THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM

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Even to the casual Bible reader, it is obvious that the books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are alike. They follow the same general order of events and contain much of the same material. The Gospel of John is distinctively different from the other three Gospels.

Scholars call the similarity of the first three Gospels the "Synoptic Problem." The English word "synoptic" comes from a Greek word that means "seeing together." As applied to the Gospels, it means "taking the same view." Scholars point out that the "synoptic Gospels" have a great deal in common. They contain many of the same narratives. However, they do not use the same words to describe these events; each Gospel contains material unique to it. One professor said the synoptic Gospels "contain marked resemblances along with equally marked differences" (Thiessen, p. 101).

Matthew To be more specific, of the 1,068 verses in Matthew, about 500 are either the same or similar to Mark (Scroggie, p. 86). About 200 verses in Matthew are shared with Luke but are not in Mark. Nearly one-third of Matthew is particular to him (Harrison, p. 137).

Mark Virtually all of Mark appears in Matthew and Luke. Colwell estimates that 92% of Mark appears in Matthew (Toussaint, p. 328). Mark also contains material not found in Matthew or Luke, such as the story of the epileptic boy in chapter 9 and the discussion concerning the Great Commandment in chapter 12. Mark's narratives tend to be longer than the parallels in the other Gospels (Harrison, p. 137).

Luke Of the 1,149 verses in the Gospel of Luke, about 330 are either the same or similar to Mark (Scroggie, p. 86). Luke includes 16 parables not found elsewhere. Also, the passion narratives in Luke demonstrate considerable independence from the other two Gospels (Harrison, p. 138).

To say the same thing another way, Mark's Gospel contains 661 verses. Matthew has a substantial parallel to more than 600 of the verses in Mark and Luke has over 350 (Filson, *ISBE*, vol. II, p. 532).

The similarities and differences of the synoptic Gospels raise questions. One author puts it like this, "How did it happen that these three Gospels were written with so much agreement in material, order, and wording, and yet with such differences that each writer remains an author and not a mere copyist of the Gospel tradition as recorded not others?" (Filson, *ISBE*, vol. II, p. 532).

The issue is the relationship between the synoptic Gospels. Which one was written first? Since they cover the same ground in much the same way, did they rely on each other for material? If so, who relied on whom? Also, did the authors of the synoptic Gospels use sources?

Early History

To think through the various issues posed by this question, the place to begin is with what is known about Matthew, Mark, and Luke from the books themselves and the writings of authors who wrote in the second century.

Matthew The author of the first Gospel never identifies himself, but ancient authors who wrote after the close of the New Testament agree that Matthew was the author and it was the first Gospel that was written.

Matthew wrote the Gospel of Matthew. All early copies of Matthew's Greek manuscripts are headed by the phrase "according to Matthew" (Walvoord, p. 9). Scroggie says, "Antiquity is unanimous in the belief that the Apostle" (Matthew) was the author (Scroggie, p. 131). Farnell says that "without exception," the church fathers held that Matthew was the author (Farnell, p. 64). In a footnote, Farnell gives the references: "Irenaeus, *Against Heresies,* 3.1.1 (quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.8.2); Tertullian *(Against Marcion,* 4.2); Pantaenus, cited by Eusebius *(Ecclesiastical History*, 5.10.3); Origen (quoted by Eusebius in *Ecclesiastical History,* 6.25.3-6); Eusebius himself *(Ecclesiastical History,* 3.24.5-6); and Jerome, *Preface to the Commentary on Saint Matthew; Lives of Illustrious Men,* 2.3" (Farnell, p. 64).

Papias (ca. AD 110) could add to that list. Eusebius quotes him as saying Matthew composed the logia in Hebrew (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.16). (Papias is usually dated ca. AD 125; for a defense of the earlier date for Papias, see Yarbrough). Evidently, Matthew first wrote in Hebrew and, later, when he departed to work with the Gentiles, he produced a Greek Gospel because Greek was the universal language, especially outside Palestine (Farnell, pp. 67-68). Only the Greek edition of Matthew has survived (Thiessen, p. 134). For Matthew to write in Hebrew and later produce the same work in Greek would not have been unusual. Josephus wrote *Wars of the Jews* in Hebrew and later in Greek.

