

## The Synoptic “Problem”

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συνόψις, “seeing together”

### Bibliography

Recom. sources for student research:

- Marcan priority:

Grassmick, “Mark,” *BKC*  
Guthrie, *NT Intro.*, 121–44, 220–36;  
Stein, Robert H., *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987.  
Stonehouse, *Origin of the Synoptic Gospels*, 48–73, 78–83;  
Streeter, *The Four Gospels*, 150–98;  
Harrison, *Intro. to NT*, 142–54 (esp. note p. 53)

- Matthean priority:

Barbieri, “Matthew,” *BKC*  
Wm. R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem*  
Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke* (1992)

- “Agnostic” position or rejection of any literary relationship:

Dyer, Charles H. “Do the Synoptics Depend on Each Other?” *BSac* 138 (1981): 230–45.  
Hiebert, *Intro. to NT*, 1:160–90 (esp. note pp. 189–90)  
Linnemann, Eta. *Is There a Synoptic Problem? Rethinking the Literary Dependence of the First Three Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992.

Tools:

Aland, *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*  
Barr, Allan, *A Diagram of Synoptic Relationships* (2d ed., T & T Clark, 1996).  
Farmer, *Synopticon*  
Huck, *Synopsis of the First 3 Gospels*

“The investigation of the problem is properly a matter for the trained scholar, but the ordinary reader cannot afford to remain uninformed about it” (Hiebert, 1:160).

### Definition of the “Problem”

In what order were the Synoptic Gospels written and what, if any, are the literary relationships between them?

This question is *not* an invention of modern critical scholarship, but is as old as Augustine’s *De Consensu Evangelistarum*. He proposed that Matthew wrote first, Mark

used Matthew, and Luke used Mark (*DJG*, 786; see also *CMM*, 31). There is also a long history of creating “synopses” or harmonies of the Gospels that reflects interest in related questions. These include Tatian’s *Diatesseron* (2d C.), Ammonius’ *Harmonia* (3d C.), and Eusebius’ canons (4th C.).<sup>1</sup>

### ***Is There Literary Dependence?***

This should not be taken for granted. As Linnemann rightly points out, literary dependence is usually assumed by critical scholars, “but a thorough investigation of the following question is still lacking: ‘Do the data in the first three Gospels necessitate the acceptance of a literary relationship, or can they be explained just as plausibly as the differences among eyewitnesses?’ (13). She attempts such an investigation of a sample of the Gospel materials (about 30% of Mark + parallels) and concludes that there is *not a literary relationship*; rather the similarities are due to the fact that the writers are eye witnesses and record similar descriptions of the same event. I disagree with her conclusions (for reasons to be noted below), but freely acknowledge her very valid warning regarding the presupposition(s) with which one begins.

The correct way to begin is to examine the actual data of the Gospels. (In this regard, see the separate handout that illustrates the data from Mark 6 and parallels.) Once that has been done, then one must consider possible explanations for the data. Also tied up with this question is that of the authorship and date of Mark (as well as the other gospels). Both questions will be considered together here. The following material summarizes some of the evidence.

### **Evidence for Literary Dependence**

#### 1. Verbal agreement

95% of Mark is included in Matthew or Luke; 90% is included in Matthew alone (or: 90/95% of Mark is taken from...). These are the usual figures given in the handbooks. It should be noted, however, that this is addressing the *content* of the Synoptics, not the exact wording. While it *is* legitimate to say that “these [verbal] agreements are...so precise and so extensive that they provide a solid bulwark for the conclusion that there is actual interdependence between the Synoptic Gospels,”<sup>2</sup> these two statements should not be unjustly combined to imply that 90–95% of Mark is verbally identical with the other two Synoptics.

The data to support this is as follows: passages in Mark that are *not* included in Matthew or Luke include Mark 1:1; 2:27; 3:20–21; 4:26–29; 7:3–4; 7:32–37; 8:22–26; 9:29, 48–49; (13:33–37); 14:51–52. This is a total of 31 verses (less than 5%).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Stein, *Synoptic Problem*, 16–25 for an interesting history of these and other such projects throughout the history of the church.

