

THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM: AN INTRODUCTION

Clinton Baldwin, Ph.D.

THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM

- The Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the Synoptic gospels, because they have basically the same plot and many stories in common. Therefore can be “seen together”
- Synoptic means “to see together”

Not only do these gospels tell many of the same stories, they often do so using the same words. Such practice is solid indication that gospels have similar source(s), as it is highly unlikely for three different persons writing at different times and places should use the same words and sequence of events unless they have some common literary dependence

THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM

- But the Synoptics not only agree, they also disagree in wording and sequence of events
- Definition: The Synoptic problem has to do with the wide-ranging agreements and disagreements among the three Synoptic Gospels

John's Gospel is different from the Synoptic Gospels

- In John there is:
 - No genealogy
 - No manger or virgin birth
 - No boyhood
 - No baptism
 - No temptation
 - No Mount of Transfiguration

John's Gospel is different from the Synoptic Gospels

- In John there is:
 - No Gethsemane
 - No scribes
 - No lepers
 - No publicans
 - No demoniacs
 - No parables
 - Never cast out a demon

Examples of the Synoptic Problem

- Mark 14:12;15:25- Jesus crucified day after the Passover
- John 19:14 - Jesus crucified day before the Passover
- Lk 2:39 - Jesus and family returned to Nazareth a month after going to Bethlehem
- Matt 2:19-22: They fled into Egypt

Examples of the Synoptic Problem

- Matt 27:3-10: Judas died by hanging
- Acts 1:18-23: Judas died by falling head first and his bowels split

Examples of the Synoptic Problem

- Matt 8:28: Two demon-possessed men from the tombs met Jesus and disciples
- Mark 5:2-3:One demon-possessed man from the tombs met Jesus and his disciples

Examples of the Synoptic Problem

- Lk.10:4-5 :Take no money, no bag, no shoes
greet no one on the way
- Matt 6:8,9: wear sandals

Examples of the Synoptic Problem

- Matt 28:2-5: One angel rolled away the stone at the tomb
- Lk 24:4: Two angels [rolled away] the stone at the tomb

Examples of the Synoptic Problem

- Matt 6:1-13: Lord's prayer spoken in public to crowds
- Luke 11:1-2: Lord's prayer spoken to disciples in private
- Matt 6:6-13/Lk 11: 2-4: Different version of the Lord's prayer

Chronological Inconsistencies

- Matt 10:46-52: The healing of Bartimaeus on leaving Jericho
- Lk 18:35-43: The healing of two blind men while entering Jericho

Chronological Inconsistencies

- Mk 11:12-25: The cursing of the fig tree happened before the cleansing of the temple
- Matt 21:12-22: Cursing happened the day after the temple was cleansed
- John 2:13-22: The temple cleansed at the beginning of Jesus' ministry
- Synoptic: Temple cleansed the end of Jesus' ministry
Matt 21:12, 13; Luke 19:45,46; Mark 11:15-17

Transformation of Information

- Mark 6:5 “Jesus could not perform any miracles except that he lay his hands upon a few sick people and healed them”
- Matt 13:58: “He did not perform many miracles there.”

Transformation of Information

- Mk 6:51: Mark's conclusion to the event of walking on the water reads: "They were utterly astonished for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened..."
- Matt 14:33: Matthew transformed this into: 'those in the boat worshipped him, saying, Truly you are the son of God

Transformation of Information

- Small band according to Mark arrested Jesus, large army of about 600 according to John arrested Jesus, Jo18.3

Transformation of Information

- In Mark, Jesus at his arrest is a vulnerable human being (Mk 14:30)
- In John, the story grows and Jesus is a divine being at his arrest (Jo12.27; 18.11)
- Mark, the disciples all flee (Mk 14:50)
- John, Jesus asked the soldiers to let them go and then 'I lose none of them' prophecy fulfilled. John 18.8,9 (17:12)

Transformation of Information

- Mk 14:35, Jesus threw himself on the ground in prayer
- John 18:4-6, arresting soldier thrown to the ground, when Jesus said, I am he- i.e., the sacred name of God (John's theology that even the emperor acknowledged Jesus as Lord, yet sought to do away with him)

Words transformed

- (Luke 16:16-17) : Law lasts until John the Baptist
- Matt 5:17-18 the law lasts until the end of the age. [words reinterpreted]
- The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped.

