

Sorting Out the Synoptic Problem: Why an Old Approach Is Still Best

CRAIG A. EVANS

Halfway through my lecture on the Synoptic problem at least one student asks what the point is: What does it matter which Synoptic Gospel was written first and how the three of them relate to one another? Seminary students are usually the quickest to raise this question. Undergraduates are a bit slower to ask, perhaps because they are less sure of themselves. However, the question is never heard from the pulpit or in the pew; evidently the question is completely irrelevant in the church.

This apparent indifference notwithstanding, the Synoptic problem is well worth pondering; its solution well worth taking into account in studying the Gospels in preparation for preaching and teaching in the church today. The exegetical and theological payoff is simply too great for us to ignore the problem and the study required to grapple with it.

What the Synoptic Problem Is and Why It Matters

The Synoptic problem becomes apparent when we observe the similarities and differences in content and order in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The striking relationship among these three Gospels is only underscored when they are compared to the fourth Gospel, which differs at almost every point of comparison.

Two or more of the Synoptic Gospels hold in common many stories and teachings of Jesus. The verbal parallels are frequent and often quite

close. The words of John the Baptist ("You brood of vipers, who warned you . . . ?") are, with two or three minor exceptions, in exact agreement in Matthew and Luke. But there are also surprising divergences. All three Gospels seem to follow the same sequence, then unexpectedly Luke breaks away. There are also odd discrepancies between Matthew and Mark.

In Matthew we find a three-chapter version of the Sermon on the Mount, complete with the Lord's Prayer. But in Luke the sermon is given on a level place (hence it is called the Sermon on the Plain), is only half of one chapter (6:20-49), and does not contain the Lord's Prayer (which shows up several chapters later, in a completely different context).

Matthew's version of the infancy narrative features dreams, fulfilled prophecies, the visit of the magi, the wrath of Herod, and the flight to Egypt. None of this appears in Luke's version. Instead, we have canticles, a visit by shepherds, and visits to a relative and to the temple. Similar discrepancies occur in the Easter narratives. In Matthew the disciples meet the risen Jesus on a mountain; in Luke the risen Jesus joins the two on the road to Emmaus, appears in a house and eats food, and ascends. None of this is in Matthew.

Matthew presents Jesus' teaching in five major blocks of material; this material is scattered in Luke. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus makes his way from Galilee to Judea in two or three chapters. In Luke it takes ten. Matthew and Luke share a whole host of teaching, which is not found in Mark. At points Luke's version overlaps with Johannine tradition; at other points it overlaps with Pauline.

These are the most obvious examples that perplex interpreters. How are these phenomena to be explained? This is the Synoptic problem, and investigation of it is important for several reasons: (1) Explaining the relationship of the Synoptic Gospels will shed light on the origins and development of these most important sources for the life and teaching of Jesus; (2) resolution of the Synoptic problem is important for assessing the antiquity and value of the sources in study of the historical Jesus; and (3) study of the Synoptic problem heightens appreciation of the distinctive features of the Synoptic Gospels, which significantly aids the task of exegesis and theological study. It is this third reason that guides the present essay.

Why the Priority of Mark Is Still the Majority View

Matthean priority was almost universally held from the second-century church to the middle of the nineteenth century.¹ When modern biblical scholarship was in its infancy three books appeared — one English, the other two German — arguing not only for Matthean priority, but using this priority to explain the relationship of all three Synoptic Gospels to one another. Henry Owen and the much better known Johann Jakob Griesbach proposed that Matthew was written first, that Luke made use of Matthew, and that Mark, writing last, made use of both Matthew and Luke.²

Matthean priority remained the dominant solution to the Synoptic problem for more than a century. But the dominance of this position began to wane with the appearance of several studies in the nineteenth century. The middle position of Mark was observed, leading some to conclude that Mark may have been the first of the Synoptic Gospels, not second or third.³ Heinrich Julius Holtzmann proposed the two-document hypothesis, whereby it was understood that a Mark-like source (document A) and a sayings source (document B) were utilized independently by Matthew and Luke.⁴ The next two generations refined Holtzmann's hypothesis, resulting in the classic two-source theory, where it is understood that Matthew and Luke made use of Mark and the hypothetical Q (the abbreviation

1. On the great influence of Matthew in the early centuries of the church, see É. Massaux, *The Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew on Christian Literature before Saint Irenaeus*, 3 vols., ed. A. J. Bellinzoni (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990, 1992, 1993).

2. H. Owen, *Observations on the Four Gospels* (London: T. Payne, 1764); J. J. Griesbach, *Fontes unde Evangelistae suas de resurrectione Domini narrationes hauserint* (Jena: J. C. G. Goepferdt, 1783); idem, *Commentatio qua Marci evangelium totum e Matthaei et Lucae commentariis decerptum esse monstratur*, I-II (Jena: J. C. G. Goepferdt, 1789-90). Although Griesbach gives no hint of being influenced by Owen's work, for three reasons it is very probable that he was acquainted with it: (1) Griesbach studied one year in England (1769-70), five years after the publication of Owen's book, which means he could probably read English and may have actually met Owen; (2) Griesbach actually possessed a copy of Owen's book, according to the catalogue of the contents of his library; and (3) comparison of their respective work suggests contact at several points. On this interesting topic, see M. C. Williams, "The Owen Hypothesis: An Essay Showing That It Was Henry Owen Who First Formulated the So-Called 'Griesbach Hypothesis,'" *Journal of Higher Criticism* 7 (2000): 109-25.

3. K. Lachmann, "De ordine narrationum in evangeliiis synopticis," *TSK* 8 (1935): 570-90; partial ET in N. H. Palmer, "Lachmann's Argument," *NTS* 13 (1967): 368-78, esp. 370-76.