Schodde maintains the testimony of Papias, Irenaeus, and Origen that Matthew wrote a Gospel "may be accepted as representing a uniform second-century tradition" (Schodde cited by Thiessen, p. 132). When scholars today comment on the early tradition that Matthew wrote the Gospel of Matthew, they use words such as "undisputed" (Tenney), "uniform" (Boa), "universal" (Luck), and "unanimously" (Thiessen). Since Matthew was not conspicuous among the apostles, it would be strange for tradition to assign the Gospel to him if he did not write it (Thiessen, p. 132). Morison wrote, "There is, indeed, no evidence that, within the circle of the early Christian church, it was ever doubted that *Matthew's Gospel* was really Matthew's. There is still no more reason to doubt it than there is to doubt that Virgil's *Aeneid* was written by Virgil or Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* was composed by the tinker of Elstow" (Morison cited by Scroggie, p. 133).

When was the Gospel of Matthew written? It had to have been written before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. It refers to Jerusalem as the "holy city" as though it was still standing (Mt. 4:5, 22:53), and it refers to Jewish customs continuing "to this day" as though they were "uninterrupted and unchanged" (Toussaint, p. 333). How much before AD 70 was it written? Matthew preached in Palestine for fifteen years, after which he departed to foreign lands (Thiessen, p. 132). It is logical to assume that he wrote his Gospel before he left. Thus, it is probable that the Gospel of Matthew was written about

AD 45. Walvoord says that Matthew may have written as early as 44 AD, during the persecution of Agrippa I (Walvoord, p. 12).

The Gospel of Matthew was the *first* Gospel to be written. Walvoord states, "The early fathers are quite clear in their testimony that Matthew was the first gospel to be written" (Walvoord, p. 11). "The unanimous and unquestioned consensus of the church fathers was that Matthew was the first gospel written and, almost without exception, the early Church placed the Gospel of Matthew first in the canon of the New Testament" (Farnell, p. 54).

Irenaeus (ca. AD 115?-202) wrote, "Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the church. After their departure, Mark, .d down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter" (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1). Note carefully: Irenaeus says that Matthew wrote a Hebrew Gospel while Peter and Paul were in Rome and after the departure (that is, their death) of Peter and Paul, Mark wrote what Peter preached. This statement definitely indicates that Matthew wrote before Mark.

Critics dismiss this assertion by Irenaeus because they say he was repeating Papias. Filson says Irenaeus "obviously knows and uses Papias as an authority. No tradition demonstrably independent of Papias exists" (Floyd Filson, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew*, p. 16, cited by Farnell, p. 71). There is, however, no hint of dependence on Papias in the writings of Irenaeus (C. Steward Petrie, "The Authorship of 'The Gospel of Matthew': A Reconsideration of the External Evidence," *New Testament Studies*, vol. 14, p. 29, cited by Farnell, p. 71). Lightfoot reasoned that as a pupil of Polycarp, Irenaeus "was not likely to be misinformed" (J. B. Lightfoot, *Supernatural Religion*, p. 142, cited by Farnell, p. 71).

Clement of Alexandria (ca. AD 150-215) says Matthew and Luke wrote before Mark. Eusebius records, "Again, in the same books, Clement gives the tradition of the earliest presbyters, as to the order of the Gospels, in the following manner: The Gospels containing the genealogies, he says, were written first. The Gospel According to Mark had this occasion. As Peter had preached the Word publicly at Rome and declared the Gospel by the Spirit, many who were present requested that Mark, who had followed him for a long time and remembered his sayings, should write them out. And having composed the Gospel, he gave it to those who had requested it. When Peter learned of this, he neither directly forbade nor encouraged it. But, last of all, John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospel, being urged by his friends, and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel. This is the account of Clement" (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.14.5-7). Clement of Alexandria plainly says that Matthew and Luke wrote before Mark. Farnell remarks, "A scholar of his stature was not prone merely to repeat information without careful investigation." He adds, "The tradition he passed on did not come just from a single elder in a single locality but from 'a tradition of the primitive elders scattered widely throughout the Christian community. That indicates that it was a tradition known and received in different places sometime in the early to mid-second century" (Farnell, p. 75).