Sayings located in Different Contexts

- Matt 10:39, Saying about finding and losing one's life is set in two or three different contexts:
- Matt 10:39
- Matt 16:25
- Mk 8:35
- Lk 9:24; Lk 17:33
- John 12:25

Reasons for the Synoptic Problem:

- Orality
- The information in the Gospels first circulated orally before they were written down
- Oral communication naturally spawns variation and diversity
- Memory is selective and changes

Reasons to the Synoptic Problem:

- The four source hypothesis: Proposes that there are four sources behind the gospels. These are: Mark, Q, M, and L
- Mark = Mark's gospel
- Q = *Quelle*, i.e., source, this is a source used by Matthew and Luke but not Mark
- M = A source unique to Matthew
- L = A source unique to Luke

Markan Priority

- Sometimes Matthew and Mark share the wording of a story and Luke differs
- Sometimes Mark and Luke shares the wording of a story and Matthew differs
- But rarely does Matthew and Luke differ from Mark when all three share the same story
- The fact that they rarely differ from Mark when they agree with one another, indicate that Mark must be one of their sources

Sequence of Stories

- When Matthew and Luke have the same stories, they present them in the same sequence that is found in Mark
- (The information found in Matthew and Luke but not recorded in Mark are always in different sequence e.g. the Lord's prayer and the Beatitudes)

Markan Priority: Shortness of Mark

- Mark's Greek is awkward and difficult with unusual words and phrases. However, these problems are not seen when Matthew and Luke narrate the same stories
- It is more likely that Matthew and Luke copied from an awkward text which they made plainer than for Mark to have copied from a clear, plain text which he modified and made more difficult

Markan Priority: The Shortest Text

- Mark consists of 661 verses
- Matthew has 1,068 verses
- Luke has 1,149 verses
- Why would Mark omit so much material if Matthew and Luke were his sources?

Markan Priority: The Shortest Text

- Why would Mark omit everything concerning Jesus' birth, the birth of John the Baptist, the sermon on the mount, the Lord's prayer, the resurrection narrative (the short ending is the original ending)?
- Therefore, if we have Mark first, we can see how Matthew and Luke came about; but if we have Matthew and Luke originally, it is difficult to see why Mark?

The Q Source

- Q= *Quelle*- A German word which means “source”
- Q= Material common to Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark
- This material agrees almost word for word, thus suggesting a common source
- Most scholars believe that Q was a written document

Contents of Q

- Q is a saying source; this material consists of sayings not stories
- Consists of 235 verses unique to Matthew and Luke
- Examples of Q:
 - The Beatitudes, Matt 5:3-12//Lk 6:20b-23
 - The salt of the earth, Matt 5:13//14:34-35a
 - The light of the world, Matt 5:14-16//Lk 8:16
 - The law and the prophets, Matt 5:17-18//Lk 16:16-17
 - Wise and foolish builders, Matt 7:24-27//Lk 6:47-49

The 'M' Source: Materials unique to Matthew

- The visit of the magi (Matt 2:1-12).
- The flight into Egypt (Matt 2:13-23).
- Jesus' instruction on almsgiving and prayer (Matt 6:1-8).
- The ten virgins (Matt 25:1-12).

The ‘L’ Source: Materials unique to Luke

- The shepherds visit to baby Jesus (Lk 2:1-52)
- Jesus’ boyhood visit to the temple (Lk 2)
- The raising of the widow’s son at Nain (7:11-17)
- The healing of the ten lepers (17:11-19)

The 'L' Source: Materials unique to Luke

- The story of Zachaeus (19:1-10)
- The parable of the good Samaritan (10:29-37)

Implications

- Seeing what the authors include and omitted help us to see what they consider to be of greater importance
- The gospels do not simply report facts, they also contain interpretation of events. They were also theological documents
- We may not know exactly what happened in many instances

Implications

- While the general thrust of the gospels are authentic there are errors in the details
- Inerrancy or infallibility of scripture is only wishful thinking
- The Bible is a book intended to build faith in Jesus not necessarily for historical factuality in everything

Implications

- God has not given us a book for salvation, he has given us a person
- How do we understand inspiration in light of these realities in the gospels?

Think About it

- Are there degrees of inspiration?
- To what extent did the copying and selection process influence the contents of the gospels?
- Is an author's work less or more inspired because he/she copied?

The End