<sup>2</sup>Ned Stonehouse, *Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 59.

<sup>3</sup>Streeter’s list, *The Four Gospels*, 195.

### An illus. of the literary relationship<sup>4</sup>

*Feeding of the 5,000*: Mark 6:30–44; Matt. 14:13–21; Lk 9:10–17; Jn. 6:1–13

# words used to tell the story:

Mark 194  
 Matt. 157  
 Luke 153  
 John 199

Agreement in wording between any 2 of the Synoptics:

59% (Mk.-Mt.)  
 44% (Mt.-Lk.)  
 40% (Mk.-Lk.)

But agreement of John with any of the Synoptics ranges from 8.5% - 6.5%!

	Matt.	Luke	Mark
Mark	<b>59%</b>		
Matt.		<b>44%</b>	
Luke			<b>40%</b>
John	<b>8.5%</b>	<b>6.5%</b>	<b>8.5%</b>

John uses totally different words/phrases to tell the same story. He uses only 8 words that the Synoptics use to tell the same story: five, two, five thousand, took loaves, twelve baskets of pieces. These are the words absolutely essential to tell the same story! John even uses a different word for *fish* (ὀψάρια, not ἰχθύς).

It would seem that some inter-relationship between the Synoptics, but John as an independent account, not influenced in the same way by the Synoptics would most easily explain this data. How likely is it that any two people could tell the same story and use 60% of the same words, and often in the exact same order?<sup>5</sup>

Other good illustrations of verbal parallels:

Matthew                      Mark                      Luke  
 19:13–15                      =    10:13–16                      =    18:15–17

<sup>4</sup>From G. Fee, *How to Read the Bible...*, 111f. The figures given above are his; I have not attempted to verify them at this point. These type of statistics would be helpfully included in your own paper on this topic.

<sup>5</sup>Linnemann contends this point, arguing that “independent reports of the same *historical events* do precisely the same thing”—but she advances no data to support this claim. It might be interesting to examine news accounts of the same event in four different newspapers to see just how likely it is that the wording would be 60% identical. This would not be proof either way, but would be an analogous situation that could point out the questions that would need to be investigated.

22:23–33        =    12:19–27        =    20:27:40  
 24:4–8         =    13:5–8            =    21:8–11

## 2. The overall structure/outline of Mark

The overall structure/outline of Mark is followed very closely by Matthew and Luke, though each adds unique material of their own. The material that is added by Matthew and Luke is different and is added at different places.

The data to support this observation may be found most easily in A. Barr, *A Diagram of Synoptic Relationships*. (Note how few of the connecting lines cross in the diagram.) For a specific example of the arrangement of material as supporting Marcan priority [Streeter's point (3), see below], cf. Stonehouse, *OSG*, 66–9; cf. also Stein, *SP*, 69–70.

Linnemann disputes this argument, asserting that the reason for the similarity of sequence is due to the fact that each writer is recording the same sequence of historical events and the result should be similar (83–95). She nowhere (at least that I have read) argues why the Gospels must be viewed as being written in historical sequence.<sup>6</sup> That all the Gospel writers use topical as well as chronological arrangements can hardly be denied (e.g., Matthew 13; Mark 1b–3, 4, etc.). The two major sections that are obviously chronological are the birth and passion narratives, but those two blocks do mandate that everything in between is also sequential.

## 3. Parenthetical material

One of the most persuasive arguments for the literary interdependence of the synoptic Gospels is the presence of identical parenthetical material, for it is highly unlikely that two of three writers would by coincidence insert into their accounts exactly the same editorial comment at exactly the same place.<sup>7</sup>

Note, e.g., the comment, “let the reader understand” found in Matt. 24:15 and Mark 13:14. This is almost certainly the author's parenthetical comment directed to his readers. Yet both Mark and Matthew add the same comment in the same location in the discourse. The most likely explanation is that one of the writers was following the other as he wrote his own account and inserted not only the bulk of the discourse, but the same parenthetical comment.<sup>8</sup>

The only alternative explanation that might be possible (that this is *Jesus'* comment directed to the [*hearer?*] who was *reading* Daniel) is improbable in light of the setting (an oral discourse) and the typical literacy rate of first century Palestine (about 10%).

