

Source Criticism. The attempt to explain the extensive duplications and disagreements among the Gospels through an examination of their literary histories and sources.

Problem. The puzzle that is especially acute for Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They are termed “synoptic” (Gk. *syn-optikos*, “viewed together”) Gospels because they have so much in common. For example, 93 percent of Mark is found paralleled in Matthew and Luke; on the other hand, merely 8 percent or 9 percent of John is found in the other three Gospels. Therefore, the problem rests with the Synoptics and its study is often termed the synoptic problem. Its chief task is unraveling the mystery of why the synoptic Gospels have so much overlapping material. Were they each dependent on the same source or were they interdependent? Are they independent of each other or was there borrowing? A close look at any synopsis (an arrangement of the Gospels showing parallel accounts) illustrates the problem well.

The early church was not unaware of the problem. Gospel harmonies such as Tatian’s *Diatessaron* (AD 170) provided syntheses. The popular view defended by Augustine, however, was that the NT sequence reflected a literary history: Matthew was the earliest Gospel, Mark was his abbreviator, and Luke was dependent on both. This might be illustrated thus:

It was not until the 18th and 19th centuries that critical scholarship challenged this solution. It was generally agreed that all three Synoptics were mutually dependent on something earlier. Hence:

For some (e.g., Herder, Westcott) an oral Gospel was being tapped. Others thought of written tracts or fragments. Still others such as Lessing suggested an old Aramaic Gospel (“The Gospel of the Nazarenes”)—a short “pregospel” (or *Urevangelium*). This shows that a documentary solution involving literary borrowing was forming and would soon find a consensus. Unfortunately all evidence for these pre-Gospel sources has been lost.

Methods of Interpretation. The numerous synoptic coincidences—seen especially in the Greek text—soon compelled scholars to look within the Gospels themselves for a solution. Perhaps the Synoptics were not independent witnesses to something original, but dependent on one another.

The Priority of Matthew. The first scholar to attempt this solution was J.J. Griesbach (1745–1812). Rather than harmonize the Gospels, Griesbach printed the Gospels in parallel columns in order to make scientific comparisons possible. For him the antiquity of Matthew could be defended, but Mark had to be seen as the abbreviator of both Matthew and Luke. Hence:

Today this is a minority viewpoint but it still has its passionate defenders (e.g., W.R. Farmer).

The Priority of Mark. Karl Lachmann (1793–1851) not only edited the first critical edition of the Greek NT in 1831, but four years later made a breakthrough in the synoptic problem by analyzing the *order of events* in each Gospel. Lachmann found the following: when Matthew and Luke use Mark, the sequence of these events in their Gospels is the same. When they interrupt Mark's outline with new materials, their method of arrangement completely diverges. This suggested that Matthew and Luke were indeed using Mark (or an early form of Mark) and other sources, but not each other.

This new emphasis on Mark was developed by many (H. Weisse, 1801–66; H. Holtzmann, 1832–1910; B. Weiss, 1827–1918) and given its classic form by B.H. Streeter (1874–1937) in his book, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (1924). The arguments for Mark's priority are numerous: (1) *Subject matter.* Much of Mark is found in Matthew and Luke. Of Mark's 661 verses, 601 are found in the other two Synoptics (or, of Mark's 11,078 words, Matthew has 8555 of them and Luke has 6737). Good explanations are available showing why Matthew and Luke omitted these few Markan units (see Kümmel, 1975, 56f). (2) *Sequence.* Lachmann observes that there is no case in which Matthew and Luke fully agree in the way in which they diverge from Mark (see Kümmel's tables, 58f). (3) *Literary characteristics.* There are elements of Mark's style which suggest that Mark is the more primitive account. First, Mark's narratives are abbreviated in Matthew and Luke to make the pericope more concise (see Mk 1:32/Mt 8:16; Mk 6:39/Mt 14:19); for example, Matthew 9:2 ("Jesus saw their faith") makes little sense unless we read Mark 2:4 which Matthew omitted. Second, Mark's rugged style is modified and/or improved by Matthew and Luke. Thus the correct title for Herod is given in Matthew 14:1 (cf. Mk 6:14) and the improper Greek term for pallet used by Mark (*krabbaton*, 2:4) is changed by both Matthew and Luke. Further, historic presents in Mark (151) are reduced to 21 in Matthew and one in Luke, and many of Mark's redundant negatives and awkward constructions are removed. Of Mark's eight Aramaic words, Matthew contains only one and Luke none. Third, substantive changes improve the content of Mark. Embarrassing statements (Mk 6:5) and even the failure of the disciples (Mk 4:13; cf. Mt 13:18; Lk 8:11; also Mk 4:40/Mt 8:26/Lk 8:25) are modified. The confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi ("You are the Christ," Mk 8:29) is expanded in Matthew 16:16 and Luke 9:20. Together these data have a cumulative force and have led most scholars to accept the antiquity of Mark.

