



The Synoptic Question

By Isaac M. Alderman

The author of the Gospel of Luke begins by noting that he researched and wrote his gospel even though “many have [already] undertaken to set down an orderly account” of the life of Jesus (Lk 1:1-3). This clearly indicates that the author was familiar with other gospels.

When reading the gospels, you may notice that some individual sayings, parables or actions of Jesus (called **pericope**, pl. **pericopae**) are repeated in more than one book while others are found in only a single gospel. The first three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, have much in common, while John’s gospel has a very different style, and unique material. Because the first three gospels have so many similarities, they are referred to as **synoptic** (syn-optic, “seen together”).

The material that is found in all three Synoptics is called the **Triple Tradition**. This refers to the fact that 90 percent of Mark’s content is also found in Matthew, and about 65 percent of Mark is found in Luke. The material that is found in both Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark, is called the **Double Tradition**. The Triple Tradition is mostly narrative material while the Double Tradition material is mostly sayings of Jesus.

Trying to understand why the synoptic gospels agree so closely in some places and disagree so widely in others is called the **Synoptic Problem**. The Synoptic Problem (or Question) has long been noticed by close readers of the Bible. Even in the first three centuries, early Church leaders such as Papias, Eusebius and Irenaeus recognized the issues.

St. Augustine, by the beginning of the 5th c. had proposed that Matthew was the first gospel written; Luke used Matthew as a source, adding material, while Mark wrote what was essentially an abridged version of Matthew. This solution served as the standard until the rise of critical biblical scholarship in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Besides the introduction to Luke, other major evidence for literary dependence is agreement in *order* and *wording*. Not only are many of the same pericopae recounted, they are often written in the same order. The triple tradition material is predominantly in the same order, while the double tradition does not agree in order. As an example of the triple tradition, in Mt 16:13-18:5/Mk 8:27-9:37/Lk 9:18-48, the following pericopae are found in the same order:

- Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi
- Jesus’ first prediction of his death
- Sayings
- Jesus’ transfiguration
- Exorcism of a boy
- Jesus’ second prediction of his death
- Teaching about greatness

The entire list of the triple tradition further demonstrates many examples of similar or identical ordering of pericopae (<http://virtualreligion.net/primer/synoptic.html>).

Also, there are many places in the triple tradition in which the agreement in wording makes it clear that there is literary dependence. Here is a good example of similar wording in the triple tradition.

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all.
And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.

***Mark 6:41-43a**

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.

Matthew 14:19-20

And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd.

And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.

Luke 9:16-17

In addition to instances where all three synoptics agree in wording, there are places where Matthew agrees with Mark against Luke, and Luke and Mark agree against Matthew.

Just as similar wording describes an event or action of Jesus, as above, editorial remarks and parenthetical material are often repeated. This is a very strong argument for literary dependence, as it is difficult to think that editorial or parenthetical comments (such as “let the reader understand,” –Mt 24:15/Mk 13:14) would be part of the story as told orally. Here is another very good example:

But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—*he said to the paralytic*—‘I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.’

Mark 2:10

But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—*he then said to the paralytic*—‘Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.’

Matthew 9:6

But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—*he said to the one who was paralysed*—‘I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.’

Luke 5:24

Although it does not closely agree in order, the double tradition often closely agrees in wording. This material includes the famous and lengthy sermon which Matthew sets on a mount and Luke sets on a level place. Below is a good example.

Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?

Or how can you say to your neighbour, "Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye", when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye?

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye.

Luke 6:41-42

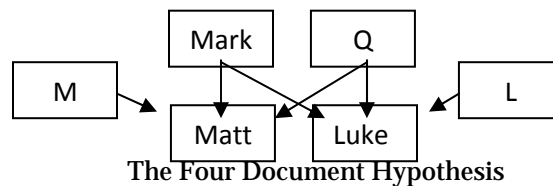
Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?

Or how can you say to your neighbour, "Let me take the speck out of your eye", while the log is in your own eye?

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye.

Matthew 7:3-5

Although there have been several proposals for how to explain the literary relationship between the synoptics, the model that most scholars have accepted is often called the **Four Document Hypothesis**. In this model, Mark is the first gospel written (**Markan Priority**), and was independently used by Matthew and Luke as a source. Additionally, Matthew and Luke had a source which Mark did not have. We call this source **Q**. Finally, Matthew and Luke each had their own sources which we call **M** and **L**.



Markan priority makes the most sense of the evidence of order and wording.

