Synoptic Problem

We’re continuing our course in the Synoptic Gospels. We’ve looked at six topics so far. The Historical Jesus, Jewish Background, introduction to acts of Jesus and the narrative genre, authorship and date of the Gospels, parables and the parable genre, the Gospels as literary work; and we come down to topic seven, which is the Synoptic Problem. So let’s have a look at that.

What is the Synoptic Problem? Well, “synoptic” means “working together.” The first three Gospels are very similar to one another as though looking at the life of Jesus from the same perspective, especially when compared to the Gospel of John. And yet they also have a number of puzzling differences. The problem, as it’s generally raised, is, “What is the relationship among the first three Gospels that will explain what makes them so similar and yet significantly different.

We expect reports concerning historical events to be similar, but the histories of Jesus are unusual. In over three years of ministry, involving many long speeches, only a few hours of speeches are recorded. While hundreds were healed, and we see that number in some of our verses, only a few healings are recorded individually. The same ones are generally mentioned in the various Gospels. Those who reject the inspiration of Scripture, inspiration of the Gospels, say, “The similarities are due to copying, and the differences are due to changes made intentionally, all because the authors were unaware of each other.” Well, what we will look at first of all is the phenomenon of the problem, and then we will do a little bit of the history of the problem, and then we will come up with some suggested solutions. Finally, we will suggest the one we think works best.

First, we start with verbal agreements and disagreements as found in the Gospels, and what I have here basically in my notes is the parable of the sower in Greek with Matthew in one column, and then Mark, and then Luke. So then you can see the similarities and differences. I’m not sure whether we want to walk through all of this. It’s
a little over a page and a half, but, for instance, the parable starts out, “Behold, a sower went out to sow,” something of that sort. And Matthew and Mark have the idou—the “behold”—at the beginning, but Luke does not. They all three have exactly the same verb, the same person, and the same tense, and all of that. They all call the sower “The Sower,” although the “the” there is probably what we think of as a generic use of the definite article. Then to handle “to scatter seed,” Matthew does it with a definite article in front of an infinitive, but he uses a present infinitive. Mark doesn’t have the definite article, and uses an aorist infinitive. Luke uses an aorist infinitive, like Mark, but a definite article like Matthew. And Luke adds, “To sow his seed,” so he adds a little phrase of actually three words in the Greek. All of them then connect the next clause with a kai [“and”], and Mark has an addition, “And it came to pass,” whereas the others just go on, “And while he was sowing,” en to speirein, is what all three of them use at that point. One of them adds, “While he was sowing.”

Then we begin to get the different cases here. Matthew, some of it—well I’m going to have it get up close to it to read the Greek here—“Some of it fell beside the road.” Matthew has, “One of them fell beside the road.” —“path,” would work as well. Luke has, “One of them fell beside the path.” So we’re going to see through the cases that Matthew used the plural for each case: so, some seed.” And Mark and Luke kind of use a representative, “one seed fell here, one seed fell there,” etc.

Well, I think it won’t be terribly—what shall we say, edifying—to plow through the rest of that, but instead I’ll give you a little short summery that Henry Alford in his Greek Testament gives of this kind of phenomenon. He says,

“The phenomena presented will be much as follows: first perhaps, three, five, or more words identical, then as many wholly distinct, then two clauses more expressed in the same words, but different order, then a clause contained in one or two and not in the third Gospel, then several words identical, then a clause not only wholly distinct but apparently inconsistent, and so forth; with recurrences of the same arbitrary and anomalous alterations, alterations, coincidences, and transpositions.”
So basically we see something that is rather puzzling when looked at on the word by word level. We can try to convert this merely anecdotal evidence to numbers by giving statistics on verbal variation within the Synoptic Gospels only in those sections where they overlap, and noting the frequency of identical and different wording.

Agreement for verbs means they have the same tense, not merely the same root. Phillip Schaff, in his *Church History*, gives statistics for this. He basically gives the three books, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and then a call on the number of the unique words, or percentage of the unique words, and then the percentage in which the one Gospel agrees with both the other two, and the percentage on which it agrees with one of the other two. And they look like this: Mark has 40 percent unique words, Matthew 56 percent unique, Luke 67 percent unique.

We move over to agreement with the other two: Mark, in 22 percent of its words, agrees with both Matthew and Luke. Matthew, in 14 percent of its words, agrees with both Mark and Luke. And Luke, in 12 percent of its words, agrees with both Mark and Matthew.

Then agreement with one of the other, but here not specified which one of the other two it agrees with. Mark agrees with one of them 37 percent of the time, Matthew 30 percent of the time, and Luke 21 percent of the time.

What you can see pretty clearly is that Mark is more like the others than the others are alike to each other. So, that basically [is] the picture you get there: if you think about the order of events, the order of events in the Synoptic Gospels is mainly the same as can be observed in *The Harmony of the Gospels* by Robertson, and just going through it and seeing that virtually all the time each Gospel has successive sections in the “Harmony.”

However, there are some differences. For instance, the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law, section 43 in Robertson, is in Matthew 8, Mark 1, [and] Luke 4. The healing of a leper, which is two units down, is a little early in Matthew, but it’s later in Mark than Luke. So the question would be, “Well, which one did Jesus really do first,” and the answer is we don’t have time machines. So we’ve got the data we’ve got here. Mark and Luke have one order, but Matthew has the reverse, presumably one or the others is not in
chronological order.

