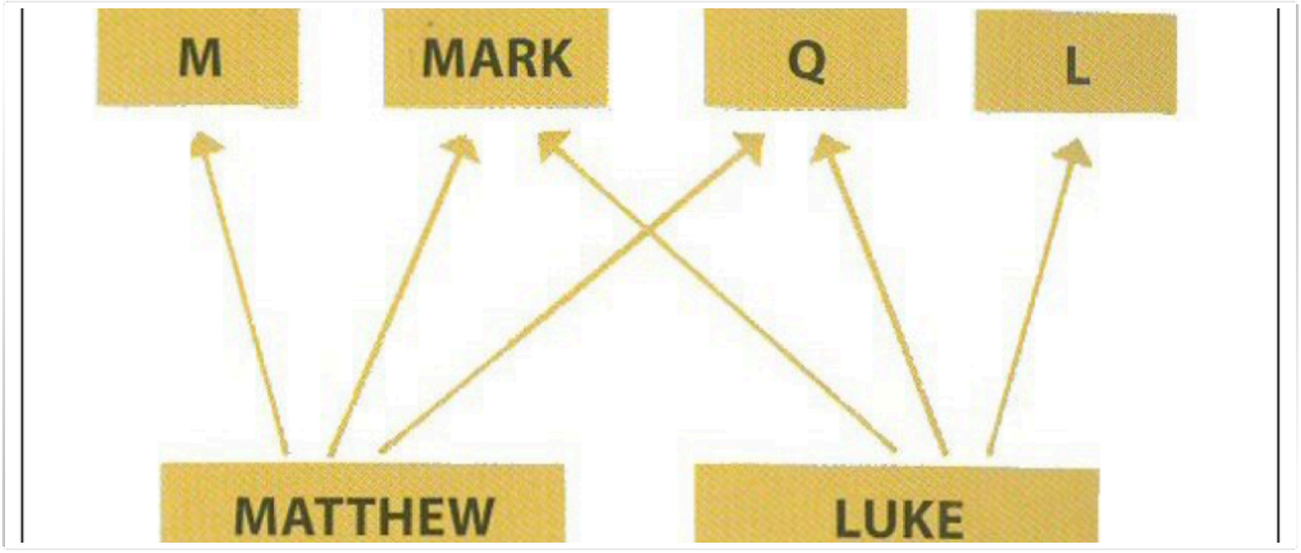



# Luke 1:1-4 And The Synoptic Problem

Timothy Berg

Like 1

Thursday, August 24, 2017

In Luke 1:1-4, Luke introduces his Gospel and Acts. We noted in our introduction to Luke-Acts that one of the important things that Luke's prologue tells is is that he used written sources. Luke explained,

> *"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught."*
> *(Luke 1:1–4 ESV)*

Luke describes others who have gone before him who have written up accounts of "the things accomplished among us" (where "accomplished" means "fulfilled according to the divine plan to bring the gospel to pass"). Luke intends to write a historically accurate account of the early traditions of the Jesus story. He was not himself an eyewitness to that story, nor is he in the first group to write up literary accounts, but he is a recipient of the traditions. Note that he explains that these traditions were "delivered" unto us. This is technical language (as we explained here) for the passing on of authoritative tradition. Luke, while not himself in that first category of "eyewitness" of the gospel events, nor in that second category of authors who wrote based on that tradition, but seems to have come into contact with men and women who were, and seeks to share in his gospel that historic content. It is striking how Luke describes these first eyewitnesses. They were "eyewitness and ministers of the word." The connection of eyewitness and service make a profound point. Those who had seen the gospel happen could not help but become slaves of the gospel message itself. When Luke uses the phrase "the word," he refers to the gospel message. Marshall explains, "[word] thus signifies the Christian message, unchanging in its central emphasis, but variable in its form and detailed exposition..." (Marshall, NIGTC, Luke pg. 42). Luke seems almost to personify the gospel message (which he will do throughout his work), and to suggest that Christ-followers are but slaves to the message of the gospel. Luke has himself carefully researched the historical data "having followed all things closely for some time past," and is prepared now to set out his research in writing, and to add his voice to the many other written accounts circulating that told the Jesus story.

