

Lecture 5. The Synoptic Problem I: Introduction and Data

1. What is the Synoptic Problem?

- There are four Gospels but three of them are called “Synoptics” because they can be viewed together (*syn-optic*) in a Synopsis, a book that sets out the Synoptic Gospels in parallel columns.
- Mid-term task encourages familiarity with passages in Synopsis. An example:

Matt. 9.9	Mark 2.14	Luke 5.27
And having passed on from there, Jesus saw a man seated in the tax-office, named Matthew, and he says to him, ‘Follow me.’ And having arisen, he followed him.	And having passed on he saw Levi son of Alphaeus seated in the tax-office, and he says to him, ‘Follow me.’ And having arisen, he followed him.	And he saw a tax-collector named Levi seated in the tax-office, and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And having left everything and having arisen, he followed him.

- The Synoptic Gospels often have a parallel order of events and they often have very similar wording. This all contrasts strongly with John. Here is an example of the parallel order:

Matt. 16.13-20	Mark 8.27-30	Luke 9.18-21	Peter’s Confession
Matt. 16.21-23	Mark 8.31-33	Luke 9.22	Prediction of the Passion
Matt. 16.24-28	Mark 8.34-9.1	Luke 9.23-27	On Discipleship
Matt. 17.1-8	Mark 9.2-8	Luke 9.28-36	Transfiguration
Matt. 17.9-13	Mark 9.9-13		Coming of Elijah

Matt. 17.14-20	Mark 9.14-29	Luke 9.37-43a	Healing of an Epileptic
Matt. 17.22-23	Mark 9.30-32	Luke 9.43b-45	Second Passion Prediction
Matt. 17.24-27			Temple Tax
Matt. 18.1-5	Mark 9.33-37	Luke 9.46-48	Dispute about Greatness
	Mark 9.38-41	Luke 9.49-50	Strange Exorcist
Matt. 18.6-9	Mark 9.42-48		On Offences

- It is consensus that there is some kind of **literary relationship** between the Synoptic Gospels, i.e the similarities in wording and order are too great for these documents to be independent of one another.
- In other words, more than one evangelist has been copying. No copyright and no punishments for plagiarism in the first century!
- The Synoptic Problem aims to discover who has been copying from whom, a key historical question, and a fascinating literary puzzle.

The Synoptic Problem is the study of the similarities and differences of the Synoptic Gospels in an attempt to explain their literary relationship

2. Different Kinds of Material

- Most of the material in the Synoptic Gospels falls into one of these four basic categories:
- By coloring your Synopsis, you can see the different kinds of material straightforwardly, especially if you use the primary colors system.

a. Triple Tradition: material common to Matt., Mark and Luke

- Famous examples: Parable of the Sower (Mark 4.1-9//); Feeding of the Five Thousand (Mark 6.30-44//); much of the Passion Narrative (Mark 14-15)
- Much of Mark's Gospel is triple tradition
- Features more narrative than sayings.

Matt. 8.25-6	Mark 4.38-9	Luke 8.24-5
<p>And the disciples, having approached him, awoke him saying, 'Lord, save! We are perishing!' * Then, having got up, he rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm.'</p> <p>*And he says to them, 'Why are you afraid, ye of little faith?'</p>	<p>And they awoke him and say to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'</p> <p>And having awoken, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Be silent! Be muzzled!' And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.</p> <p>And he said to them, 'Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?'</p>	<p>And having approached him they awoke him saying, 'Master Master, we are perishing!'</p> <p>And having awoken, he rebuked the wind and the raging of the water. And they ceased, and there was a calm.</p> <p>And he said to them, 'Where is your faith?'</p>

b. Double Tradition: material common to Matt. and Luke but not in Mark

- Famous examples: Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6.9-13//); Beatitudes (Matt. 5.3-10//)
- Sometimes called "Q material", but this can pre-judge the solution to the problem.
- Features more sayings than narrative.

Matt. 3.7-10	Luke 3.7-9
<p>Offspring of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Bear fruit therefore worthy of repentance and do not presume to say in yourselves, 'We have Abraham as father'; for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Already the axe is laid at the root of the trees; for every tree not producing good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire.</p>	<p>Offspring of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Bear fruit therefore worthy of repentance and do not begin to say in yourselves, 'We have Abraham as father'; for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Already the axe is laid at the root of the trees; for every tree not producing good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire.</p>

c. Special Matthew: Matt. only

- Examples: Ten Virgins; Sheep and Goats (both Matt. 25)
- Largely sayings material. Narrative material sometimes said to be “legendary” in character (e.g. Coin in the fish’s mouth, Matt. 17).

d. Special Luke: Luke only

- Examples: Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25-37); Prodigal Son (Luke 15.11-32)
- Rich in parables and narratives about Jesus, marking out Luke as the great storyteller of the NT.

3. Blurring of the categories

- There are interesting exceptions to all the rules; there is some material that blurs the divisions, e.g. some material is half-double and half-triple tradition, like the Temptations (Matt. 4.1-11 // Mark 1.12-13 // Luke 4.1-13).
- And there are places where Matthew alone shares material with Mark, or Luke alone, but in each case the order remains the same as the Marcan order.

4. Mark as Middle Term

- Mark has very little special material. Nearly everything in his Gospel is also found in Matthew, or Luke, or both.
- Mark is usually *the middle term* among the Synoptics. This means that in the triple tradition material, there are substantial agreements in wording and order between Matthew, Mark and Luke, between Mark and Luke and between Mark and Matthew. There are only minor agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark.
- In other words, *where all three Synoptics are present in a given periscope, Mark is usually the common denominator.*
- How do we explain this? There are two major explanations in current NT scholarship:

(1) **Priority of Mark:** Matthew and Luke both used Mark.

(2) **Posteriority of Mark:** Mark used Matthew and Luke.

- Option (1) is by far the majority view, and is at the basis of the **Two-Source Theory** and the **Farrer Theory** (on which, more next time).
- Option (2) is a minority view, and is the basis of the **Griesbach Theory**, also known as the **Two-Gospel Theory**.
- Griesbach Theory goes back to J. J. Griesbach who produced the first Gospel Synopsis in 1776. For a long time the dominant theory of Gospel origins, but replaced in the later 19th Century by the Two-Source Theory.
- Griesbach Theory revived in 1964 by **William Farmer**; still held by a minority of NT scholars in the USA who are still defending the theory, usually now under the name **Two Gospel Theory** (two Gospels are Matthew and Luke, used as sources for Mark).
- Which is more plausible, Marcan Priority or Marcan Posteriority? Most still find Marcan Priority the preferable view for reasons we will explore next time.

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