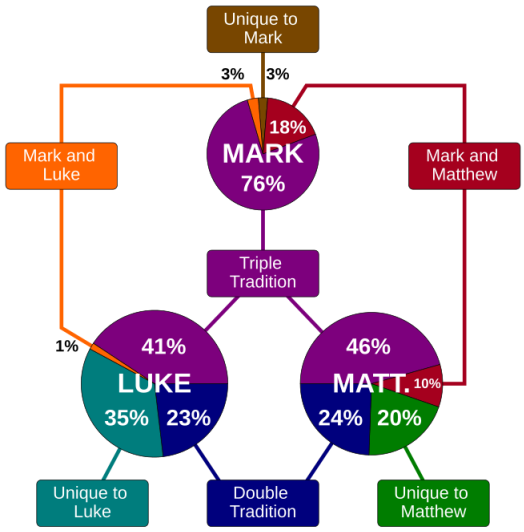
The synoptic problem is a justification for the similarities and differences between the following canonical gospels: Mark, Matthew and Luke.

We will be looking at the following image to explore the relationship between these synoptic texts.

Relationships between the Synoptic Gospels




[1]

Based on the image shared above: It can be said that a lot of content of these gospels is common while some content is unique to each gospel. Mark shared 76% of its content with Luke and Matthew; this content that is common in all 3 synoptics is called triple tradition. Apart from this 3% of Mark's content is shared with Luke while 18% of Mark's content is shared with Matthew. Hence 97% of Mark's content is in either Matthew or Luke.

Matthew shares 24% of its content with Luke only, not Mark. This content that is common between Matthew and Luke but is not present in Mark is called the double tradition.

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica: the similarities in structure and language of Matthew, Mark & Luke allow us to arrange them side by side so that common & unique material of these texts can be noticed, analysed and compared.[2]

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[1] Wikimedia Foundation. Synoptic Gospels [Internet]. San Francisco: Wikimedia Foundation; 2016 Feb 18 [cited 2024 Dec 29]. Available from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synoptic_Gospels Illustration, Relationship between synoptic gospels.

[2] Encyclopaedia Britannica, *The synoptic problem*, (1998) <https://www.britannica.com/topic/biblical-literature/The-Synoptic-problem> [accessed 29 December 2024].

Many scholars have compared and contrasted the triple tradition and double tradition content of these sacred texts to try to figure out why they are almost similar in some cases while also having some differences. For example all 3 synoptic gospels highlight the baptism of Jesus. But some wording is similar while others are different. For example Mark just shows Jesus getting baptised while Matthew adds a small line of dialogue where John the Baptist tells Jesus that Jesus should have baptized him instead… emphasizing Jesus' superiority over John.[3]

To explain this synoptic problem, mainstream scholars put forward the following theories: Two source hypothesis, Q hypothesis and Markan priority.

Markan priority is a hypothesis which declared that Mark was the first gospel while Matthew and Luke's authors wrote their gospels later, maybe they even used Mark as a source.

Q hypothesis is the claim that authors of Mark & Luke used a sayings gospel, similar to Gospel of Thomas, and this sayings gospel is no longer available. This theory explains the reason for double tradition; which is the non-Markan shared content of Matthew and Luke. As shown in illustration before, 23% of Luke and 24% of Matthew are similar. It is proposed that 'Q' is the source of this double tradition.

Scholars of two source hypothesis build upon the Markan priority and source 'Q' theory to assert that authors of Luke and Matthew used Mark alongside the Q source. This is done to explain the similarities between the synoptics of both double and triple traditions. Triple traditions exist due to Mark being used by authors of later gospels while double tradition exist due to usage of Q by Matthew and Luke.

Q is a hypothetical source, not an identifiable text or collection. It means there is no known book called 'Q' which was used by Matthew & Luke. It's just a theory based on the similar patterns on Mark & Luke that they used a shared source which is not available today. This shared document is likely to be a sayings gospel similar to the gospel of Thomas.[4]

An example of double tradition, believed to be taken from Q, is the Sermon of the Mount in Matthew and Sermon on the Plain in Luke. Both of these sermons can be compared and have many similar patterns. But there are also differences. Matthew's version of this sermon, Mount, is longer and Luke's sermon, Plain, is shorter in length. This is expected as Matthew repeatedly presents sayings, probably from Q, in large text blocks while Luke tries to keep them short and concise.[5]

Further to this, in their article, Stanton and Perrin claimed that there are very alike verbal agreements between Luke and Matthew on several double tradition verses. Making it obvious

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[3] Morna Hooker, *Gospel According to Saint Mark* (London: A & C Black, 1991), p. 44.
[4] Ronald Piper, 'Q: The Sayings Source', *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 264.
[5] Mark Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem: A Way Through the Maze* (London: A & C Black, 2001), p. 16.

that they utilised a common source which is not available today. These verbal agreements can be put forward by Q theorists to prove their claim. Line to line comparison of these 2 gospels shows almost the same Greek wording being used in some passages. For example at Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13. All of these similarities can not be due to coincidence, the authors either copied each other's work or they used a shared source.[6]

It is agreed by mainstream scholars that these double tradition similarities are due to the use of a hypothetical Q document by authors of these gospels.

Q could be the key to more information on the historical Jesus and we most likely can solve the synoptic problem if it gets discovered. It would be interesting to see how much percent of Q did Matthew & Luke copy and how much of it they ignored. The parts ignored by both of them could shed some light on the nature of historical Jesus.

