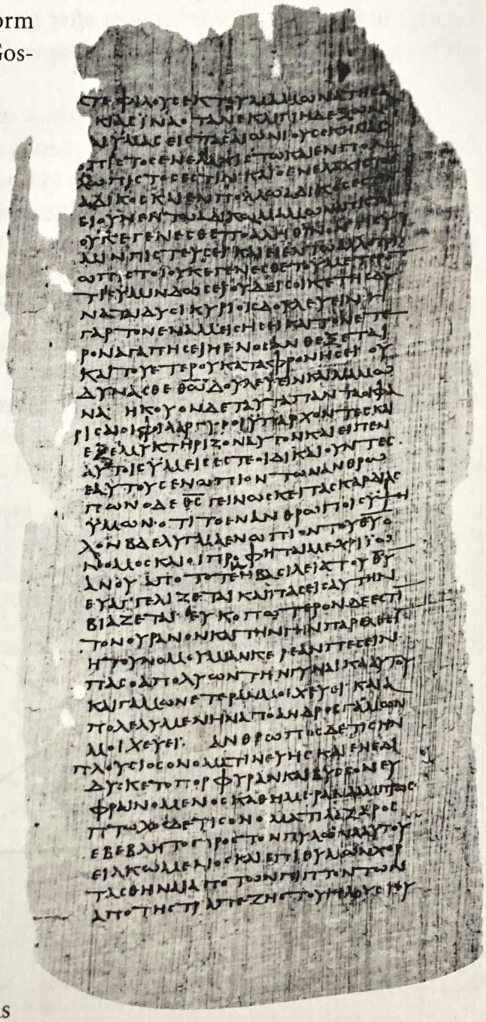
Introducing the NEW TESTAMENT

Its Literature and Theology

3.3.2. Sources and the Synoptic Gospels

In its preface, the Third Gospel makes reference to the presence of other "narratives" of "the events that have been fulfilled among us" (Luke 1:1-4). Luke thus provides a clear witness to the existence of other written accounts, but otherwise provides no hints as to their content. Scholars today differ markedly regarding the nature of the sources available to the Evangelists — for example, with some positing one or more written "sayings sources," some urging the view that an account or accounts of Jesus' suffering and death took written form already in the 30s or 40s, and others arguing that none of these had achieved *written* form prior to the writing of the first Gospel.

Examination of the Gospels themselves, however, makes it clear that common sources were employed by two or more of the Evangelists, and that the first three Gospels share some sort of literary relationship. Matthew, Mark, and Luke share a high degree of similarity of content. (Their commonality has given rise to their being labeled "Synoptic" Gospels, having a "common view.") The Gospel of Mark has less than thirty verses unique to it, so that more than 95 percent of the Second Gospel appears also in Matthew or Luke or both. This fact alone suggests that Mark either knew and used the First and Third Gospels as sources in an attempt to combine them, or that Matthew and Luke each made use of Mark.



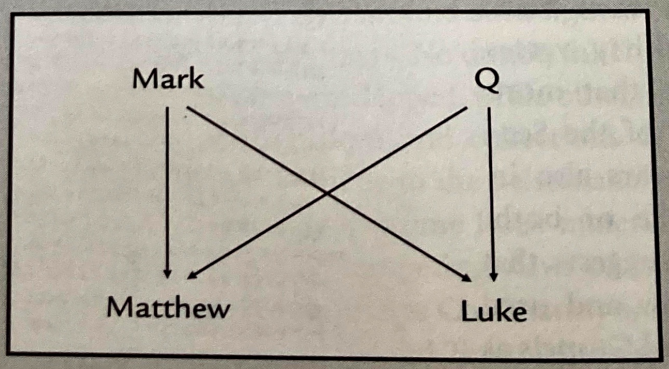
Luke 16:9-21 in Bodmer Papyrus XIV (𝔓75), ca. 175-225 CE *(Bodmer Library, Geneva)*