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<sup>6</sup>Her arguments are slanted heavily toward those critics who deny the historicity of the Gospel accounts—but I have no quibble with that issue. It is both possible and helpful to argue *both* for historicity *and* for topical arrangement

<sup>7</sup>Stein, *SP*, 37.

<sup>8</sup>See further, Stein, *SP*, 37–42, who discusses this example as well as several others (of varying degrees of persuasiveness); the instance cited above is the clearest such instance. I have not found any comment on this argument in Linnemann.

#### 4. Luke explicitly tells us that he used (written?) sources

- 1:1, Many have undertaken *to draw up an account* of the things that have been fulfilled among us [ἐπειδήπερ πολλοὶ ἐπεχείρησαν **ἀνατάξασθαι** διήγησιν περὶ τῶν πεπληροφορημένων ἐν ἡμῖν πραγμάτων],
- 1:2 just as they were *handed down* to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word [καθὼς **παρέδοσαν** ἡμῖν οἱ ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς αὐτόπται καὶ ὑπηρέται γενόμενοι τοῦ λόγου].
- 1:3 Therefore, since I myself have *carefully investigated* everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup>so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught [ἔδοξε καμὸι **παρηκολουθηκότι** ἄνωθεν πᾶσιν **ἀκριβῶς** καθεξῆς σοι γράψαι, κράτιστε Θεόφιλε, ἵνα ἐπιγνῶς περὶ ὧν κατηχήθης λόγων τὴν ἀσφάλειαν].

In chronological sequence, Luke tells us that, v. 2, eye witnesses passed on information about Jesus orally, but that, v. 1, it was later recorded in writing, and, v. 3–4, Luke drew on both these sources in researching his Gospel.<sup>9</sup> If this is so, then there *were* literary sources that lay behind at least one of the Gospels. It is therefore not implausible that the other writers may also have used written source material. This does not prove that any one of them used one of the other’s work, but it gives credence to such a proposal.

#### Possible Options

##### 1. No interdependence

“The Spirit of God inspired each writer independently...” *Unger’s Bible Handbook* (p. 493; 1966 ed.)

Eta Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?*

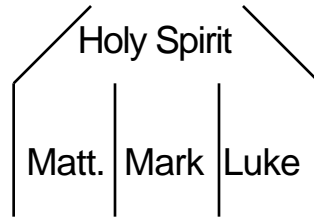
Partial Evaluation

The theoretical possibility of this is acknowledged, but *possibility* is not the same as probability or proof.

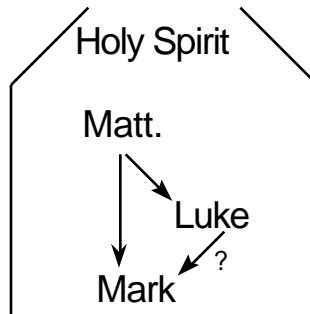
It ignores the fact that we have explicit evidence that at least one writer *did* use written sources in writing his Gospel. If God could use this for Luke, he could also do so for Matthew and/or Mark.

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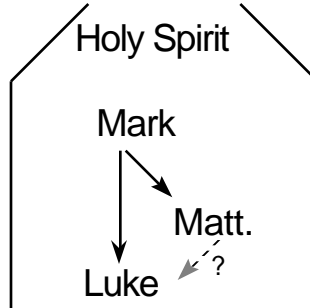
<sup>9</sup>The meaning of several of these terms is disputed. On the words emphasized above, see esp. D. Bock, *Luke*, BECNT, *ad loc.*; also Blass, *Philology of the Gospels*, 7–20. Linnemann protests against taking ἀνατασσομαι as referring to a written record, preferring to understand it as “to develop a lengthy narration” (i.e., orally), but her position here is simply stated, not defended (190–91). Both Bock and Blass provide cogent arguments for understanding it to refer to recording events in writing.