Many Bible scholars think that a second shared source, Q, was a list of the sayings of Jesus. This source, which has never been found, is the primary source of the Double Tradition and explains why Matthew and Luke have far more sayings of Jesus than does Mark. It also explains why Matthew and Luke have many of the same sayings, often verbatim.

Finally, Matthew and Luke each have material that is unique. While only 3 percent of Mark is not found in either Matthew or Luke, approximately 20 percent of Matthew and 35 percent of Luke is unique to their accounts. This further bolsters the belief that Mark is the primary source while demonstrating that Matthew and Luke each had material unavailable to Mark and John ("M" and "L" respectively, as above).

Markan Priority and the existence of Q, M and L provide the best explanation for the evidence of agreement in wording and order.

It explains why the Triple Tradition agrees in order (Matthew and Luke utilized Mark's order) and why the Double Tradition doesn't (Q has no chronology, so Matthew and Luke freely inserted sayings into the triple tradition structure).

It also explains why the Triple Tradition has agreements and disagreements in wording. Sometimes all three use identical wording (Matthew and Luke didn't alter what they took from Mark), and sometimes all three tell the same story differently (both Matthew and Luke, for reasons of their own, decided to change Mark's wording). Sometimes one gospel agrees with Mark in wording while the other does not. (Either Matthew or Luke changes the language of a pericope while the other preserves Mark's original language.)

Finally, the other sources, Q, M, and L account for the Double Tradition's frequent agreement in wording (Q), and the material that is unique to Matthew and Luke (M and L).

One of the reasons it is important to know about the literary relationship between the gospels, is that it allows for **redaction criticism**. The redaction critic assumes that the gospel authors are not just editors but are also creative theologians who shape the material they have received. Redaction criticism is related to **source criticism**, which tries to identify the sources available to the biblical writers. (See Jim West's piece on the topic under "Reading Glasses" in this issue.)

The basic idea is that Matthew and Luke, after reading a particular pericope in Mark, incorporated that pericope into their own gospel. Sometimes, it was copied verbatim and sometimes they altered the account. But, why would they alter it? That question is the primary concern of the redaction critic.

The following Triple Tradition pericope is a good example:

<p>Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them.</p> <p>When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money.</p> <p>So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.</p> <p>Mark 14:10-11</p>	<p>Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot,</p> <p>went to the chief priests and said, 'What will you give me if I betray him to you?'</p> <p>They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.</p> <p>Matthew 26:14-16</p>	<p>Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve; he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them. They were greatly pleased and agreed to give him money. So he consented and began to look for an opportunity to betray him to them when no crowd was present.</p> <p>Luke 22: 3-6</p>
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What is interesting about this parallel pericope is that both Matthew and Luke have intensified what they found in Mark. Matthew has done this by including a quote from Judas himself. Luke has gone further and introduced Satan into the scene. This gives us further insight into the **theology** of these gospel writers. For example, Luke's account returns to a theme he began earlier, with the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, except that here, Judas is the one who is tempted, and fails to resist.

Although the four document hypothesis does not have universal support, it is the consensus approach among Bible scholars. Markan priority and the existence of Q most clearly explain the agreement in order and wording in the Triple tradition, as well as the agreement in wording and lack of order agreement in the double tradition. Knowing this allows the exegete, or interpreter, to delve more deeply into the theology of the synoptic gospel authors through redaction criticism.

Isaac M. Alderman is an adjunct professor in theology at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota.

**The translations used are taken from the NRSV*

Glossary

Double Tradition: material found in Matthew and Luke.

Exegesis: the careful study of scripture to produce an interpretation.

Four Document Hypothesis: the dominant solution to the synoptic problem, with the main elements being Markan priority, and the existence of Q, M, and L.

L: a document or tradition that served as a source for Luke.

M: a document or tradition that served as a source for Matthew.

Markan Priority: Mark was written prior to Luke and Matthew and could therefore serve as a source for them.

Pericope, pl. **pericopae:** a self-contained unit of scripture.

Q: an abbreviation for *Quelle*, German for 'source,' it is a hypothetical document of the sayings of Jesus.

Redaction criticism: using the editorial decisions of the authors to assist in interpretation.

Synoptic: "seen together," refers to the first three Gospels.

Synoptic Problem: the attempt to explain how similarities and differences in the synoptic Gospels came to be, the nature of their literary dependence.

Theology: The study of the nature of God and religious truth.

Triple Tradition: material found in Matthew, Mark and Luke.