4. H. J. Holtzmann, *Die synoptischen Evangelien: Ihr Ursprung und geschichtlicher Charakter* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1863).

of the German word *Quelle*, which means source).⁵ The two-source theory and variations of it have come to dominate Gospels research.⁶

In recent years scholarly discussion of the Synoptic problem has intensified, with some claiming that the dominant view — Markan priority — is in danger of being overthrown. In 1964 W. R. Farmer challenged the near-consensus of Markan priority.⁷ He has won a few converts (mostly in North America and in Britain; virtually no one in Germany).⁸ He and his followers continue to pound away at what are considered the weak points of Markan priority. Despite their untiring efforts, however, Markan priority continues to be held by a majority of Gospel scholars.⁹

5. Among the most influential studies that favored the two-document (or two-source) hypothesis are J. C. Hawkins, *Horae Synopticae: Contributions to the Study of the Synoptic Problem*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1909 [1st ed., 1898]); W. Sanday, ed., *Oxford Studies in the Synoptic Problem* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1911); and B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins*, rev. ed. (London: Macmillan, 1930 [orig. 1924]).

6. See J. A. Fitzmyer, "The Priority of Mark and the 'Q' Source in Luke," in *Jesus and Man's Hope*, vol. 1, ed. D. G. Buttrick and J. M. Bald (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1970), 131-70; C. M. Tuckett, *The Revival of the Griesbach Hypothesis: An Analysis and Appraisal*, SNTSMS 44 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); R. H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987); S. E. Johnson, *The Griesbach Hypothesis and Redaction Criticism*, SBLMS 41 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991).

7. W. R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis* (New York: Macmillan, 1964); *idem*, ed., *New Synoptic Studies: The Cambridge Gospels Conference and Beyond* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1983).

8. D. L. Dungan, "Mark — The Abridgement of Matthew and Luke," in *Jesus and Man's Hope*, vol. 1, ed. Buttrick and Bald, 51-97; H.-H. Stoldt, *History and Criticism of the Marcan Hypothesis* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1980); D. B. Peabody, *Mark as Composer* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987).

9. The revival of the Owen-Griesbach hypothesis is not the only competing theory that is entertained by scholars these days. A more complicated version of the two-source hypothesis has been championed by M.-É. Boismard, *Synopse des quatre évangiles* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1972), and *idem*, *L'Évangile de Marc sa préhistoire*, ÉBib 26 (Paris: Gabalda, 1994). Michael Goulder, following the lead of Austin Farrer (especially "On Dispensing with Q," in *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot*, ed. D. E. Nineham [Oxford: Blackwell, 1955], 55-88), has argued that Matthew is a midrashic expansion of Mark and that Luke is a reworking of both Matthew and Mark. Among Goulder's various studies, see especially *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974) and *Luke: A New Paradigm*, 2 vols., JSNTSup 20 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989). For a recent assessment of the Farrer-Goulder hypothesis that is at points supportive and at points critical, see M. S. Goodacre, *Goulder and the Gospels: An Examination of a New Paradigm*, JSNTSup 133 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

Sorting Out the Synoptic Problem

Markan priority continues to prevail because it possesses much greater explanatory power than does Matthean (or Lukan) priority. Parallel after parallel is more easily explained in reference to Markan priority. Let us consider two examples briefly (with major points of comparison in bold face):

Example 1

Matthew 4:1-2

¹Then Jesus was **led up** by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry.

Mark 1:12-13

¹²The Spirit immediately **drove** him **out** into the wilderness. ¹³And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him.

Luke 4:1-2

¹And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was **led** by the Spirit ²for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing in those days; and when they were ended, he was hungry.

Analysis of Synoptic parallels often prompts the question that text critics usually ask: Which passage (or reading) best explains the others? Applying this question to the story of the temptation of Jesus is very suggestive.

Matthew says Jesus "was led up" (*anagein*) by the Spirit into the wilderness. Luke says Jesus "was led" (*agein*) by the Spirit in the wilderness. Mark says the Spirit immediately "drove"/"cast" Jesus "out" (*ekballein*) into the wilderness. Does Mark's reading explain the readings of Matthew and Luke? Or, do the readings of Matthew and Luke explain Mark's reading? If we assume that Mark wrote first, then Matthew and Luke replaced Mark's "drove out" with forms of "led." Or, if Mark wrote last, ignoring the forms of "led" in the two texts in front of him, then we must imagine that the Evangelist deliberately chose instead to write "drove out." Which option is the most plausible?

Approximately one half of the occurrences of *ekballein* ("to drive/cast out") in Matthew and Luke are in reference to exorcism; and about one half of those not in reference to exorcism are in reference to violent or negative acts, such as murdering and casting the son out of the vineyard (Matt 21:39; Luke 20:15), casting Jesus out of town (Luke 4:29), casting

someone out of the kingdom into hell (Matt 8:12; Luke 13:28), casting out someone's name, that is, striking a person's name from the membership of the local synagogue (Luke 6:22), or casting merchants out of the temple precincts (Matt 21:12; Luke 19:45).

If, in writing last, Mark read and made use of Matthew and Luke, which speak of Jesus being "led" by the Spirit, it is hard to see why this Evangelist would have chosen the verb *ekballein* ("drive out" or "cast out") when he would have observed that *this is the verb routinely used in the stories of exorcism*, for example, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out (*ekballein*) demons in your name?" (Matt 7:22), and that it is frequently used in other negative or judgmental contexts, as in the examples cited above.

Accordingly, probability favors the first option. For it is much easier to explain the appearance of "led up" and "led" in Matthew and Luke as stylistic improvements upon Mark than trying to find an explanation that would account for Mark's "drove out," if we suppose that when he wrote he had Matthew and Luke before him. But why did the Markan Evangelist use the word at all? Mark 1:12 is Mark's first use of *ekballein*. It did not occur to him that he would subsequently use this word in reference to exorcism. Had the Evangelist narrated (or *read* in Matthew or Luke, if we accept the Owen-Griesbach Hypothesis) one or two exorcisms *before* narrating the temptation, he too may have chosen a different verb, as Matthew and Luke would later do.

There are other editorial indications that Matthew and Luke are posterior to Mark. Matthew substitutes "devil," which Mark never uses, for Mark's "Satan." The devil is Matthew's preferred designation for the evil one (cf. Matt 4:1, 5, 8, 11; 13:39; 25:41), a preference perhaps prompted by the appearance of "devil" in Q, the tradition that Matthew and Luke have in common (cf. Luke 4:2, 3, 5, 13; 8:12). For his part, Luke takes the opportunity to say that Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit," which is in step with this Evangelist's marked interest in pneumatology. And of course, both Matthew and Luke omit Mark's somewhat cryptic reference to Jesus' being "with the wild beasts." All of these differences are easier to explain on the assumption of Markan priority, not posteriority.