Additionally, these Gospels

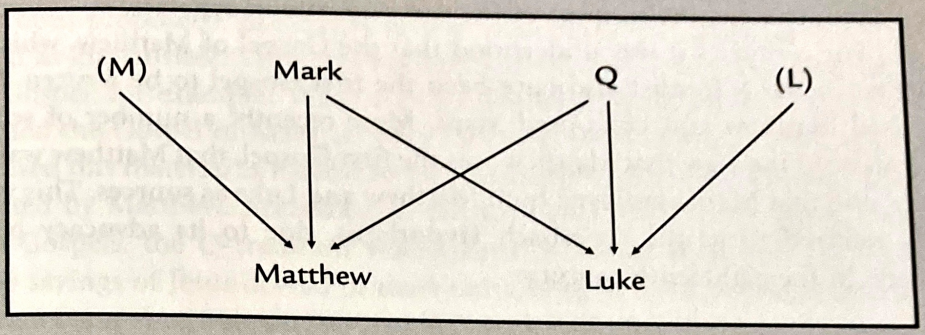
share a common structure, following a common chronological order. Most important, though, is the startling similarity in vocabulary and literary style in those many sections where the Synoptic Gospels coincide in content. Why is this remarkable? (1) Even though Jesus spoke primarily in Aramaic and reports of his deeds and teaching would have circulated originally in Aramaic, the Synoptic Gospels register a high degree of verbal similarity in Greek. (2) Unlike English, where word order is closely monitored, in Greek the order of words is quite free and irregular. Yet, commonality extends not only to word choice but to word sequence, repeatedly. (3) The possibility that three authors, writing at different times and in geographically diverse settings around the Roman Empire, would use the same language in the same order in account after account is minute. Evidence of this sort has led to the conclusion that the Synoptic Gospels share a literary relationship.

The possibilities for Synoptic relationships are several, but three scenarios are championed today. (1) Mark wrote the earliest Gospel, which was then used independently by both Matthew and Luke; both Matthew and Luke had access to a further Sayings Source, called "Q" (from the German word for "source": *Quelle*), as well as to additional materials, whether oral or written. This is the Two-Document Hypothesis. Those who prefer to think of Matthew's third source as a written one sometimes abbreviate it as "M"; similarly, Luke's third source can be referred to as "L." Accordingly, the Two-Document Hypothesis is expanded to become the Four-Document Hypothesis.

The Two-Document Hypothesis

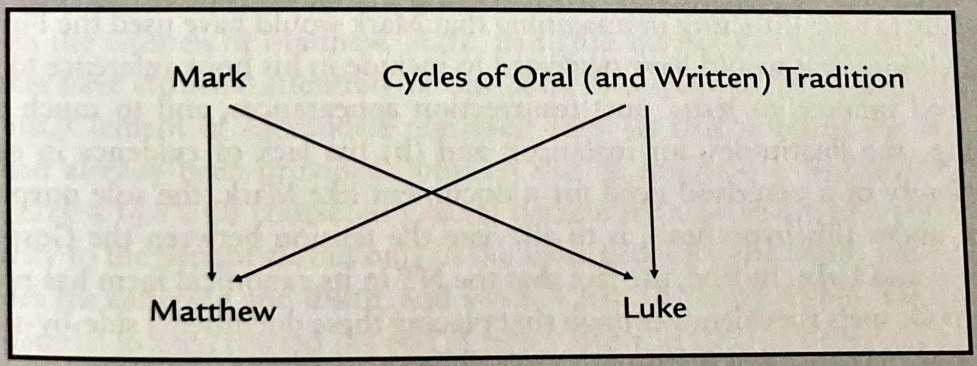


The Four-Document Hypothesis



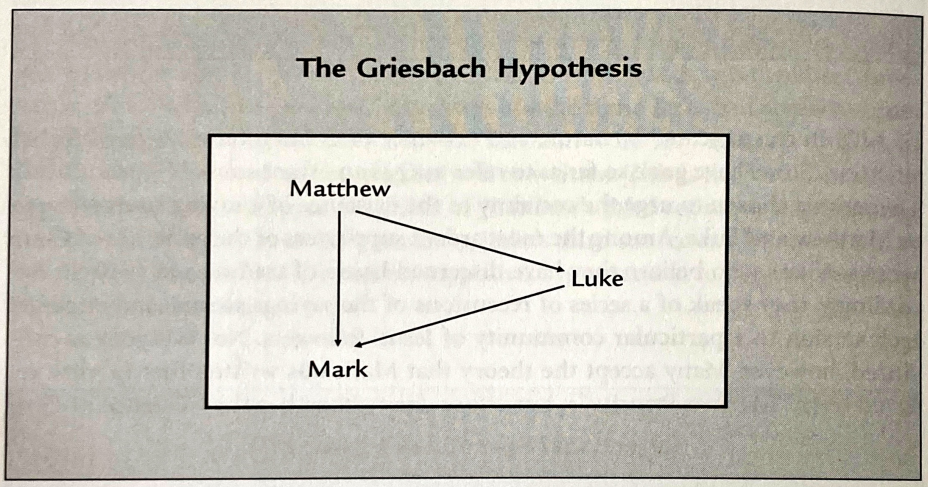
(2) In recent years, the nature and existence of Q has received a great deal of ttention. Some have gone so far as to refer to Q as an extant source — presumably hyperbole chosen to urge the certainty of the existence of a saying source shared y Matthew and Luke. Among the most ardent supporters of the existence of Q are ome scholars who believe they have discerned layers of tradition in Q itself. Accordingly, they speak of a series of recensions of the sayings source, and attribute ach version to a particular community of Jesus' followers. Not everyone is convinced, however. Many accept the theory that Mark was written first (a view referred to as "Markan Priority"), but either deny altogether the existence of Q or

