

The Synoptic Problem

Note: having your blue synopsis of the four gospels at hand will be helpful when reading this.

A common term thrown around by people studying the gospels is "synoptic." Typically, one will hear talk about the "synoptic gospels." Or we might hear about "the synoptic problem." What are the "synoptic gospels"? Put simply, they are Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Now what it means to call them "synoptic" and how they got this designation are two important questions to answer. If you are not already aware of this issue, read on....

Typically, "the synoptic problem" is seen as a maze of observations, analysis, and hypotheses concerning the gospel narratives and their sources. Who wrote when? Who wrote first? Who copied whom? These are all good questions to ask, and important *historical* questions. However, there is more than history at stake here. I think the most fruitful way to look at "the synoptic problem" is to see it as *an opportunity for deep and complex exegesis*. A quote I find very "spot-on":

"Studying 'the synoptic problem' is a difficult and intricate task, one that requires close attention to minutiae... There is no better discipline for learning the details of the gospel material."
~Margaret Davies and E.P. Sanders, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, 52-53.

What do we mean by "synoptic"?

"Synoptic" is a Greek term, meaning to 'look together.' This can imply two things: 1) the 'synoptic gospels' (Matt, Mark, Luke) all in a sense look together at Jesus' life; 2) these gospels may be looked at together by an interpreter by setting them side-by-side.

The term "synoptic" applied to Matthew, Mark, and Luke comes from a simple observation: Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell the story of Jesus in Greek using many of the same stories, often in the same order. The similarities between these three tellings span a spectrum from the macro-structure of the narratives down to the details of the inclusion of parenthetical remarks (Mark 13:14; Matt 24:15), to word order (which is flexible in Greek), to the form of a Greek verb.

Now, the observation that all three narratives are very similar is just an observation. What more can we say? Let's make a few more observations...

1.Many scenes are in all three narratives. This material is called "triple tradition." An example of this is found pericope # 160 in your blue *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*. (The pericope number is the number in bold in the center of the page.) All three gospels record this saying in very similar detail. There are a few more points about *triple tradition* material that you should know:

- *Within triple tradition material*, when all three gospels do not agree (in wording, word order, etc.), Mark generally always agrees with either Matthew or Luke. An example of this in pericope 160 is in Mark 8:37 and Matthew 16:26. Compare with Luke 9:25. Only

Matthew and Mark have the second question: "What can a man give in return for his life?" (NRS)

- *Within triple tradition material*, most of Mark's content is found in either Matthew (90%) or Luke (50%). This is most easily seen on the large scale of the substance of the narratives. But, it is also generally true for individual scenes ("pericopes").
- *Within triple tradition material*, where not all three agree, sometimes Matthew and Luke agree *against* Mark. These are much less frequent than the agreements between Mark and one of the others. In pericope 160, this can be seen in the way that both Matthew and Luke have an infinitive form of the Greek verb *ercomai* ("come, go") (Matt 16:24; Luke 9:23) whereas Mark 8:34 uses an infinitive of the verb *avkolouqew* ("follow"). This sort of agreement of wording between Matthew and Luke *against Mark* is called a **minor agreement**. These minor agreements can be agreements in changes, additions, or omissions.
- The minor agreements suggest that there are also **major agreements**. Major agreements are places where Matthew and Luke follow a triple tradition scene with the same scene, but in difference to what follows in Mark. A prime example of this is in pericopes 128-129. All three gospels have the parable of the mustard seed (Matt 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19). However, only Matthew and Luke follow this with the parable of the leaven (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:20-21).
- *Within triple tradition material*, agreement between Matthew and Luke begins where Mark enters the picture and ends where Mark ends. On the large scale, this is seen in the fact that both Matthew and Luke contain birth narratives which are not alike in any way. Matthew and Luke begin to agree in the telling of the story only when Mark's narrative begins: with John the Baptist at the river Jordan. At the end of the narratives, after Mark ends, both Matthew and Luke diverge in different ways with their own resurrection accounts. This is also generally true within individual pericopes (scenes) themselves.
- All three gospels essentially constitute *triple tradition* material on the large scale.

2. Matthew and Luke share about 200 verses *not found in Mark*. This material is called ***double tradition***. The agreement between Matthew and Luke, as far as wording goes, ranges from 100% agreement to very little. This includes the minor and major agreements.

- One key observation about this *double tradition material* is that the order of the material hardly ever coheres between Matthew and Luke, even though the wording is often identical or very similar.

3. There is a good deal of material unique to either Matthew, Mark, or Luke. That is, there are whole scenes, shorter sayings, or individual words that are only in one of the three.

So, now what? What do we make of this? The main thing is that the above general observations need to be explained. Here's where things get complex and messy....There are three safe conclusions:

1. Matthew, Mark, and Luke seem to have a *literary relationship*. Mark seems to be the "man-in-the-middle." (triple tradition)

2. Matthew and Luke seem to have familiarity with one another or use a common source. (double tradition, minor and major agreements)
3. All three gospels have their own unique material.

There are three main hypotheses which attempt to explain this data:

The Griesbach Hypothesis

This hypothesis argues that Luke used Matthew, and Mark combined both. Material unique to each gospel comes from their own traditions or from the writers themselves. *This hypothesis explains:*

- Triple tradition: Matthew is the starting point.
- Much of the double tradition--Luke knew Matthew's gospel.
- "Minor agreements" and "major agreements"--Luke followed Matthew.