Origen (ca. AD 185-254) believed Matthew wrote first. Eusebius quotes Origen as saying, "Among the four Gospels, which are the only indisputable ones in the Church of God under heaven, I have learned by tradition that the first was written by Matthew, who was once a publican, but afterward an apostle of Jesus Christ, and it was prepared for the

converts from Judaism, and published in the Hebrew language" (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.25.3).

Augustine (ca. AD 354-430) definitely states that Matthew wrote first (Augustine, *Harmony of the Gospels*, 1.2.3).

In the development of the church, there was a need for a *Jewish* Gospel, such as Matthew, and before that, there was a need for a *Gentile* Gospel, such as Mark or Luke. The Gospel was preached to the Jews first. The church was born in Jerusalem and grew in the first years only in Jerusalem and Judea. Beginning with 3,000, it shortly increased to 5,000 (Acts 4:4); a little later, we read that multitudes, both men and women were added to the Lord (Acts 5:14) and that the number of the disciples was multiplying (Acts 6:1). Lawson asks, "Would it be too much to say that there were twenty thousand Jews in Jerusalem who believed that Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah, King, Priest, and Prophet?" (Thiessen, p. 136).

Acts continues the story. Opposition soon developed. John was arrested. Stephen was killed. The persecution was such that "all were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, except apostles" (Acts 8:1-2). Lawson says, "Do not these circumstances suggest the need of a life of Christ which would encourage and confirm these persecuted believers in their faith, and at the same time confute their opponents and prove to both that the Gospel was not a break with or contradiction to the teachings of the Old Testament, but a fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and his seed?" (Thiessen p. 136).

Thiessen makes the interesting observation that Acts indicates that the church was at first Jewish. The Gospel was then carried to the Greeks at Antioch and Greece and finally to Rome and the uttermost parts of the earth. At each new step in the progression of Christianity, a different written Gospel was necessary (Thiessen, p. 129). That fits perfectly with the data gathered from the second-century authors, who said Matthew wrote first, then Luke, and then Mark.

Mark Like Matthew, the author of the second Gospel, does not identify himself. There is, however, early and unanimous evidence that John Mark wrote the Gospel of Mark and that he wrote what Peter preached.

Mark wrote what Peter preached. Papias (ca. AD 110) speaks of the "Elder" (apparently the Apostle John) who said: "Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord's discourses so that Mark committed no error while he thus wrote some things as he remembered them. For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard, and not to state any of them falsely" (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.15).

Thiessen explains, "Papias does not mean that Mark interpreted Peter's sermons on his preaching tours; for Peter needed only the Aramaic and the Greek languages, both of which he knew, in order to preach in all the places to which ancient tradition represents him as having gone. He means instead that Mark reproduced Peter's preaching in his book, and that he was the Apostle's interpreter preaching in his book, and that he was the Apostle's interpreter in that sense" (Thiessen, p. 140).

Justin Martyr (d. 165 AD) refers to the Gospel of Mark as the "memoirs of him," that is, Peter (Thiessen, p. 140). Irenaeus (115?-202) says that after the departure of Peter and

Paul, "Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter" (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1; see Thiessen, p. 141). There would be no reason for tradition to assign the Gospel of Mark to a minor character like Mark rather than Peter if he did not write it (Thiessen, p. 141).

Many have suggested a similarity between Peter's sermon in Acts 10 and the Gospel of Mark. For example, Scroggie says, "Mark's Gospel is the extended statement of Peter's outline" (Scroggie, p. 88).

When was the Gospel of Mark written? Based on what Irenaeus said (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1), some have concluded Mark wrote what Peter preached after Peter died (Thiessen, p. 141). Peter was martyred in AD 64.

Luke Like Matthew and Mark, the author of the third Gospel does not identify himself by name. Nevertheless, Luke has been universally recognized as the author since the earliest times. Plummer says, "It is manifest that in all parts of the Christian world, the Third Gospel had been recognized as authoritative before the middle of the second century, and that it was universally believed to be the work of St. Luke. No one speaks doubtfully on this point. The possibility of questioning its value is mentioned, but not of questioning its authorship. In the literature of that period, it would not be easy to find a stronger case" (Plummer, p. xvi).