Sorting Out the Synoptic Problem

Example 2

Matthew 8:18-27

¹⁸Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. . . .
²³And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. ²⁴And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. ²⁵And they went and woke him, saying, "Save, Lord; we are perishing." ²⁶And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?" Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm. ²⁷And the men marveled, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?"

Mark 4:35-41

³⁵On that day, **when evening had come**, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." ³⁶And leaving the crowd, **they took him** with them in the boat, **just as he was**. And other boats were with him. ³⁷And a great storm of wind arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. ³⁸But he was in the stern, asleep **on the cushion**; and they woke him and said to him, "**Teacher, do you not care** if we perish?" ³⁹And he awoke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. ⁴⁰He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you **no faith**?" ⁴¹And they were filled with awe, and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?"

Luke 8:22-25

²²One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side of the lake." So they set out, ²³and as they sailed he fell asleep. And a storm of wind came down on the lake, and they were filling with water, and were in danger. ²⁴And they went and woke him, saying, "**Master, Master**, we are perishing!" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; and they ceased, and there was a calm. ²⁵He said to them, "**Where is your faith**?" And they were afraid, and they marveled, saying to one another, "Who then is this, that he commands even wind and water, and they obey him?"

We have here one of the most vivid, exciting stories of the Synoptic Gospels. Every child who has attended Sunday School has heard this story, has seen it illustrated in picture books or on flannel boards, and perhaps has even acted it out in a skit.

Once again, if we ask which reading best explains the others, logic favors Markan priority. Commentators have rightly observed that the phrase "when evening had come" is from Markan redaction and serves as Mark's

way of either bringing a discrete episode to a conclusion or of introducing a new one (cf. Mark 1:32; 6:47; 11:19; 14:17; 15:42). But in adding it here, Mark creates a bit of a redundancy, if not an anomaly (is it "day" or is it "evening"?). But even more problematic, the phrase stands in tension with the story of the demoniac, which follows in Mark 5:1-20 and gives every impression of taking place on the same day. Evidently Matthew senses this problem, electing to replace "On that day, when evening had come" with "Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him." Thus, it is not the end of the day that prompts Jesus to relocate; it is the crowds. Luke removes the difficulty by simply saying, "One day. . ."

But Mark goes from the redundant and inconsistent to the strange, when he says the disciples "took him with them in the boat, just as he was." What on earth does the Evangelist mean by this? Is Jesus in some way incapacitated? Is he perhaps in a trance, so that his disciples have to pick him up and place him in the boat? No, probably not; it seems that Mark is only harking back to Mark 4:1-2, where Jesus got into the boat and commenced his teaching. That is, when the disciples departed from the shore, they took Jesus with them, already seated in the boat ("just as he was"). But it must be admitted that the text reads oddly. Not surprisingly, Matthew replaces the Markan verse with "And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him." Not only is the problem mitigated, Jesus is properly cast as the leader and his disciples as the followers. Luke again takes the simplest course, by dropping all reference to going aboard: "So they set out."

The real rub comes when the storm frightens the disciples. Mark says Jesus "was in the stern, asleep on the cushion." Matthew and Luke see no point in these details, so omit them. Does it matter where Jesus was sleeping, or on what? But far more problematic is the way the disciples address Jesus: "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?" Even with due allowance for their terror, their question borders on disrespect. Matthew and Luke provide much more respectful cries for help: "Save, Lord; we are perishing" (Matthew); "Master, Master, we are perishing!" (Luke). Both Matthew and Luke preserve Mark's verb for "perish," but each significantly alters the manner in which the disciples address Jesus.

The various forms of Jesus' reply to the frightened disciples also recommend Markan priority. In Mark Jesus says, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" What, the future apostles and leaders of the church "have no faith"? No, not exactly, says Matthew; they are "men of little faith" (a Matthean favorite; cf. Matt 6:30; 14:31; 16:8); presumably their faith will

Sorting Out the Synoptic Problem

grow and become stronger. Taking a different approach, but accomplishing the same thing, Luke says that Jesus asked, "Where is your faith?" That's right; the disciples do indeed have faith, but they have suffered a momentary lapse. They have misplaced their faith, as it were.

It is details such as these, in passage after passage, that have led most Gospel scholars to embrace Markan priority. In the passages that will be examined below we shall again find that it is always easier to explain Mark as the source of Matthew and Luke than to try to explain things the other way around. But our purpose will not be to offer yet more evidence in support of Markan priority; it will be to show in what ways a horizontal reading of the Synoptic Gospels aids the task of exegesis, theology, and preaching.

We shall begin with examples of how we understand Matthew and Luke in light of Markan priority. Historically, interpretation of Matthew and Luke has been easier because of our confidence in Markan priority. The two-source hypothesis provides interpreters with the sources of Matthew and Luke, thereby greatly aiding the task of interpretation. Because we have their sources and can observe what they have done with them, we are in a position to understand much better the messages they wish to communicate.