Well, narratives don’t have to be in chronological order; you can use topical order. Narratives [that] regularly come through their prime chronological order, if you like, will diverge to pick up [a] new character coming in, and maybe give you a little background on the character. Then he comes into the narrative, and then when a character leaves the narrative, they may say something about what he did.

So with the demoniac we will see something about [this] when we do that passage. After he [demoniac] is first introduced in the narrative, there is said a little bit about how he got that way. It’s not a whole, but a little history that the people had given up trying to restrain him, and then, when he’s dismissed at the end of the narrative, it says he went off into [the] Decapolis and told the people what the Lord had done for him; so that is a common enough feature and such.

Within a narrative of a given incident, we will sometimes see differences. So the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness in Matthew and Luke switch the second and the third of the temptations, if you like. In the Lord’s Supper, was the cup given first as in Luke? There was a textural problem there, however, and so it may be that they were either looking at more than one cup, and anyone who knows at least the current Passover… there were, in fact, four cups in the service. Which of these Jesus used as the one for the cup that shows up later in the Lord’s Supper, I don’t know. Some of the problems which arise are in the trying to discern the order of events in the Synoptic Gospels – if there are textural variants, which there often are, which is the correct text?

Then, when you’ve got two similar events, if you like, are they really describing the same event or are they describing two different events that were similar? For instance, one we’ve mentioned already but didn’t say much more about: Is the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 the same as the Sermon on the Plain in Luke? Well, a mountain is not the same as a plain, but those names are kind of invented, and someone suggested that Jesus came down from the top of the mountain to a flat place - somewhere on the slope, and that’s where he gave his sermon, et cetera. So are these two different reports of the
same occasion, or are they similar sermons on different occasions? Again, without a time machine, how can we be sure? What should we do with that?

Your more radical interpreters say that two cleansings of the temple are the same event, but one of the Gospels got it wrong… you get that kind of thing very frequently in more liberal commentaries. Agreements in the order of events in which Matthew and Luke agree against Mark are very, very rare compared with other combinations; and this, then, is used to argue against certain solutions to solve the problem.

**Accounting for Overlap**

A third thing to consider is the overlap in uniqueness of content among the three Gospels, and this is most easily done by what mathematicians call a “Venn Diagram” where you have two, or three, or four, or five [overlapping] circles. For this one we have three circles where a circle represents Matthew, a circle represents Mark, a circle represents Luke; and you have it set up in such a way that the circles have a region in which all three overlap. The three form a sort of blossom-like, petal-like sort of thing in which two overlap and then [three], so the three form a sort of—somewhat—moon-shape things in which each circle does not overlap either of the others.

If you look at that, then you can put numbers in it, and that’s what I’ve done using J. B. Tyson’s *The New Testament and Early Christianity*, which has a chart of that sort. So in the outer section here, there’s stuff that’s only in Matthew, stuff that’s only in Mark, and stuff that’s only in Luke. Tyson does it by verses, which is not totally satisfactory because of verse divisions - whoever made the verse divisions made them so they don’t always correspond exactly. But he says, basically, Luke has the biggest uniqueness. He has five hundred verses that don’t occur in either of the other Gospels. Matthew has two hundred and eighty, and Mark has fifty. Then the complete overlap, all three of them together – there are about four hundred and eighty verses of that. Then Matthew and Mark overlap in about a hundred and twenty besides that four eighty. Matthew and Luke overlap in about one hundred and seventy. And Mark overlaps in about twenty. So that’s one way to see this.
Allan Barr, in a work called *The Diagram of Synoptic Relationships*, does this with colors, and he does a long strip in which you have red and yellow and blue, I think it is, to show where the different Gospels show up. It allows you to see where there are clusters of that, and where that is spread out, and things of that sort.

Early in the church, a church father named Ammonias had devised sections, if you like, [he] divided up each of the Gospels into sections; we don’t know how early that was – it was before Eusebius. Eusebius used these to try to sketch for us which Gospels have overlapping material… where the Gospels have overlapping materials. So he took these sections that Ammonias had made, and he looked at the sections in Matthew and said for this particular section, “Does this overlap with either Mark or Luke?” And he was doing it for four Gospels, so for John as well. And then he put the ones with the same kind of overlap into headings and a list so that he made them into what are called the “Eusebian Canon” or the “Eusebian List.” And List 1 listed all the sections in which all four Gospels overlapped; and then Canons 2, 3, and 4, or List 2, 3, and 4, list the places where the three Synoptics overlapped, the place where Matthew, Luke and John overlapped, and where Mark, Luke, and John overlapped. And then 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 listed the overlaps by twos; and then the last list, lists 10a, is all the stuff that’s only in Matthew, 10b all the stuff that’s only in Mark, 10c only in Luke, and 10d only in John.

Well, when you look at those lists, he then has the number of entries in each of those. So for instance, there are about seventy four entries in which all four gospels overlap; that is, each have about seventy four sections that overlap altogether. Then the second list is what we call “Synoptics,” and they have a hundred and eleven overlaps; and the other ones by threes, Matthew, Luke, and John has twenty-two. Matthew, Mark, and John have twenty five, and the fourth possibility has none. So it doesn’t get a list, and that would be Mark, Luke, and John; so it would be zero, if you made a list for it. Then the same kind of thing happens with the pairs. Matthew/Luke is the biggest list – eighty two. Then Matthew,/Mark – forty seven. But Mark/John – very small. Luke/Mark – thirteen. Luke/John – twenty one. Then Mark/John is missing.
So if I try to summarize those, it looks like this. Let’s see how I did that. Looking at the phenomena of overlapping uniqueness in these lists, two possible combinations don’t appear from the list – Matthew, Luke, and John is unmentioned, and one set of two, the Mark/John, also does not occur. The Canons 2, 3, and 4, in which the overlap is exactly three Gospels, you can see where you get the name “Synoptic” from. That’s the one that’s got all of those; and the overlaps with John, on the other hand, are much smaller.