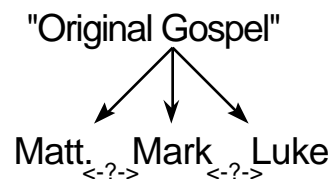
2. Matthean priority, with Lukan dependence on Matthew and Marcan dependence on both Matthew and Luke  
(W. Farmer; Barbieri, Mt., *BKC*) "The Griesback Hypothesis" \*\*



3. Marcan priority, with separate dependence of both Matthew and Luke on Mark  
(Guthrie, Grassmick)



4. Urevangelium (written in Aramaic) G. E. Lessing (1776)

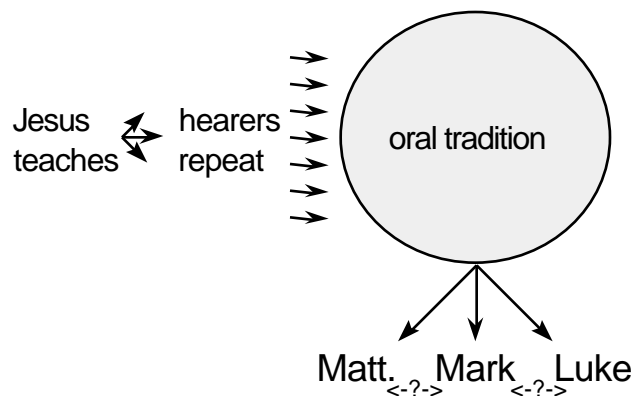


5. Oral tradition

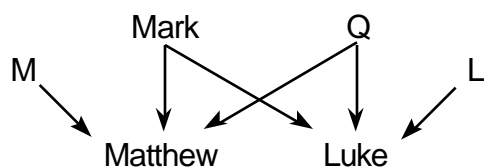
(Wenham uses this to account for the verbal similarities, combining it with Matthean priority and the dependence of Luke on Mark for his outline. (*Redating Matthew, Mark, & Luke*))

Verbal parallels = oral tradition

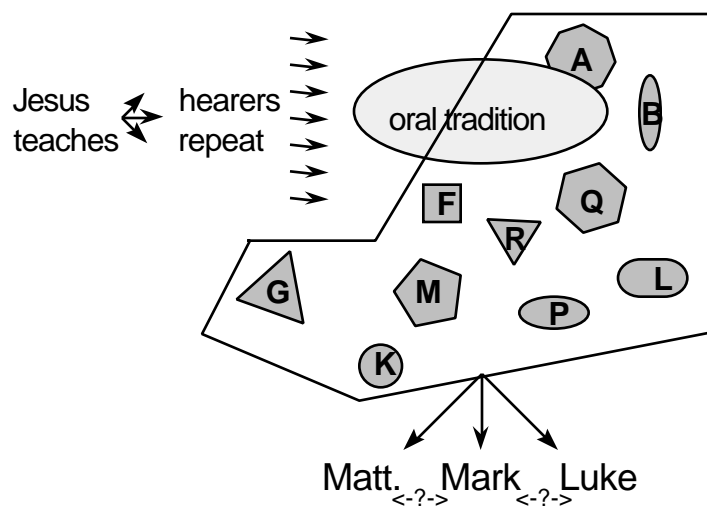
Structural parallels = Matt. priority > Mark > Luke



6. Document theory ("Q" et al) either 2-source or 4-source ("The 2 doc. hypoth.")



7. Form criticism



### Dibelius

Forms: e.g., Miracle stories, pronouncement stories, novellen ("tales"), sayings, legends, myths [Bultmann used this approach in his "demythologizing" existential encounter is all that is necessary, historical proof/basis is irrelevant—i.e., no connection between faith and history]