Interpreting Matthew in Light of the Priority of Mark

What interpretive insight may we gain if we approach Matthew as a revision and expansion of the Gospel of Mark? As it so happens, the interpretive payoff is quite significant. Matthew has a lot to say. Although this Evangelist was fond of Mark, retaining some 90% of its contents, he found it necessary to rewrite the story, revising and expanding and in a few places expurgating a Gospel that the Matthean Evangelist read and reread and probably taught from many times before replacing it with his new, revised edition.¹⁰

The messianic credentials of Jesus are much emphasized in the Gospel of Matthew. But Jesus emerges as no Messiah of popular, militant ex-

10. For the classic treatment of Matthew from a redaction-critical perspective, see G. Bornkamm, G. Barth, and H. J. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963). Cf. G. N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1992; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

pectations. We shall find a didactic, almost scribal Messiah, portrayed as master teacher. Here are two examples:

Example 1

Matthew 16:5-12

⁵When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. ⁶Jesus said to them, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and **Sadducees**." ⁷And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "We brought no bread." ⁸But Jesus, aware of this, said, "O men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? ⁹Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹⁰Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹¹**How is it that you fail to perceive that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.**" ¹²**Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.**

Mark 8:14-21

¹⁴Now they had forgotten to bring bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. ¹⁵And he cautioned them, saying, "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of **Herod**." ¹⁶And they discussed it with one another, saying, "We have no bread." ¹⁷And being aware of it, Jesus said to them, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive **or understand? Are your hearts hardened?** ¹⁸**Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?** And do you not remember? ¹⁹When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" They said to him, "Twelve." ²⁰"And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" And they said to him, "Seven." ²¹And he said to them, "**Do you not yet understand?**"

Comparison of Mark 8:14-21 and Matt 16:5-12 reveals several interesting differences. According to Mark, Jesus warns his disciples: "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." In Matthew the warning is nearly identical, but there is one important difference; Jesus speaks of "the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Matthew apparently is troubled by Mark's linking of the Pharisees and Herod. In what sense can their "leaven" (whatever that is supposed to mean) have something in common? It is not surprising that Matthew replaces "Herod" with "the Sadducees." Nor is it surprising that scribes after the time of Matthew the scribe make changes in Mark's text. Some scribes read "Herodians" (cf. P⁴⁵

Sorting Out the Synoptic Problem

W and other manuscripts), which at least provides a more sensible parallel with the plural "Pharisees" and also takes the reader back to Mark 3:6, where we first hear of the Herodians (see also Mark 12:13 = Matt 22:16).

However, it is still not clear what this "leaven of the Pharisees and Herod" is. Contextually, we are probably to think that the Markan Evangelist has in mind either unbelief (in Jesus himself or in his message) or antagonism (to Jesus or to God). The Pharisees have just asked Jesus for a sign, "to test him" (Mark 8:11-13). And a bit earlier Mark narrated Herod's malevolent interest in and fear of Jesus (Mark 6:14-29). But for Matthew the "leaven" of the Pharisees and the Sadducees is their "teaching." Such an identification is more in step with Matthew's severe criticism of Israel's religious teachers, whose unbelief and opposition to God and his messengers will lead to national disaster. We shall return to this point later.

The disciples misunderstand the import of Jesus' warning, taking his reference to leaven (or yeast) literally and so acknowledge that they have "no bread." In Mark's version Jesus appears quite exasperated with his disciples: "Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember?" Jesus' reference to hardened hearts ominously alludes to the very language of obduracy earlier applied to Jesus' enemies (cf. Mark 3:5: "he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart") and to "outsiders" (cf. Mark 4:11-12), language that echoes the harsh criticism voiced by Israel's classical prophets (cf. Isa 6:9-10; Jer 5:21; Ezek 12:2). After reviewing the results of the two feeding miracles, where the disciples recall how baskets of leftover scraps were collected, Jesus brings the discussion to a close with a question that must have made the disciples wince: "Do you not yet understand?" Mark's readers are left wondering if the disciples ever understood.

In Matthew's version, however, the disciples fare much better. They are addressed as men of "little faith," an epithet that has already been noticed. But the series of rhetorical questions is abridged; Matthew has Jesus only ask: "Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember. . . ?" Gone are the allusions to hardened hearts, unseeing eyes, and unhearing ears. Even more importantly, Matthew's form of the story ends on a much more promising note. After having Jesus repeat the original warning about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, the Matthean Evangelist assures his readers that then the disciples "understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

Matthew's revision of Mark points to a significant concern on the part of this Evangelist. Jesus is the master teacher and master disciple-maker, who warns his disciples of the false teaching of their rivals in the Jewish community. In the aftermath of the destruction of the Jewish Temple and Jerusalem the holy city, the Jewish faithful are regrouping and retrenching. Increasingly there is less tolerance for sectarian groups like the messianists of the Matthean community.¹¹ There is especially no sympathy for messianism, which in the minds of many was a major cause of the disaster that overtook the Jewish nation.¹²

What kind of Messiah was Jesus anyway? Had he liberated Israel? No, he had not. He had been put to death by a Roman governor. So what if some of his followers believed that he had been resurrected? The day of judgment had not in fact arrived. Thus, Jesus is irrelevant, his message of the arrival of the kingdom of God mistimed, and the ongoing existence of his community or church pointless.

Against these criticisms the Matthean Evangelist must mount a serious defense. He must show that the advent of Jesus fulfilled Jewish prophecy, that Jesus himself fulfilled the requirements of the Law, that he taught a way of righteousness, and that his teaching was in fact superior to the teaching of his rival teachers. Jesus was and is Israel's Messiah, but he is no defeated militant Messiah, who calls fellow Israelites to arms. He will conquer Israel's enemies through the power of the kingdom proclamation. The day of judgment will surely come, but beware; not all the sons of the kingdom (viz., ethnic Jews) will enter the kingdom; some will be cast out.

Example 2

The second example focuses on Peter's famous confession at Caesarea Philippi:

11. For recent studies emphasizing Matthew's Jewish setting, see J. A. Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); A. J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and D. C. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1998).

12. Josephus's avoidance of messianism and his disparagement of would-be liberators provide a first-century example of this tendency in Jewish circles.

Sorting Out the Synoptic Problem

Matthew 16:13-18

¹³Now when Jesus came into the **district** of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that **the Son of man** is?" ¹⁴And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, **the Son of the living God.**" ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, "**Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.** ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." ²⁰Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

Mark 8:27-30

²⁷And Jesus went on with his disciples, to the **villages** of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" ²⁸And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others one of the prophets." ²⁹And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." ³⁰And he charged them to tell no one about him.

Luke 9:18-21

¹⁸Now it happened that **as he was praying** alone the disciples were with him; and he asked them, "Who do the people say that I am?" ¹⁹And they answered, "John the Baptist; but others say, Elijah; and others, that one of the old prophets has risen." ²⁰And he said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "The Christ of God." ²¹But he charged and commanded them to tell this to no one.