A recently discovered sayings gospel known as gospel of Thomas could be seen as proof that Q also existed as a sayings gospel. A sayings gospel, unlike the canonical gospels, has no narrative of Jesus' life, death & resurrection (also known as passion). Instead, only the narrations of Jesus are included in a sayings gospel. This is what the gospel of Thomas is and scholars claim Q to be like this. However, the gospel of Thomas is claimed to be written after the synoptics, not before. So we don't have any evidence of a saying gospel which existed during the time synoptics were being composed.[7]

It is claimed by experts such as Kloppenburg, J Reed, and W Arnal that the source of non-Markan shared content of Matthew and Luke, Q, was written by someone in Galilee. This seems likely because the setting presented in 'Q' is similar to 1st century Galilee from history. Text in Q focuses on multiple parts of Galilee like Bethsaida. Further to this, there is a negative portrayal of herocratic Jerusalem so when taken into account this strengthens the theory regarding Q's location being Galilee. Jerusalem is rarely mentioned in Q. Moreover, there is no mention of Galilean urban regions especially Sepphoris and Tiberias. Further to this, there is a suspicion towards urban structures such as legal courts, prisons and marketplaces. It can therefore be argued that Q source was composed by villagers. Supporting Arnal's theory about Q being crafted by village scribes. Also supports the points of many other scholars such as Horsley that highlight source Q as being biased in favor of lower culture and local renewal. The similarities in Q and society of first century Galilee have made scholars argue in favor of a Galilean origin of Q instead of the classical arguments in favor of Antiochene origin. In 2003, Larry Hurtado claimed that Q source might have been authored by greek speaking Jewish Christians known as the Hellenists.

It is impossible to prove where Q originated from. But many scholars, as discussed before, have put forward their theories on Q's origin.

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[6] G.N. Stanton and N. Perrin, 'Q', *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), p. 712.
[7] John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 135-138.

Another question, apart from the origin of Q, that interests scholars is the purpose for why one would craft Q. There is no narrative of Jesus' resurrection and death, known as passion, in Q. It's likely that unlike the canonical gospels, Q is just a compilation of Jesus' sayings like the gospel of Thomas. Many reconstructions show Q as just a source of sayings.

Harnack, in 1904, proposed that Q was composed by early Jewish Christians to record narrations of the historical Jesus[8]

Thus it can be said that the primary aim for writing 'Q' was to preserve the sayings of Jesus so others can learn from them and spread them further. Therefore Q only contained the narrations, not narratives.

Scholars of diverse backgrounds have accepted the two source hypothesis, which includes Markan priority and Q hypothesis, for a long time. However there are still some who raise objections to the two source, Markan priority and Q hypotheses. To tackle the synoptic problem, some scholars have proposed alternative hypotheses for example the two document hypothesis where Luke utilised Matthew… Mark then copied from both Matthew and Luke. Another group accepts Markan priority but claims that Luke used Matthew to address the non-Markan content shared by both synoptics hence removing need for Q.[9] These alternative theories have failed to gain mainstream acceptance unlike the Q hypothesis.

Main reasons they get rejected is that when triple tradition content is examined, it can be noted that Mark's content is less detailed and more bland compared to other synoptics. Making it likely that Mark was written first and authors of Matthew and Luke improved upon it by adding more details and making the language sound more engaging, less bland. It makes no sense if Mark somehow copied from either of them then ended up removing details and making the language less engaging.

What if Luke used Matthew? This scenario is also not believable by mainstream scholars as if Luke had access to Matthew then Luke should have incorporated Matthean enhancements of Mark. But instead, Luke does not include Matthew's improvements of Mark so it's likely that Luke did not have access to Matthew and/or did not use Matthew as a source for this gospel.

It can be said that Q traditions were composed in Aramaic, especially if these sayings go back to the historical Jesus himself. However, Papias - one of the Apostolic Fathers - claimed that Mathhew gathered Jesus' narrations in Hebrew. So due to these 2 contradictions, there is an ongoing debate on the original language of Q.[10]

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[8] Ronald Piper, 'Q: The Sayings Source', *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 257-58.
[9] G.N. Stanton and N. Perrin, 'Q', *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), p. 714.
[10] Ronald Piper, 'Q: The Sayings Source', *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 263

Although there is still not a scholarly consensus on the original language, place of composition and writing purpose of Q, most mainstream scholars agree that Q existed and was the source of double tradition: the Non-Markan shared content of Matthew & Luke.

There is also the possibility that Matthew and Luke used different editions of Q, which could explain some differences in shared double tradition content; for example Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is longer and more detailed than its counterpart in Luke: Sermon on the Plain. Some might claim this difference in quantity could be due to Matthew's method of writing content in detail as opposed to Luke's approach of writing in short length. But this explanation fails to show why the verbal agreement between Matthrew & Luke is sometimes very similar but sometimes it differs a lot.[11]

Ultimately, the synoptic problem refers to the similarities and differences between the content of Mark, Matthew and Luke gospels. Many theories have been put forward to address this issue but the mainstream scholar community have accepted the two source hypothesis which also includes the Markan priority and Q hypothesis. According to this theory: Mark was written first then authors of Matthew & Luke used it alongside a hypothetical sayings source called 'Q'. Mark is the source of triple tradition content - on the other hand - Q is the source of double tradition content.

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Illustration, Relationship between synoptic gospels


[11] G.N. Stanton and N. Perrin, 'Q', *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), p. 712.