When was the Gospel of Luke written? Luke wrote his Gospel before he wrote Acts. He wrote his Gospel to Theophilus (Lk. 1:3) and at the beginning of Acts, which was also written to Theophilus, he speaks of the "former account I made of all that Jesus began both to do and teach" (Acts 1:1). Because Acts ends abruptly with Paul in Rome, many have concluded that Acts was written in AD 61. If Luke wrote Acts in AD 61 and he wrote his Gospel before that, he wrote his Gospel before AD 61. Many have concluded that Luke wrote his Gospel about AD 59, toward the end of Paul's Cesarean imprisonment (Boa; Tidwell; Tenney; et al.; Thiessen says Luke wrote his Gospel in AD 58). For the two years while Paul was in prison, Luke had the opportunity to interview eyewitnesses throughout Palestine.

Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke says he did research before writing his Gospel. He says, "Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed" (Lk. 1:1-4).

Luke is saying: 1) Many have written a narrative of the life and ministry of Christ (Lk. 1:1; notice, these were *written* sources). 2) His information came from reliable sources (Lk. 1:2). He calls his sources "eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word." In the Greek text, only one article indicates that these are not two different groups but one group. The most natural explanation of eyewitnesses who were ministers of the Word is that this refers to the apostles (Thiessen, p. 126). Notice these sources were *eyewitnesses*. 3) He had a perfect understanding of all things from the very first. Based on this, it is safe to assume that Luke had associated with apostles and eyewitnesses and possibly with other friends of the Lord.

Eusebius says, "But as for Luke, in the beginning of his Gospel, he states that since many others had more rashly undertaken to compose a narrative of the events of which he

had acquired perfect knowledge, he himself, feeling the necessity of freeing us from their uncertain opinions, delivered in his own Gospel an accurate account of those events in regard to which he had learned the full truth, being aided by his intimacy and his stay with Paul and by his acquaintance with the rest of the apostles" (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.24.15).

Using sources does not invalidate inspiration. Some Old Testament authors used sources (Scroggie, p. 84). Revelation is the revealing of truth. Inspiration is the recording of truth and illumination is the understanding of truth. In other words, the doctrine of inspiration is that the Holy Spirit superintended the authors of Scripture as they wrote (2 Pet. 1:21). What they wrote may have come from their personal experience, from what someone told them, or even from something written elsewhere. The Holy Spirit even directed an author to record a lie (see Satan in the Garden of Eden). The point of inspiration is that the Holy Spirit moved the authors of Scripture to write so that what was recorded was what God wanted said. The Scripture is the Word of God, but the simple reality is that the Word of God contains the words of Satan, demons, and unbelievers (the Pharisees).

Based on the likely dates suggested above, the order in which the synoptic Gospels were written is Matthew, Luke, and Mark. Ancient authors agree that Matthew wrote first. Also, the writings of the second century indicate that Mark recorded Peter's preaching and Luke investigated eyewitness accounts, which undoubtedly included the apostles.

Critical Theories

What has been said so far does not directly address the "synoptic problem," the similarity of the first three Gospels. The available records show no evidence that anyone in the first several centuries of church history attempted to address the issue.

Early Comments Augustine was probably the first to express an opinion (Thiessen, p. 102). Augustine (AD 354-430) thought that Mark abbreviated Matthew, and Chrysostom (AD 345-407) explained the brevity of Mark by saying that he wrote in connection with Peter, who was a man of few words (Harrison, p. 136). There was no discussion of the problem in the Middle Ages or during the Reformation (Thiessen, p. 102). Until the 18th century, the discussion about the synoptic Gospels concerned the *differences* among them (Mark is shorter than Matthew), but in the 18th century, theories began to be created to explain the *agreements* in the three accounts (Harrison, p. 136). Numerous notions have been proposed (see Thiessen, pp. 102-109).

The Interdependence Theory Grotius (1583-1645), a Dutch jurist, suggested that one of the Gospels was first written based on oral tradition. Using that Gospel and some added material, a second Gospel was composed. Then, a third Gospel was written using the first and second Gospels. Even those adopting this scenario could not agree among themselves which of the three was the first to be written, which was the second, and which was the third. This approach has been abandoned since it proved impossible to work out a demonstrable order (Thiessen, p. 104).

