What the Q?

Attempting to Answer the Synoptic Problem

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Introduction

The study of the Gospels has been a subject of exploration amongst scholars since just after the inception of Canonized Scripture. All four Gospels, bound together in codex form and presented as a four-fold accounting of a single Gospel was available to the Church from about the third century forward. The study of the three synoptic gospels—thus labeled from the combination of two Greek words meaning „seeing together"—was initiated with the creation of the first Synopsis by Johann Jakob Griesbach in 1776. This Synopsis is „a book in which parallel accounts in the Gospels are placed side by side for the sake of comparison." This differed from previous harmonizing that was assumed between the Gospels, and assisted with a new scholarly approach to similarities and differences.

What, then, is the Synoptic Problem? Goodacre defines it as follows: „The Synoptic Problem might be defined as the study of the similarities and differences of the Synoptic Gospels in an attempt to explain their literary relationship." Though labeled as a problem, this is something of a misnomer. „This terminology is less than ideal, however, in that it seems already to presuppose that there is a *problem* to be solved rather than an opportunity to view Jesus from a variety of complementary perspectives that enrich rather than contradict one another." These parallel comparisons, which fall into distinct categories (to be discussed further), enable the analysis of both differences and similarities. „The interconnections between the Synoptic Gospels are not, however, only those of close resemblances but also those of striking differences … even in those passages that indicate a close relationship between the three, minor differences continually appear".

Source criticism—which, in effect, is what the scrutinized study of the Synoptic Gospels and their respective origins is—is beneficial for a number of reasons. First, an in-depth study of the Biblical texts allows for a greater understanding of the historical-grammatical context, which in turn gives the reader an increased sense of what the author is trying to convey. Though this context is not the intent of source criticism, it is a gainful byproduct. Primarily, it allows for redaction criticism, which enables the scholar to distill various perspectives into a concentrated study of theological intent. As such, the study of the Synoptic Gospels proves entirely profitable for the would-be scholar and lay student alike.

There are four categories of similarities that are examined in Gospel Synopsis: 1) Similarities in wording; 2) Similarities in order; 3) Similarities in parenthetical and explanatory material; 4) Similarities in Old Testament quotations.

Similarities in Wording

There are several accounts between the Synoptic Gospels which contain text that is identical, or very nearly so. Kostenberger et al uses the texts of Matt 16:21-23, Mark 8:31-33, and Luke 9:21-22 as a case study for the potential interconnectedness of the texts. Potential solutions aside (though they mention Markan priority and Griesbach as potentials, which will be discussed later), the similarities do give pause for consideration. The fact that each Gospel was written independently is not under consideration; that much seems obvious. What does mandate consideration is this: in what likelihood is the possibility that three independent authors use identical text or phrasing for their writings? Ex:

Matt 16:21

„From then on Jesus began to point out to His disciples that **He must** go to Jerusalem **and suffer many things** from the **elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and** be raised the third day."

Mark 8:31

„Then He began to teach them that the Son of Man must **suffer many things** and be rejected by the elders**,** the chief priests, **and the scribes, be killed, and** rise after three days."

Luke 9:21-22

„But He strictly warned and instructed them to tell this to no one, 22 saying, 'The Son of Man **must suffer many things** and be rejected by the **elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and** be raised the third day.'"

Note that in all three verses, the text which is in bold is shared and almost identical to the other verses. There are a variety of other features which could be paralleled and explored, but the point remains clear: the likelihood of such an occurrence dictates that there must be a shared source from which three

independent texts originated, to some degree. The configuration of such a source or sources remains a question central to the Synoptic Problem.

Similarities in Order

There are self-contained units of narratives contained in the Gospels, termed „pericopes". While it is not as surprising that they occur—in most instances—in all the Synoptic Gospels, the order in which they do so is. Utilizing fifteen periscopes from the early ministry of Jesus, Kostenberger et al acknowledge a significant pattern of consistency in the accounts; they state that „the Gospels share a remarkable similarity in the order of the periscopes." Respective to the chronological order of Christ's early activities, the order is almost universally aligned throughout the texts. While this examination of the texts points strongly to either the Griesbach or Markan solutions to the Synoptic Problem, it cannot conclusively answer the questions of order or origin, „but must be used in conjunction with the study of other types of similarities and differences."