# The So-Called Synoptic Problem

But when we compare Luke's account with the other canonical gospels in particular, we realize that there is a literary relationship between them that must be defined. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as the "Synoptic Gospels." The word "synoptic" means, "to see the same." These three Gospels are sometimes very different, and other times very alike (occasionally down to their very wording). They clearly have some literary relationship to each other. The question of what exactly this literary relationship is has come to be called "the synoptic problem." Carson and Moo put the issues into focus when they write of the Synoptic authors,

> *"How did the authors get the material about Jesus that they have used? Why are the three accounts so similar at so many places and so different at others? What was the role of the evangelists themselves? Recorders of tradition? Authors with a viewpoint of their own? And, to raise the larger question that lurks behind all of these, why four gospels? These and similar questions have occupied thoughtful Christians since the beginning of the church. A second-century Christian, Tatian, combined all four gospels together in his Diatessaron. Augustine wrote a treatise entitled The Harmony of the Gospels. But scholars have pursued these questions especially vigorously since the rise of modern biblical criticism at the end of the eighteenth century."*
> (Carson, D. A.; Moo, Douglas J.. *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Kindle Locations 1673-1679). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.)

## Similarities Between The Gospels

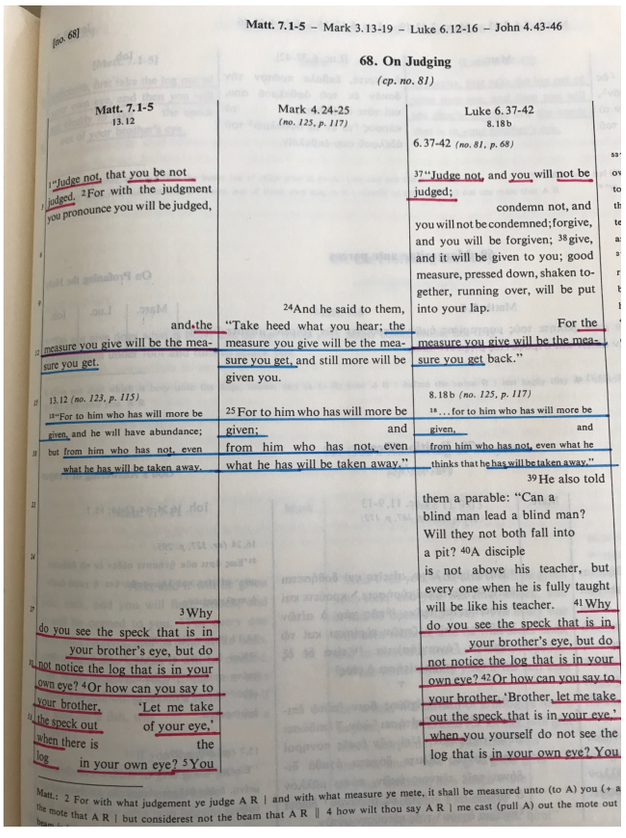
Ultimately, the "Synoptic Problem" is simply an attempt to wrestle with two realities, and come up with an explanation for both;