One Original Gospel Theory Another theory suggests that one original Gospel and the three synoptic Gospels all borrowed from it. Based on the statement by Papias that Matthew wrote an Aramaic Gospel before he left Palestine, a German critic named G. E.

Lessing (1729-1781) theorized that Matthew himself made an abstract of that Gospel in Greek and that this Greek Gospel is our canonical Matthew. He further speculated that Mark and Luke were nothing more than excerpts from the Aramaic Gospel made from their point of view. There is no *historical* support for this improbable theory. If the synoptic Gospels are excerpts from another source, why was that source not preserved? (Thiessen, p. 103).

The Fragmentary Theory Schleiermacher (1768-1834) held that the basis of all the Gospels was a large number of short, written accounts. There is not a fragment of historical evidence to support such a notion. This hypothesis has never been generally accepted (Thiessen, p. 105).

The Oral Tradition Theory First proposed by Giesler (1818) and later developed by Godet, Westcott, Alford, and others, the oral tradition theory says the common basis of the synoptic Gospels was *entirely* oral. The theory is that the instruction of the Apostles during the beginning period at Jerusalem (Acts 1:1-8:4) was repeated in much the same way by all. That oral tradition was the basis for the written Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Thiessen, p. 105-07). Luke 1:2 is used to support this assumption, but Luke 1:2 is talking about eyewitnesses, not a fixed oral tradition. There are no references to such a body of material in the second century.

The Two-Document Theory Eichhorn (1794), followed by Weiss and Holtzmann, developed the two-document hypothesis. The first document was Gospel-like (now said to be Mark) and the second source (called Q, the first letter of the German word *Quelle*, which means "source") is the material not in Mark but in Matthew and Luke (Thiessen, p. 107).

In 1835, Lachmann supposedly "discovered" Mark's priority, that is, the theory that Mark wrote the first Gospel and the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are nothing more than Mark plus additional material (Harrison, p. 180). As the theory goes, Matthew and Luke copied and supplemented Mark with other material called "Q." This is now the generally accepted view (Filson, vol. II, p. 534).

Theological liberals and even some Evangelicals accept this theory as if it were fact. For example, A. T. Robertson says, "It is plain as a pikestaff that both our Matthew and Luke used practically all of Mark and followed his general order of events." He adds, "But another thing is equally clear and that is that both Matthew and Luke had another source in common because they each give practically identical matters for much that is not in Mark at all" (Robertson, p. 255).

As has been pointed out, the problem is that all the historical evidence indicates that Matthew wrote first, not Mark. Additionally, there is no historical evidence whatsoever for "Q." It is the "missing link" of the synoptic problem. Not even a trace of it has *ever* been found. It is the figment of "scholarly" imagination. Furthermore, critics cannot agree on the content of "Q" or how much of this hypothetical document Matthew and Luke used. Moffat details no fewer than 16 varieties of opinion (Moffat, cited by Scroggie, p. 86). Eta Linnemann, who at one time was a staunch advocate of the two-source hypothesis, concluded that the idea of "Q" is "fantasy," is "based in error," and "proves untenable" (Linnemann, cited by Farnell, p. 60).

The Four-Document Theory One of the difficulties of the two-document hypothesis is that Matthew and Luke contain material not found in Mark or evidently in "Q" because they each contain material particular to them. It pushes the two-document theory too far

to say that "Q" was the source of all the unique material in Matthew and Luke (Filson, vol. II, p. 534). Thus, B. H. Streeter (1924) developed a four-document theory. According to this concoction, Matthew used Mark, "Q," and a written collection of gospel material, which he called "M." Luke used Mark, "Q," and a document called "L" (Filson, vol. II, p. 534-35). Filson correctly observes, "Streeter's view represents intelligent theories rather than established facts" (Filson, vol. II, p. 535).

The prevailing critical theory is that Mark wrote first and Matthew and Luke used Mark and some additional material to compose their Gospels.

The Conclusion

Matthew According to what is known from church history, the Gospel of Matthew was the first of the four Gospels to be written and Matthew probably wrote it about AD 45. The critical theory that Matthew is nothing more than Mark plus "Q" is not accurate.

In the first place, the authors in the first four centuries are all unanimous that Matthew wrote first. If the early authors are right, the authors of the critical theories are wrong. Matthew did not depend on Mark and an imagined "Q."