Once again Mark begins a narrative somewhat clumsily. The Evangelist situates this famous story of Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah in "the villages of Caesarea Philippi." This is odd, because Caesarea Philippi is a city,

not a territory. So in what sense can we speak of being in the villages of a given city? Matthew understands what Mark is trying to say, changing the text to read "the district of Caesarea Philippi." (Luke sees no point to the geographical reference, so omits it altogether; however, mention is made of Jesus in prayer, a popular theme in Luke.)

According to Mark's version, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" (which Luke modifies slightly, with "Who do the people say that I am?"). But Matthew has Jesus refer to himself as "the Son of man": "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" The Evangelist does this in order to link "Son of man" with "Christ," thereby defining the former in reference to the latter. In Mark the disciples reply, "John the Baptist, and others say Elijah, and others one of the prophets" (which again is essentially followed by Luke). But Matthew takes the opportunity here to add the name of the prophet Jeremiah, evidently as part of a typology by which Jesus and his fate are compared to the famous prophet of old.¹³

But the two most important differences between Matthew and Mark concern Peter's confession and Jesus' reply. According to Mark, Peter simply declares: "You are the Christ." Matthew's version, however, enhances Jesus' identity: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Luke also expands the confession, but more modestly: "The Christ of God.") Neither Mark nor Luke tells us what Jesus said in reply, apart from the injunctions to keep the confession quiet. But in Matthew, Jesus says: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." The idiom "flesh and blood" is Semitic (= Hebrew *bāšār we-dām*), occurring often in rabbinic literature, and simply refers to a human being as opposed to an angel, a demon, or God himself. No, the Matthean Jesus avers, Peter's insight had no human origin; it came as divine revelation. But this is not all; Simon son of John is now called *Peter*, which means "rock," and on this rock Jesus will build his church, an assembly of faithful, against which the gates of Hades cannot prevail.

13. Matthew, more than the other Gospel writers, is especially interested in the prophet Jeremiah. It has been suggested that the Evangelist has presented the rejection of Jesus in the light of the suffering and rejection that Jeremiah experienced. Jesus' appeal to Jer 7:11 ("cave of robbers") in the temple action (cf. Mark 11:17; Matt 21:13) encouraged this typology. The prophecies of Jeremiah are explicitly cited in Matt 2:17-18 (Jer 31:15) and 27:9-10 (Jer 19:1-13; cf. Zech 11:12-13). For discussion of this Matthean theme, see M. Knowles, *Jeremiah in Matthew's Gospel: The Rejected Prophet Motif in Matthaean Redaction*, JSNTSup 68 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

Sorting Out the Synoptic Problem

Here we have the well-known wordplay on Peter (Greek: *Petros*; Aramaic: *kepha*), whose name means "rock" (Greek: *petra*). It has been suggested that the naming of Simon and the declaration that he was the foundation of a new people of God follow an Old Testament pattern. Abram and Jacob are the only persons in the Hebrew Bible whose names are changed (Gen 17:1-8; 32:22-32). Of special interest is that the change of their names was related to their role as founders of a new nation. Of the two, only Abraham is later associated with a rock foundation. According to Isa 51:1-2, "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who gave birth to you in pain; when he was one I called him, then I blessed him and multiplied him." The parallel suggests that Jesus foresees founding a new people, his church, on the bedrock of Peter's confession and leadership. (See also the comment in Matt 3:9, where John the Baptist links Abraham with stones.)

Jesus' promise to build his church recalls God's promises in Jer 31:4, "Again I will build you, and you shall be rebuilt, O virgin of Israel!" and Amos 9:11, "In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David, and wall up its breaches; I will also raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old" (cf. Acts 15:15-18). The word translated "church" (Greek *ekklēsia*) means "assembly" or "congregation" and is the equivalent of Hebrew *qahal*, which occurs frequently in the Old Testament (often in reference to the "assembly of God" or "assembly of the Lord"; cf. Num 16:3; 20:4; Deut 23:2, 3, 4, 9).

The "gates of Hades" are the powers of evil that attempt to overwhelm the church. They are not the realm of the dead (Job 38:17; Ps 9:13, which speak of the "gates of death"; Isa 38:10, which speaks of the "gates of Sheol") or death by martyrdom. But because the church is built on the rock, it will withstand the attack (much as the house built on the rock withstands the storm in the parable in Matt 7:24-27). In view of this parallel, it has been suggested that the saying originally referred to "storm" (Aramaic: *sa'ar*), instead of "gate" (Aramaic: *ša'ar*), that is, the storms of Hades will not overpower the church.

Jesus promises Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." This saying is in some way related to Isa 22:22, "Then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder. When he opens no one will shut, when he shuts no one will open." As the representative of the "house

of David" Jesus has given the key to his principal disciple Peter, who will exercise authority "on earth," even as Jesus as Son of Man exercised authority "on earth" (see Mark 2:10 = Matt 9:6 = Luke 5:24). As chief apostle, Peter will unlock the doors that will allow true Israel to enter the kingdom (be they Jews or Gentiles), a role we see him play at Pentecost (Acts 2) and later with respect to the salvation of Gentiles (Acts 10–11).

To have the "keys of the kingdom" is to have power to "bind on earth" what "shall be bound in heaven," etc. The binding and loosing mentioned here clarify what was said above about the keys, especially in light of the parallel in Isa 22:22. That is, binding and loosing is the equivalent of shutting and opening, shutting the door on some, opening the door for others or, less figuratively, of deciding what is permitted and what is not permitted. A similar idea is found in the parallel in Matt 18:18, but with reference to questions of discipline within the church itself. Saying that what Peter binds "on earth" shall be bound "in heaven" is to assure the apostle that he has heaven's backing (compare Luke 11:52, where legal experts misuse their expertise and take away the "key of knowledge," shutting people out of the kingdom and not entering themselves).¹⁴

In the passage of the confession of Peter the theme of Jesus as master teacher is continued, but the emphasis here is on the teaching authority being passed on from Jesus to his principal disciple Simon Peter. We can only surmise what role Peter played in the Matthean community. Whether he was personally known to this community we cannot say. But it is clear that his authority is respected (or at least should be, from the Evangelist's point of view). It is vital to demonstrate that Jesus has invested this apostle with heavenly authority, so that what he binds or looses on earth is what is forbidden or permitted in heaven. In essence, Peter becomes the master teacher in the absence of Jesus.¹⁵

14. For rabbinic examples of permit/not permit (or forbid), see *m. 'Eduyyot* 4:8, "the House of Shammai permit levirate marriage between the co-wives and the surviving brothers, but the House of Hillel forbid it"; *Terumot* 5:4, "the House of Shammai declare it forbidden, but the House of Hillel permit"; and other examples in *m. Pe'ah* 7:5; *m. Demai* 2:4; *m. Ta'anit* 2:7; *m. Megillah* 1:11; *m. Temurah* 7:6.