## Guiding Principles

“Many aspects of the Synoptic Problem do not allow of confident solutions. My impression in brief is that the data available are not sufficient to justify firm and final conclusions with regard to many matters concerning which we are understandably curious. The intrinsic difficulties are so considerable that, as I see it, much more reserve and caution are demanded of students of this field of research than are commonly manifest.” (Stonehouse, *OSG*, vii)

Guthrie’s “guiding principles” for approaching the synoptic problem:

1. External evidence (tradition) should be taken seriously and assumed correct unless it can be *proved* wrong. Interpretation of internal evidence must be certain, not merely possible, before it may be allowed to over-ride external evidence. (220–21) “possibilities cannot oust probabilities” 221
2. The words of Jesus were transmitted orally for some time before being recorded in the gospels. That oral transmission was probably quite accurate as the sayings were recognized to be the words of Jesus and thus sacred. (222–26)
3. The gospel writers were real authors, not just editors mechanically splicing together material originally written by others. As such they exercised all the creative freedom of wording that any author uses. I.e., they interacted with their various sources of information and did not simply incorporate them passively. (226–28) And do remember that we are specifically told that written sources *were* used in the composition of at least one of the Gospels (Lk.).
4. A simpler solution to the problem is to be preferred to a more complex one, especially if the complex one necessitates a great deal of hypothetical reconstruction. The fewer “unknowns” the better. (228–29)

Other notes by Guthrie related to above principles:

“The probability that [Jesus] repeated His teaching material many times would in itself account for some of the differences in the Synoptic records. But if the Jewish educative procedure [i.e., memorization] had had [!] any influence upon our Lord and upon the apostolic circle, it would also go far to explain many of the similarities, particularly in language.” (224)

“The words of Jesus would be regarded as sacred and committed to memory because of their intrinsic worth and because of the regard in which the Christians held their Lord. ...\* They recognized His divine nature which invested His words with such authority that every effort would be made to retain as far as possible the very words in which He taught. This accounts for the significant fact that fewer deviations occur in parallel accounts of His sayings than in the narratives of His doings.” (224- \*25]

“The clear promise of Jesus that the Spirit would teach the disciples all things and bring to their remembrance all that He had said to them (Jn. xiv. 26) cannot be dismissed

simply because it does not fit into the normal categories of literary criticism. Whatever view is adopted regarding John's Gospel, it cannot be denied that this is testimony that the immediate disciples of Jesus were to receive special help of the Spirit in recalling what Jesus had said and that this help was directly promised by Jesus Himself." (232)

"If the Spirit aided memory it is inconceivable that He did not also control selection. There were clearly more traditions than could be incorporated, as John xx. 30, xxi. 25 show. There was need therefore for the authors to select, whether from eyewitness oral accounts or written sources or perhaps from their own personal observations. In this they would have submitted themselves as fully to the guidance of the Spirit as in the collection of data." (232)

### **Tentative Solution**

Mark was written first, probably in the late 50s, followed by Matthew and later by Luke. Both Matthew and Luke had a copy of Mark which they used as the framework for their own expansions, adding substantial amounts of Jesus' teaching that was not included in Mark. (It is also possible that Luke had a copy of Matthew, but that remains quite doubtful.)

1. No need for Q (although *theoretically* there could have been such a document)
2. Entire process guided by the H. S.
3. We know that multiple written sources were used, but we have no independent evidence of their existence or nature
4. The Synoptics include at least 2 eye-witness accounts (Peter's in Mark, & Matt.), but these cannot account for all the information included—must have additional sources, which may be either/both written or revelatory.

### **Misc. & Supporting Observations**

"The conception of 'copyright'—a consequence of the invention of printing—has entirely changed the conditions under which it is legitimate for authors to make use of previous writers. Ancient historians frequently reproduce almost verbatim considerable portions of the work of their predecessors." (Streeter, *4G*, 151)

If Matthew was written first, why was Mark ever written? (since 90% of Mark would then be a simple repeat of what Matthew had already written). [cf. Guthrie, *NT Intro*, p. 186, n. 146, citing F. W. Beare, *JBL* 84 (1965) 295–97]

Streeter's classic formulation of Marcan priority ( *The Four Gospels*)  
(Not all elements of Streeter's theory is to be accepted, though the following points are all legitimate.)