1. The Synoptic Gospels are remarkably similar.
2. The Synoptic Gospels are remarkably different.

Occasionally some well-meaning individual will claim that there is no literary relationship between the Synoptic Gospels. That "The Gospel writers just wrote what they did because that's what the Spirit told them to write." Yet this claim sharply contradicts the words of Luke in his prologue. And it simply doesn't account for the actual evidence. Craig Blomberg details four reasons why such a claim doesn't work (in addition to the fact that Luke expressly claims the opposite). *First*, the parallelism between two of the synoptic gospels is often verbatim through whole clauses or sentences, or at times identical except for the occasional substituted synonymous word. *Second*, it is surprising that this verbatim agreement occurs often even in sayings of Jesus that were originally uttered in Aramaic, but are represented now in Greek translation. If it is hard to think two people would independently record someone's exact words, it is even more hard to believe, given the extreme complexities and subjectivity of translation, that two different historians would both translate those words in the same way. *Third*, the agreement between the Synoptics extends often even to parenthetical comments or explanatory asides by an author. For example, both Matt. 24:15 and Mark 24:15 interrupt the words of Jesus in the Olivet Discourse to insert a parenthetic remark to the reader (not the hearer, which is who Jesus would have addressed). Or, for example, in Matt. 9:6 and Mark 2:10, both authors break off in the middle of Jesus words to add the parenthetical aside "he said to the paralytic" before resuming with Jesus' words to the paralytic. "These would be extraordinary coincidences if Matthew and Mark had no knowledge of each other or some common written document. (Blomberg, Craig, "*Jesus and the Gospels*," pg. 98) *Fourth*, the parallelism often extends even to the sequences of the stories as told.

## Differences Between The Gospels

But in addition to these striking similarities, one sees between almost any two accounts in any two of the gospels striking *differences* as well. The average Bible reader often doesn't notice these differences because he reads one gospel from beginning to end, then reads the next gospel from beginning to end, and so simply thinks them the same story, since he doesn't look very closely. But when one reads the gospels in parallel, as set out in a synopsis, the differences are strikingly obvious. And this is without even mentioning how the selection of which stories to include and in which order is unique to each gospel. For example, one may read over the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, and read the section on "judging" in 7:1-5, where Jesus says to judge not, and that the measure you give out will be the measure given to you. One may later read the similar words in the parallel in Mark 4:24-25 and remember them with a sense of deja vu as he reads, "to him who has will more be given, and from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away." Then one might come to Luke's Sermon on the Plain, recall the similar words and conclude that all three gospels are identical.


[no. 68]

Matt. 7.1-5 – Mark 3.13-19 – Luke 6.12-16 – John 4.43-46

**68. On Judging**

*(cp. no. 81)*

| Matt. 7.1-5 13.12 | Mark 4.24-25 *(no. 125, p. 117)* | Luke 6.37-42 8.18b |
|---|---|---|
| | | 6.37-42 *(no. 81, p. 68)* |
| 1 "Judge not, that you be not judged. 2 For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, | | 37 "Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; 38 give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. |
| and the measure you give will be the measure you get. | 24 And he said to them, "Take heed what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. | For the measure you give will be the measure you get back." |
| 13.12 *(no. 123, p. 115)* 12 "For to him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. | 25 For to him who has will more be given; and from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away." | 8.18b *(no. 125, p. 117)* 18 . . . for to him who has will more be given, and from him who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away." |
| | | 39 He also told them a parable: "Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit? 40 A disciple is not above his teacher, but every one when he is fully taught will be like his teacher. |
| 3 Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 4 Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? 5 You | | 41 Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 42 Or how can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You |

Matt.: 2 For with what judgement ye judge A R | and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured unto (to A) you (+ a
the mote that A R | but considerest not the beam that A R ‖ 4 how wilt thou say A R | me cast (pull A) out the mote out