**Q Source**

Then you look at the ones that occur in exactly two Gospels Matthew,/Luke dominates and Matthew/Mark is second. Matthew/Luke would be what the writers later come to call “Q”: The stuff that’s in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark. Some may have overlap. Almost all of Mark is found in either Matthew or Luke. Matthew and Luke have much in common and not in Mark. Inside the “Q” material—and this so-called “Q” material is mainly discourse material—only one narrative of the temptation of Jesus shows up on that. Then Matthew and Luke each have a good deal of material each, whereas Mark has rather little of that.

**Synoptic Problem: Attempted Solutions**

So that’s kind of a quick sketch of the phenomena. You have this peculiar verbal variations which, if you imagine it, [due to] copying; then somebody was doing some complete, considerable editing in the copying. Then you have the matter of order, and the order where it is generally quite the same, yet once in a while you have something that differs to that. Then we have which things are included and left out that you can see where the ideas in the two document theory where you can look at where the “Q” idea comes from, if you like.

Let’s do kind of a sketch history of the Synoptic Problem here. Something of the problem was recognized as soon as the second Gospel begins to circulate, perhaps as early as the sixties [AD]. When you have got one Gospel out there, you can argue about it, and the opponents dislike it; but when you get two who start making comparisons, and
those who are opponents can and begin [to] start to use one Gospel against the other to attack Christianity. That, in fact, is what the pagan fellow Celsius does in his work: *The True Account*. It sounds like one of those things you see around Easter every few years where somebody’s trying to debunk the Gospels. The heretical attacks against Christianity in that particular line setting one Gospel against another motivated Christians to try and solve the Synoptic Problem, and we are going to sketch some attempts of that.

The earliest one we know about is Tatian’s *Diatessaron* which was, perhaps, put together around 170 AD. Tatian’s procedure is to create a “Woven Harmony”; that is, he takes the four Gospels and makes one narrative and basically no repetition in it. So, he selects material out of any of the four Gospels and weaves them together in the way he thinks it goes. So he takes all the accounts and edits them into a single narrative.

The second one we know about is *Canons of Eusebius*, so from sometime before about 340, where Eusebius used Ammonias’ divisions, but makes these lists that we noted above, and makes these tables that index parallel accounts. And in the manuscripts of a lot of early Gospels you have a little notation over in the left side that tells you the section number for this particular thing—the sections were longer than verses but shorter than chapters—it tells you the number, and the number tells you what *Canon of Eusebius* this section is in. If you know what the canons represent, you can immediately see there are two parallels to this and you can go find Eusebius’ list which, by the way, is published in front of Nestle’s *Greek New Testament*, and find the other two parallels; then you can go look them up, and that is basically the way the *Canons of Eusebius* work.

The first book length discussion we know about is Augustine’s *Harmony of the Evangelists* written about 400 AD. He makes the first attempt to go incident by incident through the Gospels and suggests how to harmonize them. So he basically starts I believe with Matthew, and he goes through all the passages in Matthew where there are parallels, and then discusses the parallels and differences and suggests how to harmonize, [and] that sort of thing,. Then he goes back and picks up the ones that don’t overlap with Matthew.
Augustine is the first to suggest how the Synoptic Gospels arose. It is a version which later becomes known as the “Successive Dependence Theory” in which one Gospel is written first, and the second one makes use of it, and the third that’s written makes use of the previous two. In the Augustine theory, Matthew is written first, and then Mark makes use of it; and Luke, when it’s written, makes use of both of them. So it’s Matthew, Mark, Luke—Successive Dependence Theory.

Well, shortly after Augustine’s time, military and economic disaster struck the Roman Empire. Literacy drops drastically. Some estimate it may have been as high as 80% before the disaster, and as low as 5% afterwards. [This occurred] over a period of roughly 200 years, 300-500 AD. This type of study, the Synoptic Problem, was really not resumed until the Renaissance and Reformation period.

So, we’ve got Tatian’s *Diatessaron*, The *Canons of Eusebius*, Augustine’s *Harmony*, and now we come to Reformation harmonies. With resumption of academic biblical studies in the Renaissance and the Reformation, attempts to harmonize the Gospels resumed, and [so did] rethinking the sort of work Augustine faced of how to make a decision: when to treat two similar events as the same event or two different events. You have fairly widely divergent solutions comparing the “lumpers” and “splitters.” You had people who tend to put together anything that looked fairly similar, and you had people who, if there was anything different, they would make it separate.

**Modern Approaches to the Synoptic Problem**

Well, we’re going to continue on with more recent stories. These pick up around 1780 and come down to the present. The earliest of these is the so called “Primitive Gospel,” or *Ur-Evangelium*, [which] is just German for “Original Gospel.” This was proposed independently by Lessing in the 1780’s and Eichorn a little bit later. Basically, the idea is that there was one original Gospel. The Ur-Gospel, the original Gospel, and generally that is seen to be in Aramaic. Then Matthew, Mark, and Luke all extracted material from that and translated it to Greek. So similarities between the Synoptics are due to all three using this Ur-Gospel, and differences arise when they edit or translate that
Original Gospel differently This is the Ur-Evangelium theory—The primitive Gospel theory.