15. To be sure, the Matthean Evangelist has augmented his Markan source with Matt 16:17–19, but one should not assume that this material has no claim to antiquity, even authenticity. On this question, see S. E. Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research: Previous Discussion and New Proposals*, JSNTSup 191 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 153–61, 201–3, and the bibliography cited in 160 n. 90.

Interpreting Luke in Light of the Priority of Mark

Many Lukan scholars suspect that in addition to Mark and Q, imbedded in Luke is an older first draft, usually called proto-Luke. The hypothesis has much to recommend it, for in Luke we find parallel tradition that resists the explanation that it is simply edited Markan or Q tradition. But perhaps the most helpful aspect of the proto-Luke hypothesis is how it may explain a perplexing chronological dilemma that Lukan scholars face.

The problem is simply put: The Gospel of Luke is followed by a second volume, the book of Acts, which refers to the Gospel as the "first account" (compare Acts 1:1-2 and Luke 1:1-4). This second volume ends with Paul under arrest in Rome (Acts 28), probably 61 or 62 CE. But if Luke made use of Mark, which was written during the Jewish war and probably near its end (ca. 69 CE), then presumably Luke wrote some time after the conclusion of the war (and most scholars place Luke in the late 70s or 80s). Why then does Acts end where it does? Why does it not go on to narrate Paul's release, his further activities, and his eventual martyrdom? Attempts to explain why Luke chooses to conclude his narrative where he does have not been persuasive. Many wonder if the narrative of Acts ends where it does simply because there was no more story to tell. If this is true, then Acts was written in the early 60s. If this is true, then the Gospel of Luke was written at the same time, perhaps a bit earlier. But how can this be, if it has made use of the Gospel of Mark, which probably was written a few years later?

This is where the proto-Luke hypothesis may clear up the problem. What was probably written in the early 60s was proto-Luke and Acts. After the publication of Mark a few years later, the Evangelist Luke rewrote his first volume, making use of Mark and Q. Chunks of proto-Luke remain, as seen in the distinctive features of the infancy and Easter narratives, the parallel narratives (especially seen in the Passion week), and the many unparalleled stories and parables. However, the Lukan Evangelist probably did not revise or update the second volume of his work, the book of Acts.

Because we do not possess proto-Luke (any more than we possess Mark's sources), we cannot be sure what the theological perspective was in this early form of Luke's Gospel story. But we can observe what the Evangelist does with his Markan and Q sources. Several areas of interest come to light: (1) the story of Jesus stands in continuity with the story of Israel; (2) proper use of wealth is a sure sign of righteousness; (3) the good news

of Jesus is for Gentiles as well as Israelites; (4) the grounds of election are not what people always think; and (5) the Holy Spirit plays an important role in the life and ministry of Jesus as much as it does in the lives and ministries of his disciples.¹⁶

Let us probe the themes of election and the place of the Gentiles in God's plan of redemption. The first passage looks at the use of Isaiah 40 in connection with the preaching and activity of John the Baptist:

Example 1

Matthew 3:1-3

¹In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ²"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." ³For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

Mark 1:2-3

²As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "**Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way;** ³the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight —"

Luke 3:1-6

¹In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ²in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness; ³and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the

16. For the classic treatment of Luke from a redaction-critical perspective, see H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961). Conzelmann's primary focus on temporal aspects of Luke's theology has been modified and even abandoned in more recent scholarship.

Sorting Out the Synoptic Problem

way of the Lord, make
his paths straight. ^sEvery
valley shall be filled, and
every mountain and hill
shall be brought low,
and the crooked shall be
made straight, and the
rough ways shall be
made smooth; ^eand all
flesh shall see the salva-
tion of God."

With quotations from Malachi and Isaiah, Mark links the incipit of his narrative (v. 1: "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God") to the appearance of John the Baptist in the wilderness. Of course, Mark refers only to "Isaiah the prophet," which prompts both Matthew and Luke to delete the quotation of Mal 3:1 ("Behold, I send my messenger . . .") at this point and to use it later (Matt 11:10 = Luke 7:27). The Matthean and Lukan Evangelists make other changes as well. Matthew anticipates John's preaching of repentance and proclamation of the arrival of the kingdom, while Luke prefaces his account of John's preaching with a remarkably elaborate synchronism, from Emperor Tiberius to the high priests Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas.

But the most interesting feature in Luke's version is the extension of the quotation of Isa 40:3 to include vv. 4 and 5 as well. It is probable that the Evangelist has done this so that he might end his quotation with the words "and all flesh shall see the salvation of God" and so that he might thus underscore the coming mission of the church, as portrayed in the book of Acts. This mission will begin in Jerusalem (Acts 1), to be sure, but it will reach Rome itself (Acts 28). The gospel of Messiah Jesus is not limited to the faithful of Israel, but is to be preached to all nations (cf. Luke 4:16-30). Recall Simeon's praise: "my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples" (Luke 2:30-31). Simeon was among the first to see God's salvation; there will be many more.

Example 2

The second passage depicts Jesus' preaching in Nazareth.

Mark 6:1-6

¹He went away from there and came to his own country; and his disciples followed him. ²And on the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue; and many who heard him were astonished, saying, "**Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands! ³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?**" And they took offense at him. ⁴And Jesus said to them, "**A prophet is not without honor**, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house." ⁵And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them. ⁶And he marveled because of their unbelief. And he went about among the villages teaching.