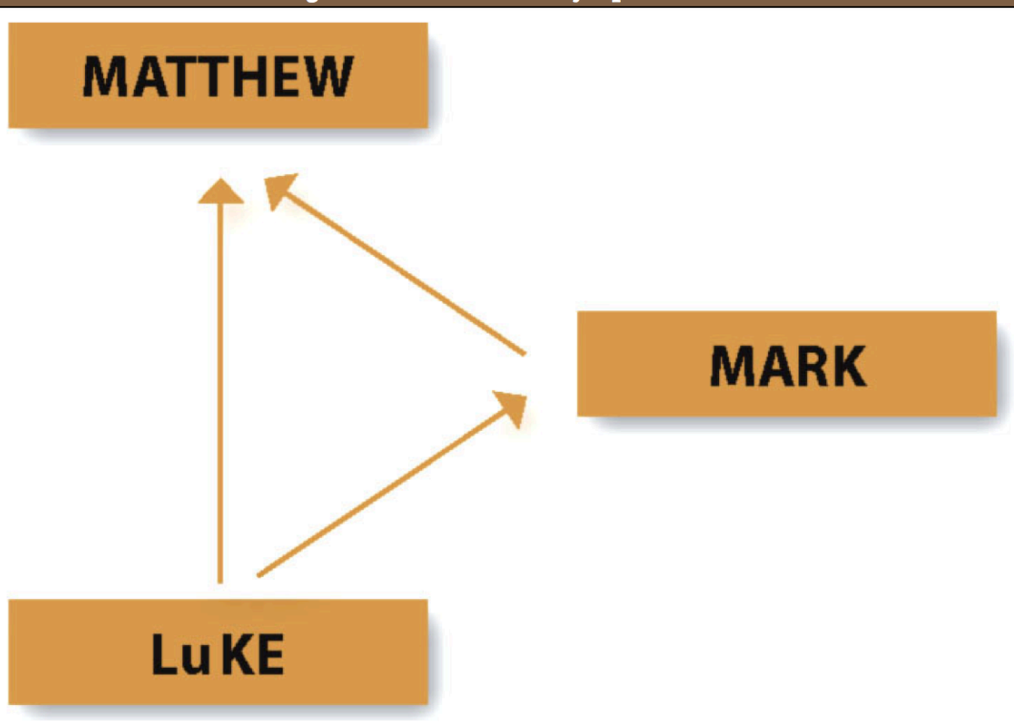
But if one looks more closely, reading the texts in parallel, he will note the exceptional differences. Mark includes his words in the context of Jesus teaching the 12 about parables after the kingdom parables (which Matthew places as a separate section in Matthew 13), with no words about judging, and no parable about specks and logs. Luke on the other hand has incorporated most of the words on judging into his Sermon on the plain (Luke 6:37-42), including Jesus' words that "for the measure you give will be the measure you get back," and ending with the parable about a a speck and and a log. But the words of Jesus "for to him who has will more be given, and from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away" Luke has moved to Luke 8:18. Matthew has handled the material differently. He likewise incorporates Jesus's words "judge not" into the sermon on the Mount, and ends with a similar parable about specks and logs (which Mark seems to know nothing of), but then takes the same words that Luke displaced from their preceding statements as found in Mark 4:24-25, and moves them to his collection of parables in Matthew 13:12. A synopsis might set these various parallels out as follows (see at right);

But the superficially simple clear verbal agreement might obscure the fact that one is reading a collection of sayings that are spread out over five different locations between three gospels. Such differences abound in practically every parallel passage in the synoptic gospels.