Then we have the “Successive Dependence Theory,” which had been proposed a century before by Augustine and is now revised by Hugo Grotious; and in its most general form you have one gospel, then the second gospel makes use of it, and the third gospel makes use of those. These kinds of models were very popular in the 19th century and interestingly, every possible order was suggested at that time. By Theissen and Alford in their discussions of the Synoptic problem sketched that—proponents by those varieties.

It’s still used today by some—the Augustinian Successive Dependence Theory is the one we mentioned earlier: Matthew first, Mark second, Luke third. Another one that’s been rather influential is the Griesbach Hypothesis, which is Matthew first, Luke second, and Mark third. We’ll come back and say a word or two about that in connection with the Synoptic Problem. Then the third one which is, perhaps, a little less common than the others, the Markian Hypothesis, which is Mark first, Matthew used it, then Luke used both of them—Successive Dependence theory.

Another 19th century theory was the so called [the] “Fragmentary Theory” proposed by Friedrich Schleiermacher. Basically, his suggestion is that there were a lot of written fragments, a lot of written anecdotes, floating around in the early church, and Matthew, Mark, and Luke each independently made collections of these and put them together into their Gospels. So for a diagram, you have lots of little fragments up here with arrows going down to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke down at the bottom.

A somewhat similar idea comes from Westcott and Alford who are relatively conservative compared to a lot of these guys. They basically suggest an oral tradition theory. That is, that oral sources lie behind the three Gospels, and they independently made use of the oral traditions and wrote them up; so you have a cloud of tradition instead of written fragments coming down to Matthew, Mark, and Luke at the bottom. They’re basically saying these common, basic Synoptics are entirely oral. The apostles who were present when the events occurred unified the oral traditions and its continuous
written narratives, and the traditions themselves came directly from apostles. That’s been a very conservative version—at least in that particular way of stating it.

The one that has come to be dominate up to the present is what’s called the “Two-Document Theory” it was proposed by Eichorn, Bernard Weiss and H.J. Holzman in the 19th century and is the dominate theory today. The idea here is that Mark is one of the two sources of Matthew and Luke, and the other source was a written source which picked up the name “Q” in the theories. There is actually some debate today where the name Q comes from. The commonest idea is that it comes from the German Quella, “source,” and that apparently has not been verified by any strong proof. It is interesting that that kind of information could get lost that quickly. Q and Mark, or Ur-Mark, or Original-Mark, are seen as the sources and Matthew and Luke had access to each of those sources, but they did not know about each other; so Matthew uses Q and Mark, and Luke uses Q and Mark.

**Problems with the Q Theory**

The scheme is hypothetical because there was no surviving Q manuscript. The Q has also sometimes been called the “logia,” that was A. T. Robertson’s favorite term for that based on the assumption that this is what Papias was talking about. When he spoke of the “logia, which each translated as he was able.” Another name that is commonly used is a “saying source.” As we suggested a little bit earlier, the overlap of Matthew and Luke that doesn’t include the Mark material does look like it’s largely words of Jesus rather than narratives, so that term “saying source” is sometimes being used. As for some material in Mark, which is unique to Mark and not in Matthew and Luke, some proponents have said that Matthew and Luke used a proto-Mark, or an Ur-Markus, an Original-Mark, that was later edited into the modern Mark.

Well, we add a couple more theories here to this one—a development of the “Two-Document Theory called the “Four-Document Theory.” It was proposed by B. H. Streeter early in the 20th century, basically in which he said there are, in fact, two more documents that were used as sources besides Mark and Q up here. Matthew had his own written source, which Streeter called “M,” and Luke had his own written source, which
Streeter called “L.” So you’ve got four source documents, but each of Matthew and Luke, each of them use only three of them. So, not many people accept this particular model, but the terms “M” and “L,” for the material unique to Matthew and unique to Luke, has been preserved, and you’ll still see that show up in discussions of the Synoptic Problem.

So, in a lot of discussions of the Synoptic Problem, M, L, and Q are used just to represent material with the particular people debating it, not specifying whether these were ever written sources or ever even sources at all, but just a way of labeling certain material.

We’re going to talk about “form criticism” later in the course, but I might mention it here because “form criticism” sort of looks like a combination of Westcott and Alford’s oral tradition theory with the “two-document theory.” So, you’d have Matthew and Luke down here as the final documents, and above them Mark and Q; but then above that, a big cloud of oral tradition. This oral tradition then was used to put together the materials in Mark and Q, but they didn’t get all of it or use all of it. And Matthew and Luke also had access to the tradition as well as to these two sources. And that’s basically the model that won and, on the other hand, critics tend to accept the “two-document model,” but they also accept there was oral tradition floating around as well.

**Discussion of Various Theories**

Well, [let's have] a little bit of discussion of these various theories. Take for instance the Original Gospel, Primitive Gospel, or Ur-Evangelion Theory; it has some advantages. It explains similarities in a natural way—that they [the Gospels] come from a common source. Lessing and Eichhorn proposed that this source was a written gospel in Aramaic, and then that this Aramaic gospel was not preserved because few people spoke it [the language] after Aramaic died out in the church (which is after 100 AD) so that it [the gospel] was not copied.