Problems with this are:

- No explanation for Mark's omission of important material in Matthew *and* Luke, such as either of the birth narratives, Matthew's sermon on the mount, any of Matthew's well-crafted discourses, either of Matthew's or Luke's resurrection narratives.
- If Mark used and combined both Matthew and Luke, he is remarkably inconsistent in how he does this.

The Four-Source (or "two-source") Hypothesis

This argues that Mark and another, unknown source "Q/q" were the sources for Matthew and Luke. In addition, this hypothesis contends that Matthew and Luke drew upon Mark *independently* of one another. Matthew and Luke also drew upon sources unique to them which accounts for material only in these gospels.

Brief Excursus: what is "Q/q"?

The document "Q/q" is an hypothetical source that has been constructed (some say "re-constructed") by gospel scholars. It is essentially re-created (or created!) from all the material that Matthew and Luke have in common. For some scholars, this "Q" document actually existed, and was a more well-defined and well-crafted collection of Jesus' sayings, which circulated in a certain believing community in the first century. This document had its own theology and articulation of Jesus' significance. This is represented by the capital "Q." Another articulation of this hypothetical document is less bold. According to this articulation, "q" consists of a collection of sayings of Jesus, but to assert that it was a full-blown "gospel" or had its origins in its own believing community with its own theology is seen as slicing the baloney a bit too thin, and thus less important. This is represented by the lower-case "q." Some of this camp even suggest that "q" is just a code for material shared by Matthew and Luke, whose origin we do not know. The point for either "Q/q" hypothesis is that neither Matthew nor Luke knew one another; they each *independently* drew on other material that is common.

The four-source hypothesis *explains*:

- Triple tradition: Mark is the starting point.
- Double tradition: Matthew and Luke had another shared source--"Q/q." This source is a hypothetical document that has been created by scholars to account for the material shared by Matthew and Luke.

Problems:

- Minor agreements: Q scholars will argue that these are places where Matthew and Luke agree against Mark by *coincidence*. For dissenters, these agreements between Matthew and Luke are too frequent to be coincidence; they suggest that Matthew knew Luke or Luke knew Matthew.
- Major agreements: Q scholars will argue that these are a case of Mark/Q overlap. That is, the places where both Matthew and Luke follow Mark in the same way, but against Mark, are cases where the Q document happens to include a scene from Mark. For others, this is not persuasive and introduces more complexity to the Q hypothesis. For these scholars, the major agreements suggest that Matthew and Luke had some sort of knowledge of one another.
- The hypothetical source "Q/q" pushes the limits. It is difficult to answer the following questions: what *order* was the material in "Q/q"? What was the original wording? Was there more to "Q/q" than what we have in Matthew and Luke?

Farrar-Goulder Hypothesis

This hypothesis argues that Matthew and Luke used Mark, *and* that Luke used Matthew.

It *explains*:

- Triple tradition: Mark is the starting point.
- Double tradition, minor and major agreements: Luke knew Matthew.

Problems:

- Luke's method: why break up Matthew's well-crafted discourses? E.g. the Sermon on the Mount; the parables discourse; the discourse on the church in Matthew 18. Scholars have a hard time figuring this out, and thus it presents a problem for this hypothesis.

Cautions and Conclusions

In light of my very skeletal overview of the synoptic problem, here are a few cautions:

1. All of the hypotheses are just that: *hypotheses*. They are attempts to explain data. They can be more plausible than not, but they are not certain or factual. They all have their problems. The important thing is that they provide helpful frameworks within which to

read and understand the gospel narratives given the data concerning their similarities and differences.

2. All of the hypotheses assume a world in which the written text is normative. That is, they assume a modern world, not an ancient one. One related point is that all of the hypotheses do not take into account *oral tradition*, which was more prevalent in the first century than today. People could learn and memorize stories and pass them on with a good amount of detail.
3. None of these hypotheses considers possible complexity of the first century very well. That is, there may have been more than one document before our gospel writers, and they may also have drawn from a well of stories being remembered orally at the same time.

A few conclusions:

1. The best explanation, at minimum, seems to be that Mark, or some form of it, was used by Matthew and Luke. The nature of the similarities leads to a *literary relationship* between Mark and the other two, and what makes best sense is that Mark was used by the other two, not the other way around.
2. Whichever hypothesis one accepts, the study of the gospels at this level has the following benefits:
 1. It focuses our eyes on the details of each gospel's account of Jesus and his significance.
 2. It gives us a better appreciation of each writer's emphases and theological points.
 3. It enhances the richness of the gospel message for proclamation today.
 4. It forces us to reckon with continuity and diversity within early Christianity and the present. We are forced to discern the unity of the gospel message amid different ways of articulating that message.

For More reading...

Bellinzoni, A., ed. *The Two-Source Hypothesis: A Critical Appraisal*. 1985.

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Goodacre, M. *The Synoptic Problem: A Way through the Maze*. 2001.

Goodacre, M. and N. Perrin, eds. *Questioning Q*. 2004.

Kloppenborg-Verbin, J. *Excavating Q*. 2000.