THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM
AND PROPOSE SOLUTIONS
THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM
Similarities & Differences in the Synoptic Gospels

- Similarities & Differences in the Synoptic Gospels
  - As observed in the last class, there are major similarities in wording and outline in the synoptic Gospels
  - Close verbal agreement; sometimes identical
  - But alongside these similarities is the fact that there appears to be so many differences
Similarities & Differences in the Synoptic Gospels

- Each evangelist omits material found in the other two and each contains unique situations.
- Same story found in different forms – longer/shorter.
- Same story told very differently.
- Same incident in different chronological sequence.
The synoptic problem

These resemblances and differences, are facts which no one can refer either to mere chance, or to the direct influence of inspiration. On the one hand, the resemblances are too numerous and too striking to be regarded as explicable on the hypothesis that the first three Evangelists wrote independently of one another. On the other, the differences are at times so significant as to imply that they are due to the use of different documents by the Evangelists, as for example in the case of the two genealogies of Jesus Christ.
The synoptic problem

- The harmony and the variety, the resemblances and the differences must be both accounted for.
- They form together a literary problem, — the Synoptic Problem, as it is called, — the existence of which was practically unknown to the ancient ecclesiastical writers.
What is “the synoptic problem”?

- How do we explain the numerous similarities between these 3 Gospels as well as the various differences?
- Why do we have more than one Gospel?
- What do these similarities and differences tell us about each Gospel origin?
3 Step Process

1. The Oral Stage – eyewitnesses who handed down traditions.
2. The Written Stage – many have undertaken to draw up an account.
3. The Editorial Stage (Final Composition) – “an orderly narrative” by an editor who chooses & arranges material.
Laws of Transmission

Groups that pass on information tend to:

- lengthen their stories,
- Add details,
- Fit stories to their own language,
- Preserve & develop only what meets their needs & promotes their beliefs.
PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM
Source Criticism
Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received. (Luke 1:1-4 – New American Bible)

- Luke tells us clearly that there were many other gospels (1:1).
- Luke tells us that these attempts were according to the early oral traditions (1:2).
• Luke numbers himself among the many and decides to investigate his sources and write an orderly account.
• We can surmise that the other gospels writers used the same procedures.
• Source criticism is nothing more than the attempt to discover from Luke and the other gospel writers their sources, with a view to better understanding their intentions.
General Solutions to the Synoptic Problem

• One can argue that the three gospels are *totally independent of each other* and that similarities are either coincidental or providential.

• One can argue that the three are related *only because all have used common oral traditions*.
One can argue that there is a literal relationship between the three, that one or two or three have copied from each other.
Proposed Solutions to the Question of Relationships

- The Utilization Hypothesis – the three gospels used each other
- The Proto-Gospel Hypothesis – each of the three gospels used earlier sources: written and oral
Proposed Solutions to the Question of Relationships

- The Tradition Hypothesis – the primary source used by all was oral tradition
- The Multiple-Source Hypothesis – each used several types of sources: each other, other written sources, oral tradition
The Augustinian – Early Church Hypothesis.

**Proponent:** Augustine,

**The Basic Solution:**
Matthew was the first Gospel written and the others used each other successively:

John → Luke → Mark → Matthew
The Griesbach Hypothesis

- **Proponents:** J.J. Griesbach, W.R. Farmer
- **Basic Solution:** Matthew was first, Luke was second and used Matthew, Mark was last and used both Matthew and Luke.
The Oxford Hypothesis (B.H. Streeter) Also known as the Two/Four Source Hypothesis.
A) THE TWO-SOURCE HYPOTHESIS

The 2 source hypothesis holds that Mark and Quell often designated “Q” (a lost collection of Jesus’ sayings) have been used independently by Matthew and Luke. Quell is a German word which literally means “Source”.
Mark and Q were written first. Matthew and Luke used these two as their sources. Q = a “sayings of Jesus” collection; a theoretical document.
1) Markan Priority

- Mark is the earliest Gospel
  - Mark: ca. 60-70 CE; Matthew: ca. 80-85 CE; Luke/Acts: ca. 85-95 CE

- The brevity of Mark: Texts tend to expand rather than contract (Mark is the shortest gospel)

- Mark is written in the most basic Greek, Matthew and Luke improve their grammar and style
Markan Priority: introduced in 1830s


b). The verbal agreements among the gospels: Matthew and Mark frequently agree, as do Mark and Luke, but Matthew and Luke agree less often.
Markan Priority

c) Chronological Agreement with Mark

● Matthew & Luke follow Mark’s chronology.

● Mt and Lk agree in their chronology only when they agree w/ Mk
Markan Priority

d). Mark’s awkward and primitive style
   - Has more grammatical irregularities and awkward constructions than others
   - The tendency would have been to smooth these out

e). Mark’s more primitive theology
   - We find many more difficult theological statements than in the others
f) Matthew and Luke’s Use of Mark

- Matthew contains nearly all of Mark; Luke has half of Mark. Over 97% of Mark’s words have parallels in Matthew and over 88% in Luke – 7,000 words shorter.

