finally, the majority of modern scholars hold to Markan priority.³³ While this is not an *argumentum ab auctoritate*, this should bear some consideration when one studies the Synoptic Problem.

³² Kostenberger, et al., *The Cradle*, 169.

³³ *Ibid.*, 173.

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