

The Synoptic Problem and Its Solutions

Lecture 8

If we go to the material after the empty tomb, Matthew and Luke share nothing. And in the rest of the story, where they don't follow Mark, they don't agree with each other either, so how do we account for this?

The canonical Gospels are given titles in the manuscripts: “the good news according to X”: It is natural to ask about the authors and the circumstances in which they wrote. The ancient approach was through authorship, relying on traditions found in patristic writings. A 2nd-century figure named Papias averred that Matthew wrote first in the Hebrew dialect and was translated by others; Mark is a translation of the preaching of Peter. In the (probably) late-2nd-century Muratorian Canon, Luke is identified as a physician and companion of Paul, while John is the Beloved Disciple of the Fourth Gospel and the Seer on Mt. Patmos. The problem with this approach is that identifications are based on guesswork, they have a strong apologetic interest—connecting evangelists to apostles—and they don't help in actually interpreting the Gospels. They also make even more acute the question of diversity in the accounts: John and Matthew are both supposed to be eyewitnesses, yet their Gospels are least alike!

The contemporary approach is through literary and historical analysis of the compositions themselves. Scholars seek to determine from the texts themselves the circumstances of writing, in terms of social setting, themes, and the like, with little attention to the identity of the actual authors. The reconstruction of circumstances then becomes the framework for the interpretation of the Gospel. There are also problems with this approach—not least that of another form of circularity and guesswork!—and the evidence can often point in more than one direction.

The most pressing problem facing the critical analysis of the canonical Gospels is the literary relationship of the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John's Gospel is so different from the other three that it poses questions of its own, but these three Gospels are alike and different in such intricate and complex ways that they present a distinct *synoptic*

problem (they can be “seen together” in columns). The data to be considered is complex, involving language, selection of material, and sequence. In the Greek, the similarity in language tends toward identity; for phrases and clauses, the language in all three is identical; when they differ, Matthew and Luke tend to vary from Mark in different ways. About 90 percent of Mark’s material is found in both Matthew and Luke, whereas about 10 percent of

The minority scholarly opinion follows the ancient tradition of Matthean priority.

Mark is found in neither Matthew nor Luke. Matthew and Luke share a substantial amount of material (mainly sayings that also have a strong linguistic similarity) not found in Mark. Matthew and Luke also each have material unique to

each, designated *M* and *L* material. In terms of the sequence of material, Luke and Matthew differ in their order except where they both agree with Mark.

Here is a situation in which popular, uncritical answers are insufficient because they do not really address the data. It is true that teachers can say similar things at different times or perform similar actions, but this does not cover the character of the linguistic phenomena. It is true that eyewitnesses can have different perspectives and versions, but the linguistic pattern does not fit that of eyewitness behavior, and the appeal to eyewitnesses does not cover the circumstances in the first place. The data suggest, indeed demonstrate, a literary relationship of dependence among these three Gospels, and all critical scholars agree that one of the Gospels was written first and the others used it as a literary source for their versions.

The minority scholarly opinion follows the ancient tradition of Matthean priority. Matthew is written first, then translated into Greek; according to Augustine, Mark then epitomizes Matthew. The solution is appealing because it is simple, because it agrees with church tradition, and because it accounts for the “Jewish” character of Matthew. It leaves out of account the role of Luke. The Griesbach hypothesis (1783) postulates that Luke used Matthew in the composition of his Gospel, then Mark epitomized by drawing from both Matthew and Luke. There are reasons why the majority of scholars do not accept this traditional view: It is actually not simpler—demanding multiple

recensions of Matthew and Luke; the “Jewish” character of Matthew has other explanations; and most of all, why would Mark both leave out choice materials and mangle the superior Greek of his sources?

The majority of critical scholars adopt what is called the *two-source* (sometimes the *four-source*) hypothesis. Mark writes first, with Matthew and Luke using his Gospel independently as a written source, independently correcting what they consider inferior Greek. Matthew and Luke both use another written source (conventionally designated as *Q*). Matthew and Luke each have independent sources (or compose distinctive material), called *M* and *L*. The value of the hypothesis—and it remains a hypothesis—is that it best explains the phenomenon of sequence and the linguistic patterns. The limits of the hypothesis are also real: It does not cover every case, and care must be taken not to reify *Q*. ■

Essential Reading

B. H. Throckmorton, *Gospel Parallels: A Comparison of the Synoptic Gospels*, 5th ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992).

Supplementary Reading

R. H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987).

Questions to Consider

1. How does the synoptic problem set up a tension between critical analysis of the text and ancient tradition?
2. What does the literary interdependence of Matthew, Mark, and Luke suggest about the early Christian understanding of “tradition”?