Doing without Q



continue to speak of Q only as a collection of Jesus' sayings without insisting that this collection was written or that it had achieved anything resembling a fixed form. These first two theories of Synoptic relationships are closely related and together have attracted the support of the vast majority of scholars.

(3) For centuries it was understood that the Gospel of Matthew, which appears first in the NT, must also have been the first Gospel to be written. Mark, then, used Matthew and Luke used Mark. More recently, a number of scholars have embraced the view that Matthew was the first Gospel, that Matthew was used by Luke, and that Mark employed both Matthew and Luke as sources. This view is usually referred to as the Griesbach Hypothesis, due to its advocacy by J. J. Griesbach in the eighteenth century.



This view has not won widespread support due to a number of weaknesses — especially (a) the difficulty in imagining that Mark would have used the First and Third Gospels but would have neglected to include in his book reference to Jesus' birth and infancy, to Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, and to much of his teaching (the Beatitudes, for instance); and (b) the lack of evidence in earliest Christianity of a perceived need for a document like Mark, the sole purpose of which, under this hypothesis, is to alleviate the tension between the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Indeed, the fact that the NT in its canonical form has not one but four Gospels is evidence enough that placing these documents side-by-side, in spite of or perhaps even because of their differences, did not constitute an insurmountable obstacle.

The discussion surrounding the existence of Q is more difficult to assess. The

most pressing evidence in its favor is the number of close verbal agreements between Matthew and Luke that are not shared with Mark. These might be explained by the possibility that Luke used Matthew (the notion that Matthew used Luke has rarely been proposed). But Luke's treatment of Matthew could then only be described as implausible. What has happened to the major teaching sections in the First Gospel, for example? What is more, one finds little evidence that Luke has amended the Gospel of Mark in ways that Matthew has done — suggesting that Luke used this material as it came to him from Mark and not as it would have been mediated by Matthew. According to the data available to us from the First and Third Gospels, the Q-tradition would have consisted of at least 230 verses — mostly sayings of Jesus devoid of marks of setting or context — but whether this tradition comprised a secure, written document remains a matter of speculation.

During most of the twentieth century the study of the Gospels proceeded on the basis of one or another of these hypotheses regarding the relationships among the Synoptics. Such work has become increasingly problematic because of growing unease with all of these scenarios. The search for simple lines of transmission has given way in some circles to a recognition of the possibility of more and more complex veins of tradition, with oral and written materials circulating side-by-side and interacting in now untraceable ways. Although these developments in the conversation have not undermined the basic assumption that Mark was the earliest Gospel to be written, they have opened the door to wider circles of influence as accounts of Jesus' actions and teaching were put to use in the formation of communities seeking, sometimes in debate with each other, to be faithful to their Lord.

3.3.3. The Gospel of John and the Synoptics

Although the question of the relationship between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics will resurface in chapter 7, a brief comment is relevant now. The differences between the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke on the one hand and John on the other have attracted attention for centuries. According to the church historian Eusebius, Clement of Alexandria remarked early on that, whereas the historical data had already been provided, John set out to compose a "spiritual Gospel" (*Hist. Eccl.* 4.14.7). Of course, in general outline the Gospel of John bears some similarity to the Synoptics, but only in the most general sense: Jesus' public career precedes his suffering and death, and so on. Closer scrutiny reveals, for example, that material located toward the end of Jesus' career in the Synoptics, especially as this pertains to Jesus' work in Jerusalem, has in several cases been moved forward and scattered throughout the Fourth Gospel. Again, the parables of Jesus in the Synoptics and the tradition of Jesus' proverbs have been replaced in John by