Or, for another example, we could zoom into the surrounding context in Mark 4. Jesus shares the famous parable of the sower, the seed, and the soils (Mark. 4:1-9), then provides a private explanation to the disciples (Mark 4:10-20). Then he launches into the parable of the lamp under the basket, (Mark 4:21-25), the parable of the seed growing (Mark 4:26-29), the parable of the mustard seed (4:30-32) and notes that Jesus told many other parables as well on this occasion (Mark 4:33-34), before crossing to the other side of the lake (Mark 4:35-41). Fairly straightforward. Matthew retains much of this order in his collection of parables in Matthew 13. He shares the same parable of the Sower and seed (with modification) in Mt. 13:1-9, the same private explanation in Matt. 13:10-17 (with an added quotation from Isaiah in Matt. 13:14-15), and the same interpretation of parable in 13:18-23. But then he interrupts the context with a parable from his sources that Mark didn't know, the parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:24-30). He deletes Marks parable of the seed growing (from Mark 4:26-29), But right before it, what has he done with Mark's parable of the light under the bushel? He has moved it to an entirely different context in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:15), and uses part of the end of that saying in a yet different context in Matt. 10:26. We noted already how he displaces the section on Judging. Then, he includes the same parable as Mark about the mustard seen (Matt. 13:31-32). He adds a parable about leaven (Matt. 13:33), before coming to the same explanation of parables Mark had (Mark 4:33-34/ Matt. 13:34-35). He adds an explanation of the parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:36-43), and a new parable of hidden treasure (Matt. 13:44-46) and a Net (Matt. 13:47-50), and ends the section not with Jesus crossing the sea and performing a miracle of calming the storm as in Mark 4:35-41, but simply returning home, where Matthew explicitly says he *didn't* perform a miracle (Matt. 13:53-58). And what about Luke? Luke keeps the same section where Jesus presents the parable of the sower and soils, and explains it, in Luke 8:1-15). He keeps the light under the bushel in Mark's place (Luke 8:16-17), and part of the saying on Judging (Luke 8:18). The seed growing disappears. The parable of the weeds is unknown to him anywhere. He keeps the parable of the mustard seed, but not here in this context. Rather, he moves that parable to Luke 13:18-19, while Jesus is teaching in the synagogue rather than the seaside. He puts the parable of the leaven that Matthew knew in this context (Matt. 13:33) into the same synagogue context in Luke 13:20-21. At the end of the section, Luke retains (against Matthew) the entrance into the boat and the stilling of the storm (Luke 8:22-25).

The point is - the synoptic gospels are amazingly alike. And at other times amazingly different. How do we understand this literary relationship?
Scholars have since almost the very beginning of the church been trying to answer that question. Augustine suggested that Matthew wrote first, and that Mark used Matthew, and Luke used both Matthew and Mark. Mark Strauss sets out his view as follows;

**Figure 2.2**
**Augustine's Solution to the Synoptic Problem**

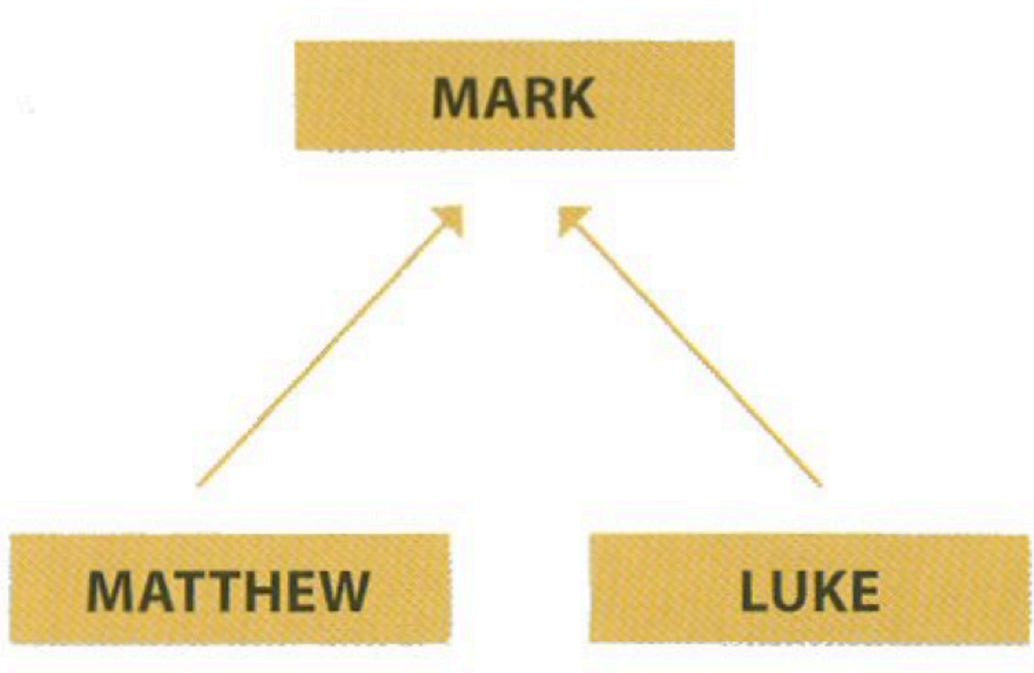



**Augustine's View**

Arrows indicate a dependent relationship. Arrows to Mark and Matthew from Luke indicate Luke used both of these as sources.