“Matthew may be regarded as an enlarged<sup>†</sup> edition of Mark; Luke is an independent work incorporating considerable portions of Mark.

“Five reasons for accepting the priority of Mark.

“(1) Matthew reproduces 90% [600 of 661 vv.] of the subject matter of Mark in language very largely identical with that of Mark; Luke does the same for rather more than half of Mark.

“(2) In any average section, which occurs in the three Gospels, the majority of the actual words used by Mark are reproduced by Matthew [51% of the actual words] and Luke, either alternately or both together.

“(3) The relative order of incidents and sections in Mark is in general supported by both Matthew and Luke; where either of them deserts Mark, the other is usually found supporting him.

“This conjunction and alternation of Matthew and Luke in their agreement with Mark as regards (a) content, (b) wording, (c) order, is only explicable if they are incorporating a source identical, or all but identical, with Mark.

“(4) The primitive character of Mark is further shown by (a) the use of phrases likely to cause offense<sup>‡</sup> which are omitted or toned \*down in the other Gospels, (b) roughness of style and grammar, and the preservation of Aramaic words.<sup>°</sup>

“(5) The way in which Marcan and non-Marcan material is distributed in Matthew and Luke respectively looks as if each had before him the Marcan material *in a single document*, and was faced with the problem of combining this with material from other sources.

“Matthew’s solution was to make Mark’s story the framework into which non-Marcan material is fitted, on the principle of joining like to like. Luke follows the simpler method of giving Marcan and non-Marcan material in alternate blocks; except in the Passion story, where, from the nature of the case, some interweaving of sources was inevitable.” [Streeter, *4G*, 151-52]

<sup>†</sup>Streeter explains on p. 158 that “enlarged” means adding more material not in Mark, not expanding portions already in Mark. This is obvious in that Matthew *abridges* those portions. He gives 3 examples in which Mark uses 325, 374 and 235 words, but Matthew, although following Mark’s account and vocabulary, condenses them to 136, 135, 157. “The verbal compression and omission of minor detail seen in the parallels in Matthew has an obvious purpose, in that it gives more room for the introduction of a mass of highly important teaching material not found in Mark.”

<sup>‡</sup> “politically incorrect” but not standard Greek e.g., (1–4 = Guthrie, *Intro.*, 134)

1. Redundant negatives
2. Unusual words
3. Difficult constructions

4. Inclusion of Aramaic words (8 in Mk.; only 1 in Mr. & 0 in Lk.) (esp. since Mk. writes for Roman readers! Why add them?)
5. Use of καί to begin a sentence

			ttl. # words
Matt.	228 ×	10.84/1,000 words	18,293
Mark	391	30.16	11,025
Luke	281	15.60	19,376

[& remember that Mk. is much shorter than Mt. or Lk.]

°Streeter elaborates on the language and grammatical style of Mark: pp. 163–\*64: “Mark reads like a shorthand account of a story by an impromptu speaker—with all the repetitions, redundancies, and digressions which are characteristic of living speech. And it seems to me most probable that his Gospel...was taken down from rapid dictation by word of mouth. ... \*Matthew and Luke regularly emend awkward or ungrammatical sentences....” A key argument (DJG 788) If Matt. or Luke were original, Why would Mark “degrade” their Greek since he was largely copying their work. It makes much better sense that Matt. & Luke polished the relatively rough Greek of Mark.

Note Carson/Moo/Morris concl.—*Intro/NT*, 38—sane, well-balanced

### Guthrie’s proposed theory of the origins of the Synoptic Gospels

Guthrie’s theory is in basic agreement with the overall structure of Streeter’s theory summarized above. (#s1–2, 6 summarized, 3–5 quoted)

Stage 1: apostolic preaching, emphasizing the passion, but also including a summary of Jesus’ life and ministry prior to the cross.