Similarities in Parenthetical and Explanatory Material

A possible explanation of similarity between the Synoptic Gospels can be derived from the examination of material that is either A) Accurate in its reporting of Christ's words, or B) Demonstrated by literary dependence. For example, the text in Matt 24:15 and Mark 13:14 (though it is absent from the same pericope in Luke 21:20-22), specifically considering the shared parenthetical statement „Let the reader understand". Kostenberger et al explain that this statement may be viewed with two different perspectives. First, in the case for accurate reporting: These words could be quotation of Jesus as recorded by those listening to Him speak. He could have articulated the words Himself as a direct reference of those reading the text. However, the common Jew in Jesus' day could not have afforded to own the text himself, and would have either been rich, or in a synagogue listening to the reading. This would seem to indicate that, perhaps, the similarity occurs then because of a literary dependence; that is, whomever wrote the secondary document used the original as a source. To further illustrate this possibility, consider the texts Matt 27:18: and of Mark 15:10: „For he knew they had handed Him over because of envy" (Matthew); „For he knew it was because of envy that the chief priests had handed Him over" (Mark). This similar examples presents a more complicate query; if these were the thoughts of Jesus, how could accuracy of reporting be possible? In all probability, „the similarity in content and wording strongly suggests literary dependence."

Similarities in Old Testament Quotations

Because New Testament authors quote the Old Testament in a variety of ways, it is important to take note of the quotations being made. Kostenberger et al explains several ways the quotations are made: a strict translation from Hebrew to Greek; a verbatim reproduction of the text in the Septuagint; the verbatim rendering of text in the Targums; the writer's own paraphrasing; sometimes, it is a blending of multiple texts in the form of a single reference.

Consider the following New Testament quotation from the Synoptic Gospels, which blends verses from both Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1:

Mathew 11:10

„Look, I am sending My messenger ahead of You; he will prepare Your way before You."

Mark 1:2

„Look, I am sending My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way."

Luke 7:27

„Look, I am sending My messenger ahead of You; he will prepare Your way before You."

Mark 15:10 : Ps 37:1

This quotation is a synthesis of two Old Testament prophetic messages. Found in one Gospel, this may not be an extraordinary occurrence. However, it is found in all three Synoptic Gospels in precisely the same fashion. It is rendered identical, which again points to the interconnectedness of the Synoptic Gospels. The literary dependence is in this fashion unmistakable, but points back to the Synoptic Problem. The question still exists, what is or are the primary source(s)?

Possible solutions to the Synoptic Problem

Although cursory in breadth and scope, the following are two major hypotheses for the solution to the Synoptic Problem, and explanation for the supplemental use of Q, and two minor hypotheses.

Two-Gospel Hypothesis

The Two-Gospel hypothesis (or Griesbach Hypothesis) is the product of J.J. Griesbach, produced in 1783. Griesbach proposed the following order for the Synoptics: 1) Matthew; 2) Luke; 3) Mark. Utilizing Matthew as the source for both

Mark and Luke's Gospels, Griesbach based his findings on the following: A) Church tradition argues (almost completely) that Matthew's Gospel was the first to be written. It is placed first canonically, and is argued to be a primary text due to Matthew being an apostle, whereas Mark was not. B) Matthew and Luke's texts are identical or strikingly similar, while differing from Mark. Mark was proposed to have copied the texts of Matthew and Luke, „with the exception of these minor elements that did not affect the sense of the passage." C) The use of redundancy in Mark's text (some 213 occurrences) can be easily explained by examining the corresponding passages in Matthew and Luke (though this is disputed in examination of Markan priority). Mark, in his use of Mathew and Luke as source texts (Matthew as primary, Luke secondary), would simply „have combined and abbreviated his sources." D) Perhaps the most significant point for this hypothesis—it does not require the use of a hypothetical (or perhaps nonexistent) source such as Q.

