The Synoptic Problem

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What is the Synoptic Problem?

- Synoptic means "looking together."
  - Matthew, Mark & Luke are very similar.
  - John is rather different.

- How are the Synoptic Gospels related?
  - How explain their similarities?
  - How explain their differences?
What is the Synoptic Problem?

- Synoptics are unusually similar:
  - 3 years ministry, only a few hours given
  - 100s healed, just a few narrated

- Those who reject Gospels claim:
  - Similarities due to copying
  - Differences due to:
    - Intentional changes
    - Authors unaware of each other
The Phenomena of the Synoptic Problem
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- Verbal agreements & differences
- Differences in order of events
- Overlap & uniqueness of content
Verbal Agreements & Differences

- Sample – the Parable of the Sower
- Alford's summary:

  The phenomena presented will be much as follows: first, perhaps, we shall have three, five or more [words] identical, then as many wholly distinct, then two clauses or more, expressed in the same words but differing order; then a clause contained in one or two and not in the third [Gospel]; then several words identical; then a clause not only wholly distinct, but apparently inconsistent...
Verbal Agreements & Differences

- Book – unique – agree w 2 – agree w 1
- Mark  40%  22%  38%
- Matt  56%  14%  30%
- Luke  67%  12%  21%
Differences in Order

- Order is mainly the same.
  - Check any Synopsis.

- Some differences do occur:
  - Healing Peter's m-in-law vs leper
  - Order of temptations
  - Order of cup & bread at Last Supper

- Some complications
  - Correct text?
  - Same event?
Overlap & Uniqueness

- Mt
  - 280
  - 120
  - 170
- Mk
  - 480
  - 50
- Lk
  - 500
  - 20
Overlap & Uniqueness

- Canon/Content/Sections
  - 1 – All Four – 74
  - 2 – 3 Synoptics – 111
  - 3 – Mt/Lk/Jn – 22
  - 4 – Mt/Mk/Jn – 25
  - 5 – Mt/Lk – 82
  - 6 – Mt/Mk – 47
  - 7 – Mt/Jn – 7
  - 8 – Lk/Mk – 13
  - 9 – Lk/Jn – 21

- Canon/Content/Sections
  - 10a – Matthew – 62
  - 10b – Mark – 19
  - 10c – Luke – 72
  - 10d – John – 96
Summary on Overlap

- Almost all of Mark is in Matthew or Luke.
- Matthew & Luke have much in common that is not in Mark.
- Matthew & Luke have much material unique to each.
Sketch History of the Synoptic Problem
Early History

- Tatian's *Diatessaron* (c170)
- The Canons of Eusebius (c330)
- Augustine, *Harmony of the Evangelists* (c400)
  - Successive dependence Mt – Mk – Lk
- Reformation Harmonies
  - Two different strategies
  - Lump or split?
Modern History

- Primitive Gospel (Urevangelium)
- Successive Dependence
- Fragmentary
- Oral Tradition
- Two Document
- Four Document
Primitive Gospel (Urevangelium)

Advantages:
- Common source
- Might have disappeared with language change

Problems:
- No evidence for this document
- If Aramaic Matthew, why so different from Greek?
- Order differences
- Apparent discrepancies
- Why did Mark pick only what is in Matt & Luke?
Successive Dependence

Advantages:
- No need to postulate missing documents.

Problems
- Order not obvious
- How verbal differences arise?
- Where does later material come from?
- How explain apparent discrepancies?
Fragmentary

**Advantages:**
- Luke 1 implies many attempts.
- Gospels look like series of anecdotes.
- Apparently a variety of sources used.

**Problems:**
- Often used to reduce reliability of sources.
- View shares problems of Form Criticism.
- Probably some merit, but needs repair.
Oral Tradition

- Advantages:
  - Seems to have been an early oral period
  - But oral transmission is often very reliable

- Problems:
  - Should not insist all sources were oral
  - Shorthand did exist in antiquity
  - Probably a combination of oral & written sources
Two & Four Document Theories

Advantages:
- Matt & Luke do follow Mark’s order.
- When divergent, don’t follow each other.

Problems:
- No evidence for Q, M, L.
- Verbal differences peculiar for copying.
- Why did Luke omit a large section of Mark?
- Why did Matt follow Mark so slavishly?
A Proposed Solution

- Gospels written by traditional authors, who used both oral and written sources.
- Internal evidence looks like Mark is source for Matthew & Luke, but doesn't fit order of writing.
- Suggest that Matt & Luke depend on oral form of Mark, i.e. the apostolic tradition.
How does this explain the similarities?

- All depend on the life of Christ, real series of historical events.
- All depend on oral teaching of Apostles.
- Peter (source of Mark) was their spokesman.
- Both Matthew & Luke used Jesus' oral teaching materials in addition.
- Perhaps the disciples memorized his teaching.
- Some notes were likely used.
How does this explain the differences?

- Jesus teaching was repetitive.
- Some of his actions were repeated.
- Witnesses emphasize different features.
- Oral repetition produces variation.
- Gospel writers condensed materials.
- They did not know everything.
- They did not use all they knew.
How does this fit with inspiration?

- Inspiration is not usually dictation.
  - Authors have various styles.
  - Consistent with approximate language...
- The accounts are harmonious.
  - But we may not be sure how to harmonize
- Inspiration is a revealed doctrine, not an inductive one.
  - Like sinlessness of Christ, goodness of God
The End

But not the end of the debate!