It simply does not make sense to say that Matthew depended on Mark. Matthew was an apostle; Mark was not. Why would an eyewitness depend on second-hand information? As Thiessen points out, "It certainly seems strange that he (Matthew) should be supposed to derive even the account of his own conversion from Mark!" (Thiessen, p. 116).

Moreover, in the historical development of the church, there was a need for a Gospel for the Jews before there was a need for a Gospel for the Gentiles. The idea that Mark wrote first is backward from what was needed. Chapman says, "This topsy-turvey theory seems to suggest that the Gospel was first preached to the Gentiles and later carried to the Jews, first propagated at Rome and then in Palestine" (Thiessen, p. 135).

Matthew did not depend on Mark or an imagined "Q:" he depended on the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16). Before He left, Jesus told the apostles, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come" (Jn. 16:12-13). Among other things, this promise includes the inspiration of the New Testament.

Mark: Based on what is stated in early church history, Mark wrote what Peter preached *after* Peter died in AD 64. Mark had a source—Peter, not a written source or even a fixed oral source. Besides, Mark wrote as He was moved by the Holy Spirit, which is what Peter taught happens when Scripture is written (2 Pet. 1:21).

Luke Given what Luke says, after he investigated *eyewitness* accounts, which no doubt included the apostles, he wrote his Gospel under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel of Luke is called Scripture in the New Testament. In 1 Timothy, Paul says, "For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,' and, 'The laborer is worthy of his wages' (1 Tim. 5:18). The first quotation is from Deuteronomy 25:4 and the only place the second quotation is found is in Luke 10:7. All Scripture is given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16).

What Luke is saying in his prologue and what modern critics say about Luke are two vastly different things. Luke is saying that he investigated, including interviewing

eyewitnesses. Then, he wrote. That is radically different than saying that his Gospel is nothing more than Mark and an imagined "Q." Luke's explanation of his "sources" refutes the theory that he relied on written sources, including Mark and "Q" or even some supposed fixed oral tradition, unless, of course, he lied to us.

Summary: The authors of the synoptic Gospels were either eyewitnesses or spoke to eyewitnesses and wrote as the Holy Spirit moved them. There is no historical evidence for the critical theories that the source for the Synoptic Gospels was written or oral material or that Mark wrote first and Matthew and Luke relied on his Gospel. In fact, information gleaned from ancient authors indicates that Matthew wrote first.

The notion of the priority of Mark has been weighed and found wanting. It fails to take seriously what the early authors wrote or to consider the historical development of the church. Breckenridge complains that the testimony of the writings of the early church is "all too frequently neglected in NT studies" (Breckenridge, p. 118). On the other hand, Matthew's priority is supported by the second-century authors and harmonizes with the demands of the developing church.

As for sources, the critical theories leave out the author's experience, eyewitness accounts, and the Holy Spirit. Matthew did not need a source; he was an apostle! Mark had a source; it was Peter, who was an apostle. Luke's sources were eyewitnesses, which undoubtedly included the apostles. All the authors of the Gospels were guided by the Holy Spirit as they wrote.

After a detailed examination of the writings of the church fathers bearing on this subject, Farnell says, "An analysis of the data from the church fathers results in one conspicuous conclusion: they do not support either the Two-document hypothesis or the Two-Gospel hypothesis. The assumed dependence of Matthew and Luke on Mark is totally without historical foundation, as is the assumed dependence of Mark on Matthew and Luke instead of on Peter's preaching" (Farnell, p. 84).

In 1962, William R. Farmer wrote *The Synoptic Problem*, arguing that the two-source theory is based more on theological bias than objective facts. In 1980, H. H. Stoldt wrote *History and Criticism of the Marcan Hypothesis*, claiming, "The Marcan hypothesis is false—false in its conception, execution, and conclusion" (Stoldt, p. 221). Grant R. Osborne says, "The priority of Mark … can no longer be considered a given. Recent challenges to the 'sacred' two-document hypothesis have established problems that cannot be answered by so simplistic a theory" (G. R. Osborne, "The Evangelical and Redaction Criticism," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, vol. 22, p. 318).