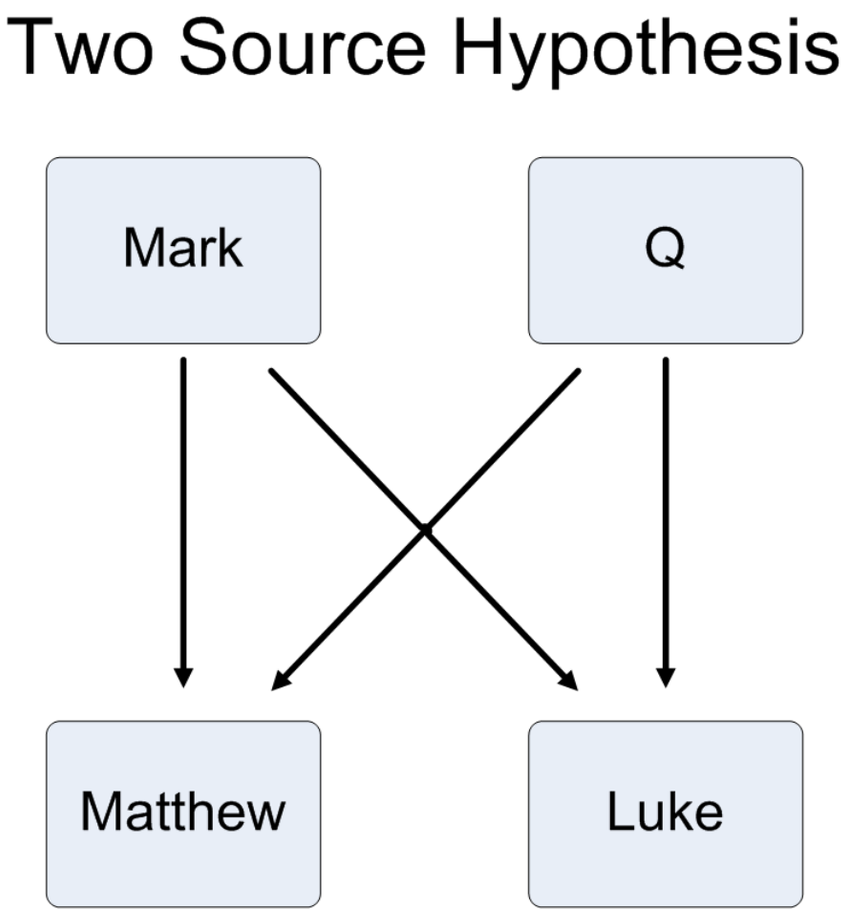
Most scholars accept the view called *Markan priority* (the view that Mark was written first). I have heard Craig Evans say that some 97% of scholars hold that view, but I've also seen a revival of Matthean priority (the older view that Matthew was written first), and so those numbers probably aren't as sharp today. This is not the place to make a case for Markan priority. Still, most scholars accept some form of Markan priority, in a variety of different modifications. That is, that Mark was written first, and that Matthew and Luke both used Mark, but didn't use each other.