This tendency is seen in history: documents in a foreign language are generally not copied if the language is not known, and particularly if a translation is already available. Hebrew and Greek, for instance, were lost in the Western Church for centuries during the
Middle Ages. Problems with the Ur-Evangelion theory: we have no direct or indirect evidence for such a document, as nobody speaks of such a document in antiquity and such; and we don’t have any fragments of it. If it was an Aramaic-Matthew, as some have proposed, then the question would be: Why is it so different from the Greek-Matthew because you’ve still got to explain where the Luke stuff came from, and it supposedly came out of this? Why did the writers use this source in such a peculiar way? Sometimes they quote directly; sometimes [they] suddenly make tense and wording changes and even change the order occasionally.

Then there’s the problem that Aramaic in some sense never really did die out of the church. It just gradually drifted into what we call Syriac, and there’s a Syrian church, even today. So, this would work better, I suppose, if it were Hebrew, which did die out of the early church. But that’s just suggesting various complications there.

How do we explain the material which is unique to each gospel, especially if it has apparent discrepancies if there’s only one source? If the gospels are condensations from it, why did Mark happen to extract only the same materials in Matthew and Luke? yhsy complication arises. So, the Ur-Evangelium Theory explains similarities rather well, but doesn’t really account for the differences too well.

Successive Dependence Theory has advantages: It claims we have all the original documents, so there’s no need to hypothesize lost documents, or proto-gospels, or something of that sort. Problems: who borrowed from whom? Different scholars have been able to make some kind of case for each of the three orders, and part of the reason for this is that writers do condense; and, in fact, that was a very common phenomenon in antiquity of making condensed versions of longer works because papyrus was expensive. Parchment was more expensive, [and] scribes were skilled workers, so you had to pay a lot of money to have somebody copy something; so various condensations of various histories and things of that sort were often made in antiquity. Of course, people will sometimes expand on something, so something shorter might be a condensation, or something longer might have been an expansion. So we don’t really know whether the authors expanded the source narratives or condensed them. How did the verbal
differences arise? Why did the writers feel free to make changes in their sources if they knew they had only the inspired Gospels in front of them? Where does the material come from in later Gospels that’s not in the earlier gospels, particularly when Peter is inconsistent in some ways?

Robert Gundry’s commentary on Matthew takes a somewhat similar view: it argues that Matthew had Mark and Q and that Matthew modified the shepherd story, which was apparently then in Q, into the wise men story using a midrash style. That seems a big strain on inspiration. Well, those are the Successive Dependence Theories.

Fragmentary Theory, written fragments—advantages: Luke 1:1 tells us that there was much written material available. Many have attempted to draw accounts, et cetera. Of course, these need not be fragmentary. They might have attempted to draw up as complete an account as they could. Schleiermacher did see that the Gospels looked like a series of anecdotes. There are only a few examples of connections between these anecdotes; for instance, Jesus doing several events one after another on the same day. In general, you don’t have those kinds of connections. Apparently, there were a variety of sources. We see Luke shift from a Semitic style in Luke 1 and 2 to a Hellenistic style in the rest of his gospel. This implies that he had a different source for Luke 1 and 2, which we suggested was brought from Samaria.

Some downplay the reliability of the fragments to the point where we can’t know their order or historicity. There is probably some merit in a fragmentary-tight view that there are multiple sources, but it needs some repair, I think.

Oral Tradition Theory—advantages: the events of Jesus’ life were presented orally in the early ministry for the apostles and evangelical churches. The connotation of oral tradition is negative in applying many generations to transfer, but that connotation is not necessary in [the] corresponding Greek world where it just means something is handed over. A tradition might come directly from the apostles, if you like, rather than six generations later or something. The terms that are used for tradition in the New Testament are paradidomi—to hand over, and paradosis—materials handed over. They show up in the New Testament and can be translated “tradition,” but they don’t like the
sense of a long cloudy history with no known source. The Greek sense refers to what a teacher hands over to a student to guard carefully and keep from error. Similarly in rabbinic schools, a good student was as one of them says, “Like a plastered cistern, which did not lose a drop of the material stored in it.” Whether a rabbinic handing over are reliably to Moses, as the rabbis claim that by two-thousand years and thirty or forty transfers, is one thing, whether the New Testament tradition is reliable within one generation thirty generations or less is quite another question. Problems with the oral tradition model: this possible view if we do not insist that the only New Testament sources were oral, short-hand did exist at that time and was used for recording court cases and such. Educated followers would have taken notes, written diaries, things of that sort. So it seems to me that a combination of written/oral sources is going to make the best sense.

**The Problems of the Two or Four Document Theories**

We’ll treat the two and four document models together. Their advantages are they’re basically the same. Matthew and Luke do appear to depend on Mark in that they both follow Mark’s order most of the time. When Matthew and Luke do not follow Mark, neither one follows the other. Thus we can see how Luke and Matthew might have had Mark in front of them, but not each other’s gospel. So Matthew didn’t have Luke or Luke didn’t have Matthew. With this strength we can see why this particular view is dominate. However, it’s not the only way to explain the data.

Griesbach had a reverse explanation idea, and he explains them by saying that Mark had both Matthew and Luke in front of him. Mark followed both Matthew and Luke where they agreed, but where they didn’t agree he’d follow one or the other. So we’d get exactly the same result. Nearly any borrowing scheme can be argued both ways. Simple is not always earlier than complex. It’s very difficult to tell which account was first in our literature as well.

