

The Four Gospels and their Literary Relationship

1. The Synoptic Problem

The origin of the term 'Synoptic': the three Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke can be arranged in columns and viewed together (*syn* = with; *opsis* = look at). A great deal of material is common to all three; some is only common to Matthew and Luke (not Mark); and other material only in one Gospel. Most of Mark is found in Matthew and Luke, following the same order and groupings.

The task of clarifying this is known as the Synoptic Problem: a study of the similarities and differences of the Synoptic Gospels in order to explain their literary relationship.

1.1 The Two-Document Hypothesis

A source-critical study of the literary relationship of the Gospels led certain scholars (H.J. Holtzmann and B.H. Streeter) to propose what is known as the 'two-source theory': Mark's Gospel was written first (ca. 70 CE) and then used by Matthew and Luke independently of each other.

- Arguments for the **priority of Mark**: i) Matthew or Luke always agree with Mark's order, but they never depart from this order at the same time; ii) Matthew and Luke had reason to improve Mark's Greek grammar and style.
- Matthew and Luke had access to another source, known as **Q** = Quelle (the German word for 'source'), consisting primarily of sayings of Jesus (around 230 verses) (e.g., Sermon on the Mount [Matt. 5-7] or Sermon on the Plain [Luke 6:17-49]). This hypothetical Sayings Source may have appeared in more than one edition (note different wording). Not everybody is convinced about the existence of Q (see Michael Goulder and Mark Goodacre).

- Matthew and Luke also made use of a substantial amount of material, oral or written, unique to them (known as **M** in the case of Matthew, and **L** in the case of Luke).

1.2 The Griesbach Hypothesis

This hypothesis (named after J.J. Griesbach) claims that Matthew's Gospel was the first to be written; it was used by Luke, and Mark used both Gospels as sources. Critique of this hypothesis: Why would Mark use Matthew and Luke and yet omit such traditions as the birth narratives, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' parables etc? Why would it have been necessary to write Mark's Gospel if Matthew's already existed?

Note the example of Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi: 'You are the Christ' (Mk 8:29); 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Matt. 16:16); 'You are the Christ of God' (Lk. 9:20). Why would Mark abbreviate Matthew's version (particularly as 'Son of God' is a key christological term for him)?

2. John and the Synoptics

Clement of Alexandria: the historical data is provided by the Synoptic Gospels, while John set out to compose a 'spiritual Gospel' (*His Eccl.* 4:14:7). John bears some resemblance to the Synoptics (especially its outline); much common material has been scattered throughout the Gospel rather than clustered at the end.

Many have claimed that John's Gospel was probably written independently of the Synoptic Gospels; overlap between them is the result of their dependence on common (oral) tradition. However, it is increasingly being argued that John may have had close familiarity with the Synoptic Gospels (particularly the gospel of Mark) but without using or 'citing' these gospel sources in the same way as Matthew and Luke use and 'cite' Mark.

Select Bibliography

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