**Figure 2.4—Markan Priority**



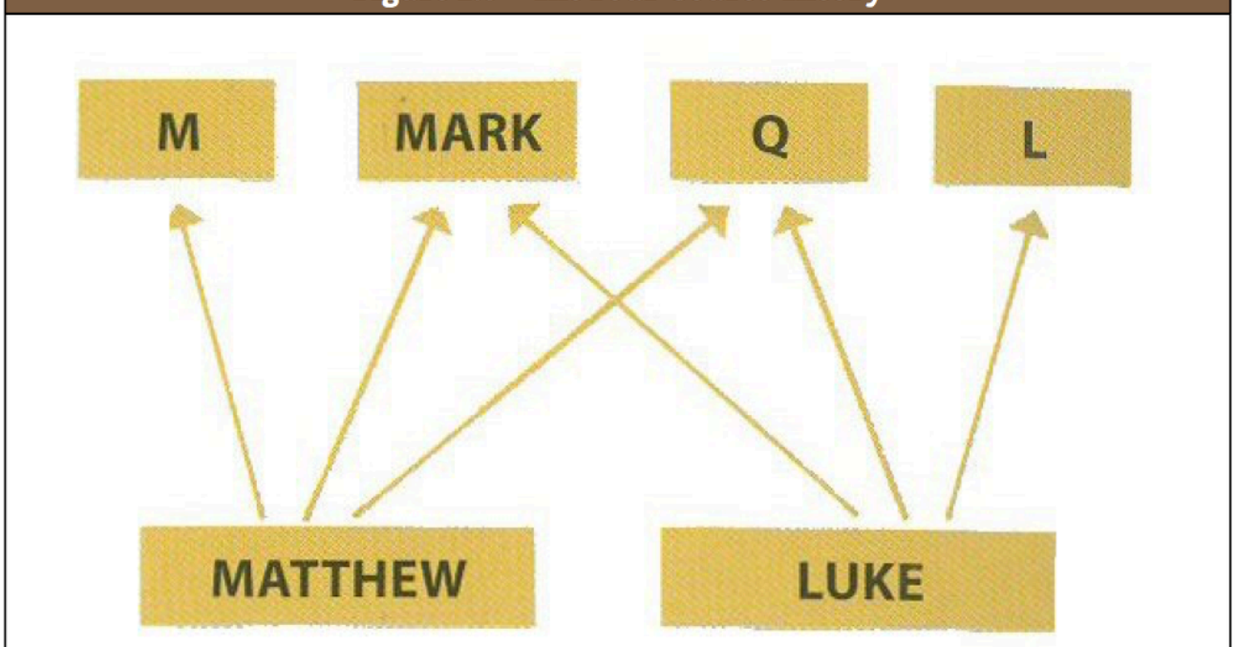

## The Existence of Q

A large number of scholars also believe that Matthew and Luke both had an additional source/sources (sometimes called "Q" which is short for the German word for "source"). For example, we noted above that both Matthew and Luke have added material like the parable of the leaven (Matt. 13:31/ Luke 13:20-21) which they seem to both share, but which doesn't come from Mark. Similar material shared by Matthew and Luke, but not Mark or John can be found in Canon V of the Eusebian Canons. Some scholars think this was a written document (which we no longer have). Others think it may have been only oral traditions passed down that Matthew and Luke both had access to. Most simply use "Q" as a designation for shared sources of any kind, whether written, or oral, or both. One group of scholars have painstakingly placed together all the places where Matthew and Luke share material not found in Mark, and combined them to reconstruct "Q." Their volume has become the standard work on Q. But it must be noted that the only access that we have to this source today is through Matthew and Luke. We can plot the basic relationships in this position on the Synoptic problem as follows;




B. H. Streeter proposed a modified form of the two-source hypothesis. Recognizing that Matthew and Luke both independently made use of Mark (but not of each other), and that they also shared a source or sources between them that we no longer have access to (Q), he also noted that at times Mathew and Luke present material *unique* to their Gospel, and not shared with the other (The first and third parts of Canon X in the Eusebian Canons). Thus he proposed the additional two sources, "Special L" and "Special M," which are really just ways of speaking about material unique to each of these gospels that may go back to the sources they independently used. Such an understanding, which is basically the one we will proceed with in this series, can be set out in the diagram to the left.