Problems of the Two and Four Document Theories: we have no evidence for the
background documents Q, or even worse, for the four document theory with M and L, too. Not even comments regarding their existence exist, unless we take Papias as referring to one of them say Q, but the early church took these as referring to Matthew; and although we can hypothesize that the early church didn’t know, they were just shooting in the dark, it’s perfectly reasonable to assume that Papias was only one strand of the information that came from the apostles, and that other church fathers had access to the other strands, so they knew in fact that Papias was referring to Matthew. There are these verbal differences between the two, Matthew and Luke, that are peculiar if they are copying from Mark.

Why did they change some things, often trivial things, and then use other wording? Why did Luke omit a large section of Mark 6:45-8:9? There is no easy rationalization for that. If we propose this section is missing Ur-Markus, then we admit another missing document. The Two and Four Document Theories are particular problems for Evangelicals, and that’s this: why did Matthew the Apostle follow Mark as slavishly as he did if Mark is secondhand and Matthew was an eyewitness and was there himself? Why not use his own notes instead of Peter’s Memoirs? The biggest problem, though, is that this view—two and four document—throws away all the traditional, that is, all the historical information regarding Gospel origins. All tradition says that Matthew was written before Mark, and this view reverses the order.

Proposed Solution

Well, that’s where we are on the Synoptic Problem. I’m going to give you a proposed solution. I wasn’t there; I don’t have time machines. I will find out one day; I believe Christianity is true, [and] I will find out one day how things worked. But here’s what my proposed solution looks like: Every book has both internal and external evidence. It appears that the Gospels are written by the traditional authors: Matthew, Mark, and Luke, who used probably both oral and written sources. Internal evidence, on the other hand, suggests that Mark was followed in some way by Luke and Matthew. The apparent contradiction to this, the external evidence, says that Matthew was written earliest and that Matthew was probably written before Mark. Well, I suggest a model in
which the oral source of Mark is also a primary source of Matthew and Luke and that Matthew and Luke were written before Mark.

How do we work that? We look at the oral apostolic Testimony made. This [is] kind of an arrow coming down the middle, and Peter was one of the major spokespersons for the Apostles. The Apostles gathered and organized things, the material things, in the time they were together after Jesus’ ministry, if you like. And then Matthew made use of the whole apostolic testimony and he wrote, as I think, a Hebrew Matthew; and, of course, he used his own memory, but he also used material that had been supplied by the apostles as they were discussing these together [earlier] and later. That’s followed by a Greek Matthew that Matthew himself translated later, but we don’t know.

Meanwhile the apostles are not only speaking in Aramaic—or whatever—to the other Jews in Jerusalem. They’re beginning to branch out to Hellenistic Jews, and then going to move out of Israel and go to other places. So their oral testimony is also going to be developed in Greek. So it’s possible that the Greek Matthew made use of the oral testimony of the Apostles in the form of Greek as well. Meanwhile, over on the other side of this big arrow, you have Luke, and Luke is in Israel for the two years that Paul was in prison at Caesarea and he goes to interviews. He interviews apostles; he interviews people who were part of the seventy; he interviews people who were across the Jordan and were in Perea and saw Jesus’ miracles over there. He puts this material together, and some of that’s the apostolic testimony of the Apostles and puts together his Gospel. Last of all, Mark in Rome has been with Peter while he’s making/giving this material, and people ask him to write up what Peter had to say, so he does. So although he writes last, he’s writing directly from one apostle rather than from selections as other people have.

Well, that’s my model, if you like; it’s in some ways more complicated than the others, but in fact it doesn’t make any assumptions about detailed written documents; though obviously some of the Apostles and other people may have had written notes in one way or another.

**Similarities Explained**

So I ask three questions then that I need to respond to in presenting this model for
teaching. And first is: How are the similarities to be explained? [There are other] questions then that I need to respond to in dealing with, in presenting this model for, critics; but first this: how are the similarities to be explained?

Well, first of all we suggest that Matthew, Mark, and Luke use mainly oral sources with some written supplements. So what are we going to have? Well, first of all, all the Synoptics depend on the life of Christ, an actual series of events in history. So part of the similarities between them comes from the fact that they aren’t making it up: it is stuff that really happened. Some of the similarity is due to the fact these events actually happened, yet how do we explain the common selection of certain events from a much larger whole? [There are] maybe twenty healings scattered over the three Gospels where there must have been hundreds, maybe thousands, etc.

Well, secondly all depend on the oral preaching of the Apostles. The Apostles experienced all of Jesus’ public ministry. They preached and talked together for a number of years afterward, and they were in communication to some extend thereafter. Doubtless as the Apostles were together; they talked through which instances in Jesus's ministry best captured who he was, what he did, and how best to present these items. As teachers, as we teach over and over again, we have to think through: Well, how well did that go? Did they understand? How could I have explained that better? and those sorts of reflections. So all the Synoptics depend on the life of Christ, the actual series of events; they all depend on the oral [tradition] and preaching of the Apostles where they got together and talked it out, identifying the materials which would work best.