- Matthew employs 600 of Mark’s 661 verses. Luke employs over 300 of Mark’s 661 verses.
2) The “Q” Source: 235 Sayings of Jesus

- When you take the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and remove all of the verses borrowed from Mark and all of the verses unique to each (Mark and Luke), surprisingly, what is leftover in both Matthew and Luke are 235 identical sayings of Jesus!

- Scholars have labeled these 235 sayings of Jesus as “Q” (German: Quelle=Source)
  - was a collection of 235 of Jesus’ sayings (The Gospel of Thomas)

- Q was used as another source
What Do We Know About Q?

- Q is a hypothesis. We have no ancient copies of this document.
  - It was recovered by comparing the Synoptic Gospels.
- It is composed of at least 235 sayings of Jesus (note: there is no accompanying narrative)
- It was probably written prior to 70 CE because there is no reference to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (scholars say ca. 50 CE)
What Do We Know About Q?

- It was probably composed in Northern Palestine (Galilee region) because it makes references to towns in this region (Chorazin, Bethsaida, Capernaum) = where Jesus did his ministry

- More than likely originally composed in Aramaic (Aramaisms)
What Do We Know About Q?

- Similar to the Gospel of Thomas (2nd century); collection of Jesus’ sayings with no emphasis or mention of his death or resurrection
  - Both remember Jesus as a wisdom figure
The Challenge of Q Studies for Contemporary Christians

- Q studies have isolated a moment in the earliest Jesus movements where Jesus’ death and resurrection are not foundational events.
B) Four Source Theory

- As a result of this discovery (Q), scholars have proposed the 4 source hypothesis to solve the synoptic problem.

  - **Proponents:** B.H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins*

- 1. The Gospel of Mark was written first and used as a source by both Matthew and Luke

- 2. “Q” (a lost collection of Jesus’ sayings) have been used independently by Matthew and Luke

- 3. Matthew and 4. Luke each had material(s) unique to each author who employed it in their respective gospels (M/L)
Matthew and Luke used Mark, Q, M, and L as sources. M = special material only found in Matthew, L = special material only found in Luke.
c) What Other Sources Do Matthew Employ? The “M” Source

- M Source: This consists of passages that are entirely unique to the Gospel of Matthew: they occur nowhere else in Mark or Luke.
- E.g.: the visit of the Magi (Mt 2:1-12);
- the escape to Egypt (Mt 2:13-23); etc.
d) What Other Sources Does Luke Employ? The “L” Source

L Source: Passages that are entirely unique to Luke’s Gospel

E.g.: The Song of Mary (Lk 1:46-56);
The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37);
The Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32)
The Four Source Theory

- **Proponents:** B.H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins*

- **Basic Solution:** Mark was first, Matthew was second and used Mk and Q, Luke was last and used Mark and Q. Both Matthew and Luke also had access to another source, called M and L respectively.

- **Dominance:** many scholars, even to this day, will speak of this solution as one "assured result" of gospel studies.
The Four Source Theory
Summary and Prospect

- What is clear from this brief survey of the Synoptic tradition is that there is no certain picture of how the Gospels were formed in terms of sources.
- There is no single theory of documents or sources that definitively demonstrates how all the similarities and differences in the Synoptic tradition can be explained.
- Today, most people accept either the Two Document or Four Source Hypotheses as being most reasonable, probably with the majority leaning to the Four Source Hypotheses.
Summary and Prospect

• Today most allow a role for some form of a Q document, although there remains little agreement on the details of how it was used or what it contained. One "assured result" of gospel studies.

• But this should not be taken as saying that there is no value in any of this research.

• What Synoptic studies have shown us is that the Gospel traditions were truly living traditions passed on by a living community of Faith and used in that community.
Summary and Prospect

- That has tremendous implications not only for how we study the Gospels, but also how we formulate our view of the nature of Scripture.

- A further implication of an examination of the Synoptic Problem yields one of the most important insights for the study of the Gospels.
Summary and Prospect

- With this recognition of the complexity and interrelationship of the Synoptics, any detailed study of the Synoptics must consider the differences between the Gospels and the implications those differences have for interpretation.

- No matter which theory of composition we consider, since we are dealing with material that has identifiable sources, a major focus of exegesis must be how the individual authors have used, adapted, changed, or applied the material (redaction criticism or analysis).
Summary and Prospect

- For example, the differences between parallel accounts may reveal a particular theological emphasis as we examine what changes were made and what effect they have on the message. and L respectively.

- In one of the Beatitudes in Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Mt 5:3). Luke's version reads simply, "Blessed are you who are poor" (Lk 6:20).
Summary and Prospect

● In a later Beatitude Matthew's version reads, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (5:6). Luke's version of the same saying is: "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled" (6:21).

● It is obvious that Luke used the tradition to focus on physical needs, while Matthew used it to focus on spiritual needs. 