For a scholarly defense of the priority of Matthew, see *Jesus and the Gospel* by William R. Farmer (Fortress, 1982) and "The Synoptic Gospels in the Ancient Church: A Testimony to the Priority of Matthew's Gospel" by Farnell, F. David in *Master's Seminary Journal*, vol. 10, pp. 53-86.

Why do the critical theorists ignore or try to explain away the evidence from church history? Petrie describes the casual dismissal of the evidence from church history: "This is the kind of unintentional belittling guess that easily hardens from 'maybe' to a firm statement and then becomes a dogmatic basis for further adventures in criticism" (Petrie, cited by Farnell, p. 62). Farnell says, "Sadly, the overarching reason why modern scholarship rejects or explains away their testimonies is adherence to an assumed hypothesis of literary dependence" (Farnell, p. 85). Speaking about the "Q" hypothesis,

Stanton explains, "When once we have thought ourselves into a particular theory, a conviction of its truth is apt to be bred in mind, which is altogether beyond the evidence, while inconvenient facts are ignored" (Stanton, cited by Scroggie, p. 87). People get hypnotized by their theories.

The critical theories degrade Matthew and Luke to slavish compilers and perhaps plagiarists (Thiessen, p. 127). Such theories are subjective speculations, not objective conclusions based on the evidence of history. They are too naturalistic because they omit any reference to the Holy Spirit.

Well, why are there so many similarities? There are similarities in the synoptic Gospels because they tell the same story! There are differences because they are telling the same story from different points of view. It is regrettable that the word "synoptic" was ever attached to the first three Gospels. It emphasizes their agreements and, unfortunately, tends to obscure their differences. The simple and obvious reality is that each of the four gospels has "its own special content, outline, and style" (Filson, vol. II, p. 532).

Let me explain. The Gospels are not the life of Christ. They record nothing of His life from age twelve to about thirty. The Gospels are about the ministry of Jesus, but they do not tell the whole story of His ministry. At the end of his Gospel, John says, "And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen" (Jn. 21:25). What the Gospels do is outline His three-year ministry and focus mostly on His death, resurrection and, appearance before His ascension. As much as twenty-five percent of each of the synoptic Gospels record the last week in the life and ministry of Jesus.

When all the information given in all four gospels is correlated, it becomes immediately apparent that the ministry of Jesus was mainly in Galilee, followed by His ministry in Judea and Perea, ending, of course, in Jerusalem (A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels for Students of the Life of Christ*). The synoptic Gospels simply trace the ministry of Jesus as it happened. Naturally, they have the same basic order. Each begins with Christ's temptation and baptism and they all record Christ's great Galilean ministry. Of course, they all end in Jerusalem with the crucifixion and resurrection. They contain many of the same stories *because they relate what happened in a particular place.* The Gospel of John is distinctly different. It focuses on Jesus' visits to Jerusalem and was written to evangelize (Jn. 20:31).

At the same time, there are major differences between Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Five discourses dominate the book of Matthew. Sixty percent of Matthew contains the spoken words of Jesus. Mark is a book of deeds. The emphasis in Mark is on works, not words. In Mark, only a few discourses and only four of the fifteen parables in Matthew are given. Jesus is pictured as a worker hastening from one task to another. The word "immediately" is used fourteen times in Mark of the personal activity of Jesus, compared to two in Matthew and none in Luke. Matthew and Mark devote only a short space (two chapters in Matthew and one in Mark) to the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. In contrast, Luke spends ten chapters chronicling that trip, the longest part of his book (Lk. 9:51-19:44).

To illustrate, suppose three authors wrote a book about a man who became President of the United States. On the way to the Oval Office, he served in the House of

Representatives and in the Senate. In telling his story, each author would no doubt trace the basic outline of his career through the House and Senate, describing some of the same stories along the way. In addition, while there would be overlap because each tells the story from a different point of view, there would also be great differences. The synoptic Gospels trace the ministry of Jesus mainly through Galilee (House and Senate). John concentrates on Jesus' visits to Jerusalem (Oval Office).

The synoptic Gospels are original accounts written by men under the direction of the Holy Spirit. The authors did not rely on written records that might not have been trustworthy. They wrote what they saw and/or heard from eyewitnesses, as the Holy Spirit directed them.

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