Luke 4:16-30

¹⁶And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day. And he stood up to read; ¹⁷and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written, ¹⁸"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, ¹⁹to proclaim the **acceptable** year of the Lord." ²⁰And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²²And all spoke well of him, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth; and they said, "**Is not this Joseph's son?**" ²³And he said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself; what we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here also in your own country.'" ²⁴And he said, "Truly, I say to you, **no prophet is acceptable** in his own country. ²⁵But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when there came a great famine over all the land; ²⁶and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. ²⁷And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue

Sorting Out the Synoptic Problem

were filled with wrath. ²⁹And they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong. ³⁰But passing through the midst of them he went away.

Mark's version provides no actual content of what Jesus said apart from the pithy saying, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house." Oddly, the Markan Evangelist relates more words of Jesus' critics than of Jesus himself: "Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?"

Luke's version of the visit to Nazareth is essentially in agreement with Mark's version. The major difference is that in Luke we have a remarkably detailed account of the content of Jesus' preaching. Jesus is handed the scroll of Isaiah, he reads from Isaiah 61, and he then expounds on the meaning of the text through appeal to the examples of the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

Jesus reads most of Isa 61:1-2 ("The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor . . ."), notably omitting the final clause, "and the day of vengeance of our God." Luke's quotation is from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew) and is actually a combination of various parts of Isa 61:1-2 and 58:6 (61:1a, b, d; 58:6d; 61:2a, with 61:1c and 61:2b, c omitted). Isaiah 61 and 58 are linked by common words and ideas: *dektos*, "acceptable," in 61:2 and 58:5, *aphesis*, "release"/"forgiveness," in 61:1 and 58:6. Luke may understand *aphesis* in both senses of forgiveness (of sins) and release (from prison). Another noteworthy detail is the replacement of the verb meaning "to call for" in Isa 61:2a with a verb meaning "to proclaim," thus suggesting that the Anointed One, or Messiah, does more than merely "call for" the acceptable day of the Lord; he actually "proclaims" its arrival, which lends itself very well to the idea of the preaching of Jesus.

Jesus declares, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." This assertion is very significant. It is to this passage that he appeals when a doubting, discouraged, and imprisoned John the Baptizer sends

word, asking Jesus, "Are you he who is to come, or do we look for another?" (cf. Matt 11:2-6 = Luke 7:18-23). It is this passage that in all probability has shaped Jesus' understanding of mission more than any other. Jesus believes that the Spirit of God is upon him. This claim is well supported by the healings and exorcisms that Jesus is able to perform "by the finger of God" (cf. Luke 11:20). In the Lukan narrative, of course, the foundation for such a claim has been convincingly laid: Jesus was generated by the Spirit, was baptized by the Spirit in great power, was full of the Spirit when he entered the wilderness to be tested, and then emerged from the wilderness "in the power of the Spirit." The reader has been well prepared for the claim that the words of Isa 61:1-2 are fulfilled in Jesus.

The reaction to Jesus is more nuanced in Luke's version than in Mark. Initially, the synagogue congregation seems pleased: "Is not this Joseph's son?" We should not read Luke through a Markan lens. The people of Nazareth are pleasantly surprised, as if to ask, "Could this be true? Could we be so fortunate that the one anointed of the Lord is one of our own?" The mood of the congregation changes when Jesus recites the proverb, "Physician, heal yourself," warning them, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country." He goes on to appeal to the examples of Elijah and Elisha, implying that the awaited messianic blessings are not the exclusive privilege of Israelites, but will be extended to Gentiles, even to enemies. Enraged, the congregation throws Jesus out of the synagogue. It seems that the prophet who proclaims the "acceptable" year of the Lord is not himself acceptable.

Most interpreters rightly recognize that Luke has taken the opportunity to lay out Jesus' program, emphasizing the central role of election in Jesus' message and theology. The expansive rewriting of the visit to the Nazareth synagogue is consistent with the expansion of the quotation from Isaiah 40. Both revised passages contribute to the Lukan Evangelist's interests in the Gentile mission, a mission that becomes a central theme in the book of Acts.

Interpreting Mark in Light of the Priority of Mark

It has already been acknowledged that we do not possess Mark's sources. Therefore, we cannot easily identify precisely those places where the Evangelist has made changes in order to develop themes of interest to him, the way we can when we study Matthew and Luke. We must infer from the

Sorting Out the Synoptic Problem

whole of Mark the message that the Evangelist hopes to convey. But there are a few key places that we may be sure will reward investigation.¹⁷

When studying a book from late antiquity a good place to begin is with the book's beginning, or what we have called the incipit. Mark's incipit echoes the Roman imperial cult: "The beginning (*archē*) of the good news (*euangelion*) of Jesus Christ, Son of God (*huiou tou theou*)" (Mark 1:1). We immediately think of the birthday inscription in honor of Caesar Augustus: "... since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior (*sōtēr*), both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god (*tou theou*) Augustus was the beginning (*archein*) of the good news (*euangelion*) for the world that came by reason of him . . ." (OGIS 458, primarily based on the Priene Inscription; ca. 9 BCE).

The parallels between Mark's opening verse and the birthday inscription are obvious. The appearance of the god, or Son of God, is the beginning of the good news for the world. We hear this idea expressed in a papyrus in reference to Nero (reigned 54-68 CE): "The good god of the inhabited world, the beginning of all good things" (POxy 1021). Mark's Gospel was written at the very end of Nero's rule or shortly after his death (probably ca. 69 CE). Mark's incipit should be seen as a direct challenge to the cult of the emperor. In essence, the Evangelist is saying that Julius Caesar and his descendants are not divine sons; Jesus Christ is; the good news for the world does not begin with Caesar; it begins with Christ.