**Figure 2.6—The Four-Source Theory**



Note that as diagramed here, Mark wrote the first of the canonical gospels. Matthew used Mark, and also made use of some source or sources which he shared with Luke (Q). In addition, he made use of some source or sources unique to him (Special M). Luke likewise used Mark, but did not have access to Matthew. He also used the same shared source with Matthew (Q). In addition, he made use of a source or sources unique to him (Special L).

Because we believe Luke is an author of inspired Scripture, if we want to understand what the Spirit says through him, it is important to note how he used his sources, and what he intended to say in his use of them. Each gospel writer exercised the three basic editorial processes of *selection*, *arrangement*, and *adaptation*. As Bible readers, we want to pay attention to what stories the Gospel writer selected to tell, how he arranged them into a whole, and how he adapted them to make his particular point.

This understanding of the literary relationship between the gospels becomes especially important from chapter 3 on in our study of the Gospel of Luke. The unique emphasis of Luke can often be seen, and thus his point most clearly heard, when we realize how he has edited his source material. These editorial changes give us a window into Luke's own intent, and behind Luke's intent, I believe, we can see the intent of the Holy Spirit who inspires him. Thus, we will have cause repeatedly to refer back to this likely solution to the Synoptic Problem.

If You Enjoyed it, Share This Blog!

Facebook | Twitter | LinkedIn

And Subscribe to The Blog Here!

Blog RSS

SEE ALSO

How The Gospel Reshapes Your Worth...
The church does just tolerate...

Single Not Dead: A Holy Handling Of The Single...
The possession of your sex...

Jesus > The Bible (Part 2)
Jesus is the core of the...

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Exegesis | Bible | Kjv |
| Kjvo | Kjv Only | Textual Criticism |
| Gifts | Gospel | Fundamentalism |
| Preservation | Resurrection | Textus Receptus |
| Reformation | Luther | Neo-Fundamentalism |
| New Testament | Tongues | Apologetics |

0 Comments

Sort by Oldest

Add a comment...

Facebook Comments plugin

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Church History | Eschatology | Kingdom |
| Tr Only | Tyndale | Apostolic Fathers |
| Commentaries | Easter | Gospels |
| Jesus | Luke | Sex |
| The Shire | Theology | Tr |
| Anabaptist | English Bible | Holy Week |
| Inaugurated Eschatology | King James Bible | King James Only |
| Lord Of The Rings | Luke-Acts | Missions |
| Objections To Christianity | Preaching | Protestant |
| Single | Singleness | Slander |
| Slavery | Song Of Songs | Technical Commentaries |
| Textual Essays | Translation | Acts |
| Already/Not Yet | Anabaptists | Apostles |
| Bible Study | Biblical Commentaries | Burgon |
| Ccm | Charismatic | Charity |
| Christmas | Christology | Chronology Of The Life Of Christ |
| Church History \ | Contemporary Issues | Cross |
| Cursing | D. A. Carson | Demonization |
| Die Hard | Doctrine Of Preservation | End Times |
| Exegesos | Exegsis | Faith |
| Fathers | Fundamentaism | Gordon Fee |
| Gospel Contradictions | Greek | Hands |
| Historical Jesus | Historical Theology | History |
| Homosexuality | Journal Of Travels | Kingdom Chronicles |
| Kingdom Of God | Kjvonly | Lewis |
| Liturgy | Marriage | Matthew |
| Mattthew | Minimal Facts | Music |
| Nt | Oh My God | Omg |
| Paraphrase | Pastor | Paul |
| Philosophy | Polycarp | Praying |
| Psalms | Radicals | Reformers |
| Satire | Sermon Notes | Sex Drive |
| Sexuality | Single Life | Singles |
| Spiritual Gifts | Spirituality | Strongs |
| Synoptic Problem | Taking The Lords Name In Vain | Tattoo |
| Text | The Doctrine Of Preservation | The Power Of The Tongue |
| The Singer | Translation Methods | Tro |
| Webster's | William Tyndale | Word Studies |
| Words | Worship | |