And third, the apparent priority [of] Mark may be a result of Peter’s influence as spokesman and leader among the Apostles during the early years while they were together in Jerusalem. So Mark preserves the teaching of the most influential Apostle, but is not the written source of Matthew and Luke. Peter’s preaching, the oral source of Mark, is also the main oral source for Matthew and Luke because Peter’s influence in the selecting and shaping of the material constitutes the apostolic testimony of Jesus. And presumably Peter too was influenced by decisions made among the Apostles, which were better and such, so that worked both ways.
And fourth, the similarity of Matthew and Luke where Mark is not present, what we call Q material, may be due to each having used Jesus’ oral teaching materials. Those who study the Synoptic Problem are well aware that this material in Matthew is not always put in the same place as this material in Luke. Matthew arranges these sayings and discourses in blocks, while Luke scatters them throughout his narrative. Some suggest that Luke used Matthew, but Luke often has these discourses in a different context than Matthew.

Why would Luke have changed the context of Matthew? One of the strengths of hypothesizing a Q document is that it explains this feature by having no narrative context, and so Matthew and Luke just selected out sayings independently; but this still has the author's context and scheme. It’s better, it seems to me, to say that Jesus is an itinerant speaker. He often repeats materials so that Luke and Matthew place items differently because Matthew reports one occasion and Luke another that’s determined by Luke’s interviews. Whether Matthew knew all the ones Luke knew, and Luke knew all the ones Matthew knew, we have no idea.

If I’m right that the Perean narrative material in Luke indicates that Luke interviewed people over in Caesarea, it may be that Matthew considered that secondary, or wasn’t even along at venues where these things happened and such. Sayings are typically reported once in the Gospel. The writings are after all trying to remove monotony. They are trying to keep the book length down since book productions were expensive. My suggestion here is that Matthew made decisions even where he knew several contexts. He made decisions putting them into a one particular context. Luke may have done the same as well.

Well, the idea so far then is actual events in history produced the similarities; the selection of which to present was partly done by the single group processing the apostles' [preaching], and that Jesus as an itinerant speaker, [so] his oral materials could have been found in a lot different contexts and in slightly different forms.

I’m an itinerant; well, was an itinerant preacher, if you like, when I taught at seminary. I would get invited to preach in various churches, and so I would go round [and
I had certain sermons which I would use again and again. Other sermons I would use once or twice and decided I didn’t do a great job on it. I would give up on the round and try again. I would polish it or something. Yet, surely, if you had tape recordings of these different sermons, they would not be exactly the same, but they would have some overlaps where I had settled on some way of giving an anecdote or something that was pretty close to being repeated.

I mentioned two more things under similarities. Five, the students of Jewish rabbis learned their master’s teaching, and perhaps this was also done in Christian service. This, in fact, was a pretty common phenomenon. In educational circles throughout the world, memorization is kind of out of vogue in the West that had been common for many, many centuries. The great ceremonies and wording in particular in Jesus’ teachings [are similar], I had mentioned that before; but the similarities in the Gospels are stronger when Jesus is speaking than when the narrators are narrating. So the great similarities there suggest some kind of memorization. It might be intentional memorization, or what we might call accidental memorization. I tried hard several times to memorize Bible verses and never was great at it because of a bad memory, but having read through the Bible now seventy-five times, or something like that, in different versions, I know some verses. So that kind of thing happens. Newspaper reporters back in the time when the presidents used to go from town to town on train and giving their speech, it often was said that they could give the president’s speech after five or six times reading it. So that does happen.

There are some clear parallels between Jesus and rabbis. Both had disciples. Both sometimes taught in parables. Both debated with opponents. Both were called “rabbi.” Both in Greek and Jewish cultures learning was mainly by memorization from oral recitation rather than by reading books or taking notes and such. Birger Gerhardsson in his book Memory and Manuscript gives us a detailed discussion of this kind of material. Some students had great memories and could quote teachers like an Encyclopedia. Others could perhaps not remember that so well, but could quote the logic in the argumentation.
[It depends on] different ways in which our brains have gotten wired over their growth, [and] I suppose there may have [been] some genetic component to it as well.

Lastly, under similarities, some documents or notes were likely used. Luke 1 - 4 mentions many root accounts, though we do not know whether he used any of these written materials. Papias’ comments on Mark, [that Mark wrote] “accurately, but not in order,” perhaps should be understood as Mark taking notes during Peter’s sermons, which he later organized into a final draft. Something else is that Mark actually wrote the Gospel, “accurately, but not in order.” So that is how similarities are to be explained.

**Differences Explained**

How are the differences to be explained? Well, I recall that the Gospels sometimes contain exactly the same incidents clustered with some readings of differences in event, order, and words. Well, let’s see. First of all, Jesus' teaching was doubtless somewhat, but not exactly, repetitive as he spoke to different audiences. This would help his disciples to lean his teachings and yet may account for some of the variations. Some of Jesus’ actions were also repeated. Many miracles of people with the same kind of maladies are very similar type healings. The Gospels themselves typically do not repeat those kinds of things, so you do not generally get five narrations of lepers, or something of that sort. There are two cleansings of the temple if we take the Gospels seriously. There are two miraculous catches of fishes; there are two feeding of the multitudes, etc. So, some of Jesus’ actions were repeated.

