

## Project 1: Synoptic Comparison

## I. Overview of the Synoptic Problem

Differences and similarities between the four Gospels have been recognized since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. The first attempt at harmonizing the four Gospels was produced by one Tatian, ca. 150 in his *Diatesseron* (literally “through four”). The intent was apparently to establish historical sequence by their comparison as well as to resolve any apparent discrepancies.

What is surprising (except in light of the Enlightenment) is that the “Synoptic Problem” became an issue so late in history. In Luke’s introduction to his Gospel, he specifically mentions that a number of writers had produced Gospel accounts of sorts. These were written, says Luke, with the intent of recording the experiences of original eyewitness associates of Christ. Luke himself states that did his own research, apparently over some time. This investigation likely included personal interviews, but does not exclude the possibility that he used at least some of the written sources that he was obviously already familiar with. Luke also states his intent to produce a chronological work (“consecutive order” NASV), to the end that he might communicate the (historical?) truth to Theophilus.

The Synoptic Problem is two fold. First how can the *similarities* between the synoptics be accounted for? Apart from some supernatural explanation (in connection to inspiration), the most likely explanation is that common source material was utilized by the authors. It could have been Mark, Q, other sources or a combination of all. Second, in view of the similarities, how may the *differences* be accounted for? Can they be fully explained by differences in authorial purpose, target audience and theological emphases?

Significant agreements occur in wording, order of narrative and parenthetical material.

## Project 1: Synoptic Comparison

Mark has 661 verses, and almost all of Mark is found in Luke or Matthew or both. Only 30 verses are unique in Mark. Matthew contains all of Mark except for 40 verses. Almost half of Luke (548 of 1149) are unique to Luke. Matthew and Luke have 235 verses in common that are not found in Mark, leading some to conclude that two sources were used to produce these works. Observations and concerns of J. Gieseler in 1818 started an intellectual movement which viewed the differences as a historical problem. Previously, simple parallels were observed, with a tendency to look for the “full story” by harmonizing the three. Gieseler argued for oral tradition as the basis for the synoptic tradition, which after achieving some level of stasis was then translated from Aramaic to Greek. This theory, however, is discounted by many examples of exact duplication of wording between the three, as well as parenthetical comments and notes to *readers* of the work. Finally, there is “extensive agreement” in the order of material between the synoptics, which seems best accounted for by a common written source.

Critical theorists propose several solutions for the synoptic problem. These scholars tend to assume the priority of Mark, arguing from its shorter length, his poorer style and “incorrect grammar.” Mark also contains redundancies, harder readings (limitations on Jesus’ power, negative descriptions of the disciples, theological difficulties) and other aspects which lead many to conclude that it both preceded the other synoptics and was a source for them. Some have proposed that Matthew and Luke used Mark as their source for narrative sections of their gospel, and *Quelle* (source) or “Q” for the sayings of Jesus. This theory does not account for one fifth of the material in Matthew and one third of the material in Luke. Others suggest that Matthew and Luke had their own unique sources in addition to Mark. *Quellenkritik* has arisen as a distinct branch of study in an attempt to explain the remaining differences.

## Project 1: Synoptic Comparison

## II. Summary of the Synoptic Problem for Mark 6:17-29

Comparing the parallel of Luke to either Matthew or Mark leads to the conclusion that there is little commonality in Luke for this pericope. The only mention in Luke concerning this incident in the life of John the Baptist is to the effect that Herod added to his many evils by jailing John. Luke makes no mention of John's execution here, while both Mark and Matthew offer significant details of the event.

Comparing Mark and Matthew, it is clear that while Mark is as a whole the shortest of the three synoptics, Mark is verbose in this pericope compared to Matthew.

Matthew and Mark *are* similar in this passage in several ways. First, both narratives flow in the same order. Second, there are significant numbers of exact duplicates at the word and phrase level. Third, where the wording is not exactly the same, there are a number of synonymous expressions.

While there are many similarities between the Markan and Matthean accounts, there are also some noteworthy differences. In spite of the fact that Matthew's Gospel as a whole is significantly longer than Mark's, Matthew's parallel of this pericope is more terse, using about half the number of words than Mark does. Also, in several instances Matthew uses pronouns for the names of characters in the narrative in places where Mark states a name. On occasion the opposite is true. In one case (Matt.14:10) Matthew states the proper noun  $\text{Ιωαννην}$  where Mark used the pronoun  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\nu$ . There are also a number of cases where Matthew used a different verb form or verbal phrase than did Mark, while still maintaining synonymous meaning. For example, compare Matt.14:7 and Mark 6:23; also Matt.14:8 and Mark 6:25.

## Project 1: Synoptic Comparison

There are also some different emphases in the two accounts. For example, while Matthew records that Herod feared the multitude, Mark states that Herod feared John. Also, at the very end of the pericope, Matthew tells his readers that the disciples of John came to tell Jesus the story of John's execution. It is interesting that these differences in emphasis occur roughly at the beginning and the end of the pericope, respectively.

To summarize, Luke's parallel is for practical purposes non-existent, so there is no synoptic problem between Mark and Luke. The synoptic problem as it relates to the similarities between Mark and Matthew are two. The first is the reduced length of Matthew's account. This fact would indicate that if Matthew used Mark as a source, he was less interested in detail than was Mark. The color coding of similarities makes obvious the fact that if Matthew used Mark, he omitted sections of significant length (1-2 verses.) The second aspect of the synoptic problem for this pericope is the use of synonymous statements by Matthew. These differences may reflect dialectical preferences of Matthew himself or of his original intended audience. They may also indicate different levels of facility with Koine between the two authors. If the Matthew who authored the Gospel of Matthew was a tax collector, it is not unlikely that he was more skilled in Greek than Mark considering his profession. This explanation would relate to the discussion above concerning Mark's improper use of grammar and awkward constructions.

Therefore, based on a comparison of Mark 6:17-29 and Matt.14:3-12, there does appear to be a literary relationship and possibly a dependency between these two Gospels.

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Project 1: Synoptic Comparison

Sources

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