The Case for Q. What do we make of the material common to Matthew and Luke which is not found in Mark? Griesbach could explain this by Matthew and Luke's use of each other. Now it is argued that another written source was used by Matthew and Luke alongside of Mark. This source is called "Q" from the German word *Quelle* (source). The following categories suggest Q's existence: (1) *Agreements.* Numerous corresponding verses (about 250) show such precise parallels (see Mt 3:7–10/Lk 3:7–9; Mt 7:7–11/Lk 11:9–13) and close similarities (Mt 10:26–33/Lk 12:2–9) as to urge a common document. (2) *Sequence.* If the sequence of Q sayings in Matthew and Luke are compared, the order in which they are used has a surprising number of parallels (although there are variations). This does not refer to the point where each has interrupted Mark's outline (cf. Lachmann), but instead to the mere sequence of Q sayings. (3) *Doublets.* This is decisive for many. A doublet is when a saying of Jesus occurs twice in Matthew or Luke—one source being clearly from Mark while the other is not. These include narratives (the sending of the disciples, Lk 9:1–6; 10:1, 2 with Mk 6:7–13/Mt 9:35–37) and sayings (Mt 13:12/Mk 4:25/Lk

8:18 with Mt 25:29/Lk 19:26). Q is thus a written source consisting chiefly of sayings with little narrative. (On the other hand, if Luke knew Matthew as A.M. Farrer has argued, then the hypothetical source “Q” disappears.)

The Four-Source Hypothesis. The sources of the Synoptics are now postulated with some certainty. Matthew and Luke were dependent on Mark and Q. But B.H. Streeter also points to the independent materials contained in Matthew and Luke which might represent other primitive sources. This might be illustrated thus:

Thus Matthew employed Mark, Q, and his own sources (M= about 300 verses or 42% of Mt), and Luke used Mark, Q, and his own sources (L= about 520 verses or 59% of Lk). The size of “L” has led some to argue for yet another homogenous source for Luke, namely proto-Luke, which might be another ancient text (see Martin, 1975, 1:151–156).

Assessment. While there seems to be a general consensus in favor of the four- (or two-) source hypothesis, extensive debate surrounds its particulars. Many even challenge its basic assumptions. For instance, why does Luke omit Mark 6:45–8:26 (Luke’s so-called “great omission”)? Streeter explained that Luke possessed a damaged copy of Mark. Others have said that Luke used an early, shorter form of Mark (*Urmarkus*) and that a later editorial hand added the debated section to the Second Gospel. But there is no evidence whatsoever for this. Moreover, it runs the danger of adapting the data to the theory rather than the other way around.

While the conclusion of Markan priority seems assured, the continued disagreement over details may indicate that source criticism has reached its limitations. The literary history of the Synoptics may have been extremely complex. Each Gospel may have gone through numerous recensions at its earliest stage. If this is so then only the broadest outline of literary dependence is obtainable.

The conclusions of source criticism have become basic to any critical study of the Gospels today. Its use, however, must be seen in a much larger theological context. Scholars are endeavoring to get behind the Gospel tradition *as a feature of the quest for the Jesus of history*. Ancient traditions are deemed more reliable: hence sources such as Mark, Q—even proto-Luke—are valued due to their antiquity. Thus the conclusions of source criticism are presupposed in redaction criticism (the study of how the evangelists themselves shaped these ancient traditions as editors) and form criticism (the history of the tradition prior to its written stage).

Fundamental to Christian faith is some certainty concerning the historical traditions within the Gospels. Source criticism helpfully shows how the evangelists used primitive sources in their work (see Lk 1:1–4). However it would be misguided to disparage a portion of the Gospel *when no source can be determined* (Wenham, 1977, 145f). Source criticism effectively illustrates literary dependence, but has severe limitations when used to affirm historical certainty. A completely independent pericope, for instance, in Matthew might theoretically bear a greater antiquity than Mark or Q. At least in this example the source critic is incapable of making an objective historical judgment on it.

See FORM CRITICISM; MARKAN HYPOTHESIS; DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS; REDACTION CRITICISM; TRADITION CRITICISM; SYNOPTIC GOSPELS; MATTHEW, GOSPEL OF; MARK, GOSPEL OF; LUKE, GOSPEL OF; BIBLICAL CRITICISM; NEW TESTAMENT; DEMYTHOLOGIZATION.

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¹ Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). [Source Criticism](#). In *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible* (Vol. 2, pp. 1988–1990). Baker Book House.