Thirdly, different witnesses see and emphasize different aspects of the same event. The easiest way to check this is to go to a reunion with your siblings, perhaps, and discuss things that happened, and you’re slightly different ages, and so you remember some different items. But you remember some same items, yet you remember different things about the same items. Same thing will happen at a college reunion or a high school reunion or something of that sort. So basically different witnesses see and emphasize different aspects of the same event.
Fourthly, oral repetition, even by the same person, regularly produces the kind of verbal variation observed here [in the Gospels], striking similarity with random variation of tenses and things of that sort. Our minds, I guess some people’s minds anyway, work verbally in such a way that you’re eventually, essentially spinning out a tape of some sort, but others don’t work that way, and you may have some stuff that you have exactly the same way on two occasions, and other things that you have put a different clause in, or you’ve done something like that, and you get a different result.

There is no need to postulate, by the way, a mini-linked chain in the case of rabbinic oral traditions allegedly going back to Moses. They have to because you’ve got 1500 years or so. Even with Matthew writing in the forty, in the forty’s, you’ve still have about ten years of oral repetition between his writing it down, and that may be oral repetition by Matthew. The striking similarities are due to the Apostles' being together, [and] variations in tense and wording are natural features of personal differences, and even repetition of one individual. The writers and speakers are telling us what happened. They’re not attempting to be identical in their accounts.

Fifth, the Gospel writers apparently do not always intend to convey the very words of Jesus, many of which were probably not spoken in Greek anyway. They tell us what Jesus said, but an exact transcript would be impractical because of length. All the Gospel writers were seeking to communicate widely, not just to a wealthy elite. So to contrast with Josephus' 20 volume *Antiquities*, they kept their cost down by selecting and summarizing events and discourses. Papyrus rolls were not that long, and they were fairly expensive, [so] the gospel message was compressed to the medium book style and economy of the day. Summaries, of course, can omit details and still be accurate.

Sixth, presumably the Gospel writers did not each know everything known by the other; they had their own recollections and their own research on some things that may have happened when a particular apostle was not around, or he may not have remembered. Lastly under differences, the evangelist certainly did not use everything they did know: remember John 21:25. But rather they selected, as John himself says a chapter earlier, John 20:30 and 31. They selected their materials to keep their accounts
within balance and to give the emphasis that they intended. Shortening an account by generalizing and being vague makes the story drab. It is better to retain the dialogue in concrete detail, even if it means selection of only a few incidents or key sentences of a sermon to retain the vividness. There was no use of sound lights as by modern TV news casters.

**How does this fit with Inspiration?**

So, how do you explain the similarities? How do you explain the differences? Thirdly, how does this fit with inspiration? If the Bible really is God’s inspired word sent for us, how does all of this fit with that? First of all, inspiration does not require dictation. It allows the author’s style to come through without using or losing truthfulness. God has done even better than dictation—occasionally he wrote the commandments with his own finger, or whatever that involved, on the stone, if you’d like. God certainly dictated some things to some of the prophets, etc., but inspiration is that Scripture is fully trustworthy, as is taught many places. It also presumably has involved narrators who are selecting events, and the narrators of Samuel and Kings and Chronicles mention sources they use in putting them together, etc.

So inspiration does not rule out some dictation, but inspiration is consistent with approximate language such as round numbers. It’s also consistent with summarization; it’s consistent with non-chronological arrangement, say topical, as long as the author does not claim chronological order and then doesn’t do it, if you’d like. It’s not, of course, consistent with contradiction or explicit chronological error. A summary, of course, may seem misleading if you’re trying to extract points from the story which the author has now provided. A hostile critic, commentator, reviewer can find contradictions in something where the person is not really contradicting himself. We see that all the time in election campaigns, so that’s just a common feature. A writer may use a logical arrangement rather than chronological order, and he is not under obligation to tell you this explicitly.

Inspiration does ensure us that they’re harmonious, but it doesn’t tell us how to
harmonize them. It tells us that these are harmonizable, and that we should think in that direction, though that doesn’t mean we need to move heaven and earth to harmonize them; we might not know enough to do a proper job. Typically, we can often suggest two or three possibilities, or even a five or ten possibilities, but not be sure which one is right.

One example I can think of is harmonizing the three denials by Peter, etc. I know one writer who comes up with six denials to have all the material harmonized, and I don’t think it’s the way to go. That’s not Hal Lindsey, it’s Harold Lindsell in one of his books. I wasn’t back there, so my own scheme is that on at least the second and third occasion Peter’s got several people around him saying, “Yea what about this, etc.” So one narrator picks out one of the persons and another one picks out another.

Lastly, inspiration is a revealed doctrine; we don’t derive inspiration from Scripture by inductively resolving all the known difficulties, we deduce it from what the Bible teaches. The Holy Bible says God cannot lie, and that the writers were guided, and that Jesus, and the Apostles, and the prophets, etc. treat Scripture as inerrant. That’s the sort of direction we go in deriving inerrancy from what the Bible teaches. Thus we don’t need to be able to answer all questions before accepting it, though we should still work at answering such questions in order to help others, and in order to strengthen our own confidence in God and his words.

Liberals have an advantage here, if you want to call it that, in that they can pile up apparent inconsistencies and then claim a high probability that at least one of these is a genuine error. But the same technique can be used against the sinlessness of Christ or against the goodness of God; and if Christianity is true, then God is good and Christ is sinless, and his word is trustworthy. Remember that any single event is improbable as too many other things might have happened. We can argue that the Scriptures give positive evidence of their supernatural source, and that’s what I would do. It is impressive enough that their historical accuracy is testable. We can argue then that we have no excuse that will stand in the judgment to objecting to the Scriptures.

Okay, well, that’s where we are on the Synoptic problem, and I think we will quit
at that particular point. Thank you for your attention.

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