Stage 2: Instruction of new converts would have included the teachings of Jesus [as Mt. 28:19–20 instructed], either orally, or perhaps also in written form.

“Stage 3: Mark, who had had close contact with Peter and had many times heard Peter preach, reduced the content of Peter’s preaching to writing. The result was a Gospel with more action than discourse. ... If the external tradition is correct, Mark and Peter were together at Rome and after Peter’s departure Mark wrote down his recollections.

“Stage 4: After the production of Mark’s Gospel, probably at Rome, Matthew may have come into possession of a copy of it and have been led to expand it by the addition of a considerable amount of teaching material from the catechesis [instructional material for new converts] and other material, some of which was drawn from personal reminiscences....

“Stage 5: Luke, who was personally acquainted with Mark, conceived a plan to write a careful account of the course of events from the beginning (i.e. from the advent of Jesus). He studied all the material he could lay his hands upon and all the reports given to him orally by eye witnesses. He appears to have had a copy of Mark....”

Stage 6: Various churches used one of these three gospels, depending on what was available to them. As copies of them circulated among the churches, eventually a collection of gospels came together, much as Paul's writings were eventually collected into one corpus.

### Objections to Marcan priority

1. Matthew & Luke sometimes agree (in content) with each other against Mark. (= Q)
2. Luke omits all of Mark 6:45–8:26—unusual if Luke used Mark as his exemplar. (“The Great Omission”)
3. Mark has some bits of info not in Matt. or Luke, even when they include the same event in their record.
4. The early church fathers held to the priority of Matthew.
5. Marcan priority requires that Matthew and Luke be written after A.D. 70—something most conservative scholars are unwilling to do.

#### Rebuttal:

1. The agreements of Matthew and Luke are very small ( 6%) and can be explained by other common sources (perhaps oral tradition?).
2. The gospel writers selected material according to their own purposes. It would not be at all unusual for Luke to omit such a section if it did not fit his specific purposes. (The section of Mark in question may have interrupted Luke's theme of Jesus' “journey to Jerusalem.”)
3. The omission of smaller bits of information is likewise fully in accord with the author's prerogative. (cf. previous point)
4. The argument re: the early church father's view of Matthean priority is based largely on the canonical order of the books (Mt., Mk., Lk.), not on any specific concern regarding the chronological order of writing.
5. Marcan priority does *not* require dating the other Synoptics after A.D. 70. Mark may be dated in the late 50s (perhaps 57–59), allowing adequate time for Matthew and Luke/Acts. (The latest date possible for Acts is A.D. 62.)

Specific comments regarding Eta Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?*

1. She presents the issue as a relatively modern invention of liberals who deliberately developed the problem and the technique in an effort to discredit the authority of Scripture. Although it is true that some scholars had this motive (e.g., Lessing), the first discussion was by *Augustine* (hardly a liberal!) who argued that the verbal similarities were to be explained on the basis of Matthean priority. [*The Harmony of the Gospels*, 1.2] Carson, Moo, Morris (*Intro/ NT*, 31) say that this was the standard view from 4th–19th C. 2. She assumes an Aramaic original of Matthew. (One could be facetious and suggest that this is a “critical view” and therefore ought to be rejected!) (188–89)

**Mark 13:14**

But when you see

the abomination of desolation

standing where it should not  
be

(let the reader understand)

then let those who are in Judea  
flee to the mountains

**Matthew 24:15f**

Therefore when you see

the abomination of desolation

which was spoken of through  
Daniel the prophet

standing in the holy place

(let the reader understand)

then let those who are in Judea  
flee to the mountains

*Mt. makes stmt. more explicit  
by specifying **where** the a.d.  
will be, and also notes that  
Daniel prophesied this event  
also.*

**Luke 21:20f**

When you see

Jerusalem surrounded by  
armies, then recognize that

her desolation is at hand.

then let those who are in Judea  
flee to the mountains

*Luke, writing for Gentiles, is  
content to speak of Jerusalem  
in general.*