Mark's bold challenge to the cult of the emperor is not limited to his opening, thematic verse. It appears from time to time throughout the narrative. The Evangelist tells us that Jesus acted with great authority (*exousia*), an authority that the Son of Man possessed on earth. At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry we are told: "And they were astonished (*ekplēssein*) at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority (*exousian*), and not as the scribes" (Mark 1:22). In many places in the Greek Bible *exousia* is used

17. For the classic treatment of Mark from a redaction-critical perspective, see W. Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956). Few today share Marxsen's optimism in distinguishing source from redaction.

in reference to a king's authority. But consider what happens to Heliodorus, agent of the tyrant Antiochus IV Epiphanes (reigned 175-164 BCE), who hoped to loot the temple at Jerusalem: "But when he arrived at the treasury with his bodyguard, then and there the Sovereign of spirits and of all authority (*pasēs exousias*) caused so great a manifestation that all who had been so bold as to accompany him were astounded (*kataplēssein*) by the power of God, and became faint with terror" (2 Macc 3:24).

The linkage of authority (*exousia*) and astonishment (*kataplēssein/ekplēssein*) in Mark may well call to mind such stories and traditions (see also Mark 11:18 [astonished] + 11:27-33 [authority]). More interesting is the comment of the shaken disciples after Jesus stills the storm: "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?" (4:41). The language of this question very probably alludes to the hated Antiochus, of whom it is said after he is stricken with a fatal illness: "Thus he who had just been thinking that he could command the waves of the sea, in his superhuman arrogance, and imagining that he could weigh the high mountains in a balance, was brought down to earth and carried in a litter, making the power of God manifest to all" (2 Macc 9:8). The idea that the emperor was master of land and sea, indeed, could even command the elements, is echoed in later imperial traditions applied to Caesar Augustus, as we see in a marble inscription from Pergamum: "The Emperor, Caesar, son of a god (*theou huion*), the god Augustus, the overseer of every land and sea," or in the poetry of a sycophantic Virgil: "Yes, and you, O Caesar, whom which company of the gods shall claim before long is not known . . . watch over cities and care for our lands, so that the great world may receive you as the giver of increase and lord of the seasons . . . whether you come as god (*deus*) of the boundless sea and sailors worship your deity alone . . . or whether you add yourself as a new star to the lingering months . . . learn even now to hearken to our prayers!" (*Georgics* 1.24-42).

Jesus heals by touching (Mark 1:41; 8:22) or being touched (3:10; 5:27, 28, 30, 31; 6:56); he even uses his spittle to heal and restore sight (7:33; 8:22-26). These healing acts also parallel expectations of the imperial cult, as we see in stories told of the newly enthroned Vespasian: "A man of the people, who was blind, and another who was lame, together came to him as he sat on the tribunal, begging for the help for their disorders, which Serapis had promised in a dream; for the god declared that Vespasian would restore the eyes, if he would spit upon them, and give strength to the leg, if he would deign to touch with his heel" (Suetonius, *Vespasian* 7.2-3).

Sorting Out the Synoptic Problem

Details in Jesus' mockery and execution are probably modeled after the Roman imperial triumph. Jesus is dressed in purple, given a reed for a scepter and thorns for a laurel wreath, and is saluted by kneeling soldiers, with the words, "Hail, king of the Jews!" (Mark 15:16-20).¹⁸ And of course, at the very moment of Jesus' death, the Roman centurion proclaims, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39), language that specifically alludes to the identity of Augustus and his successors.¹⁹

Thus, from beginning to end the Markan Evangelist narrates the story of Jesus with words and images calculated to evoke thoughts of the imperial cult in the minds of readers and hearers of the Roman Empire. Implicit is an invitation to the reader to consider who really is Lord — Caesar or Christ?

Conclusion

Old-fashioned redaction-critical, comparative analysis of the Synoptic Gospels yields a great deal of exegetical nuance. Only a few themes have been treated in the examples above. The newer forms of literary criticism rightly emphasize wholistic readings and "close" readings of the narrative. But in those cases where we have good reason to believe that we possess the sources that the Evangelists used (such as in the cases of Matthew and Luke, particularly), we do well to engage in the task of redaction criticism. The new methods run the risk of being overly subjective, if the results of comparative analysis are overlooked.

Redaction criticism has been around much longer than we realize, though we tend to think it was invented in Germany half a century ago. Church Fathers and medieval scholars employed the method long ago (albeit in a much more limited way), with some remarkable insights, some of which we think were discovered only recently.²⁰

Redaction criticism serves the busy pastor well. It requires little more

18. For discussion of these details and others, see T. E. Schmidt, "Mark 15:16-32: The Crucifixion Narrative and the Roman Triumphal Procession," *NTS* 41 (1995): 1-18.

19. T. H. Kim, "The Anarthrous $\nu\acute{\iota}\delta\varsigma\ \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$ in Mark 15,39 and the Roman Imperial Cult," *Bib* 79 (1998): 221-41.

20. On this point, see the intriguing study by R. W. Herron Jr., *Mark's Account of Peter's Denial of Jesus: A History of Its Interpretation* (Lanham/New York/London: University Press of America, 1991).

than a Gospel synopsis (a.k.a. a Gospel harmony). Knowing Greek is a plus, of course, but even if limited to the English Bible, the student of Scripture can see many of the tendencies, preferences, and emphases of the respective Evangelists. Careful comparative analysis, always asking how the Evangelist has edited (or "redacted") his source or sources, will result in interesting and insightful exegesis, which will in turn translate into better sermon content and more stimulating Bible lessons.

It will also impress on the student that the Evangelists are theologians in their own right. We tend to think of Jesus, Paul, and John as the theologians of the New Testament. But we thus overlook the vital contributions of the Synoptic Evangelists. Luke, author of nearly twenty-five percent of the New Testament, is a profound theologian, whose themes contribute significantly to pneumatology, soteriology, and community life. The Evangelist Matthew grapples with the place of the Law of Moses, with prophetic fulfillment, with ethics, and with the salvation of Israel. And finally, who is bolder than the Markan Evangelist, who dares to challenge the political correctness of his day, denying the divinity and priority of Caesar in favor of the true Son of God, Jesus?

Each Synoptic Evangelist in his own way makes important contributions to New Testament theology and to the faith and practice of Christianity. It is up to each of us to unpack these contributions, and the comparative approach of redaction criticism, which presupposes the Synoptic problem and its solution, will greatly assist us in this task of unpacking.