Markan Priority

The Markan Priority Hypothesis assets that Mark's Gospel served as the primary source text for both Matthew and Luke. It is supported by several arguments: A) Mark's text is the shortest of the three Synoptic Gospels. Though it lacks the length of Matthew and Luke (and for some reason does not contain certain lengthier pericopes such as the Sermon on the Mount and and the narrative of Christ's birth), it does provide the same accounts, only longer and with greater details. Further, as Kostenberger et al points out, "it is easier to explain Matthew and Luke expanding Mark than Mark abbreviating Matthew and Luke at the expense of such significant testimonies to Jesus." B) Mark uses a system of transliteration—that is, the converting of text from one writing system to another—on the Aramaic text to that of Greek. His Greek was certainly less refined than that of Matthew and Luke, who tend to translate their texts into the Greek language, and who, most likely, improved upon Mark's rough transliteration. C) There exists a certain difficulty in the readings of Mark. Texts which contain a certain complexity, such as Mark 10:18, tend to read with less complexity in other texts:

Mark 10:18

„Why do you call Me good?" Jesus asked him. „No one is good but One—God."

Matthew 19:17

„Why do you ask Me about what is good? … There is only One who is good."

As with the case of the brevity of Mark's text, it is easier to understand Matthew and Luke making Mark's text less complicated, rather than Mark intentionally making theirs more difficult. D) With respect to the ordering of the pericopes within the three Synoptic texts, when the account in question also exists in Mark, the ordering seldom disagrees with Mark. When it does not appear in Mark,

however, but only Matthew and Luke, then the ordering in Matthew tend to disagree. In effect, Mark's Gospel allows for a greater harmonization.

Q Hypothesis

The term „Q" is short for the German word *Quelle*, which means „source". Q is a hypothetical document—hypothetical, because no evidence of it has ever been found. However, evidence of such a document does exist in the writings of Matthew and Luke. According to Markan priority, Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source for their texts; however, there is material in them that is not found in Mark. It is proposed, therefore, that the writing embedded in these texts came from an anonymous, as yet unfound source; hence the term „Q". Darrell L. Bock, in his essay *Questions about Q*, argues that „the case for Q, even though it is a posited source, is plausible based on the internal evidence of the biblical text." The Q Hypothesis finds its place in both Markan Priority and the Two Source Hypothesis.

The Q Hypothesis has been strongly supported by B.H. Streeter, among others. There has been some speculation that Q could have been from a plurality of sources, a combination, perhaps of oral and written. Streeter proposes that Q was a written document, composed in Greek.

Q is proposed to be a collection of the saying of Jesus. The words of Christ would not have been in Greek—Aramaic, rather—but the explanation is easy enough to accept. From the Editorial Board of the International Q Project: „Although Jesus' mother tongue would seem to have been Aramaic, his sayings were very early on translated into Greek and collected into small clusters, which were brought together into the Sayings Gospel Q."

Two-Document Hypothesis

This hypothesis also argues that Mark's Gospel was written first. It asserts that Matthew and Luke wrote their Gospels independently, though utilizing Mark extensively in combination with a Q document. Later revitalized by B.H. Streeter, this hypothesis finds its origination as early as 1794 by Eichhorn.

Farrer-Goulder Hypothesis

This hypothesis states that Markan priority was in effect for the composition of Matthew, and then Luke, who used both Mark and Matthew. It disposes of the notion of the Q source, and is constructed on the notion of minor agreements in Luke and Matthew against Mark.

Conclusion

In evaluation of the major and minor theories presented as potential solutions to the Synoptic Problem, Markan Priority appears to be the most viable for several reasons. First and foremost, the similarities in the Synopsis that point to the correlation of ordering cannot be overlooked. As aforementioned, where Mark includes the same pericopes as Matthew and Luke, the ordering against Mark is almost nonexistent. Second, the brevity of the Gospel with respect to Mark and Luke (and without even factoring in the consideration of increased depth and more extensive details), it is far less probable, as mentioned, for Matthew and Luke to have both condensed their texts in light of Mark, rather than them expanding to include additional material. Excluding accounts of Christ's birth narrative and the Sermon on the Mount would almost certainly have been cause to eliminate from canonical possibility. Third, while the existence of Q has always been, and will most likely always be a topic for debate, there is no questioning the veracity of the sayings of Christ, regardless of their sourcing. As Blomberg states in his essay *The Synoptic Problem: Where We Stand at The Start of a New Century*, „It would be surprising if early Christians never created such a compendium of *the best of Jesus*"— Christ's words, whether from Q or another source, and the core of New Testament studies, as is found in Christological development—which is another subject altogether. It should suffice to have been illustrated that the study of the Synoptic Gospels proves entirely profitable for the would-be scholar and lay student alike.