NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 9

The Synoptic Problem – Part One

I. INTRODUCTION

What are the synoptic gospels?

There are four gospels (accounts of the life of Christ) in the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Of those four books, three (Matthew, Mark and Luke) contain much of the same information and stories. All four are called the "synoptic" gospels. The term comes from the Greek word *sunoptikos*, which basically means "to see together."

What is the synoptic problem?

The first three gospels frequently contain common phrases, content, and similar arrangement. Still, a close read of these three gospels show many differences as well. While the arrangement is often similar, there are also significant differences. The material has differences in content as well.

Let's put this problem into a more practical example: Consider the resurrection of the Lord Jesus in each gospel:

MATTHEW 28

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it…. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified…"

MARK 16

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so they might go anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been

© Copyright 2006 by W. Mark Lanier. Permission hereby granted to reprint this document in its entirety without change, with reference given, and not for financial profit.

rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said, "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen!"

LUKE 24

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightening stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!"

What do we know for certain from all three passages? Mary Magdalene and a second Mary were at the tomb on the morning of the first day of the week, the stone was rolled away, and God's messenger declared the truth – Jesus had risen from the dead.

What do these passages leave us questioning? Several differences are readily apparent. First, Matthew mentions only one angel and has him sitting outside the tomb on the rolled away rock. Mark does not reference an angel, but a young man. Further, Mark seems to have him inside the tomb to the women's right. Luke has two men (not termed angels) "suddenly appearing" and standing next to the women. Second, an issue arises on the identity of the women. Matthew has Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary," while Mark has Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome. Luke merely has "the women."[1]

What truly happened? When? Where? And, what was truly said? These are issues that are considered part of the synoptic problem. At the core of this problem are two issues: (1) What is the view of scripture and its accuracy in reporting history? (2) How do the gospels interrelate to each other and how we can understand the events that are recorded? These questions merit careful consideration.

[1] Later in verse 10, Luke records the women talking to the Apostles after "they came back from the tomb," and there the women are identified as "Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them."

II. VIEW OF SCRIPTURE

Scholars hold a wide spectrum of views on scripture. On the far "left," there is a view that scripture is nothing more than an accumulation of ideas by a number of different authors with mistakes, errors, and slanted perspectives that come from a basic lack of God's involvement in the scriptures. Some who hold this perspective, even though they may teach in divinity schools and author religious books, are agnostic in faith. Religion and Biblical Studies are merely subjects to be mastered and explored much like history or sociology. Faith is not a requisite for these people.

On the far "right," there are those who believe that every word in the Bible is literally true and fits a "rationalistic" mindset that we would expect from a studied historian writing today.

Between these extreme views, there are innumerable divergent perspectives. Among the more notable views is the notion of that whom "accepts" the truth of events for teaching purposes, even though there is no acknowledgement that the events are accurately conveyed. In other words, let's consider the accounts accurate, even though they are not necessarily so. Another noteworthy view is one that says the Bible accurately conveys theology and the doctrine of salvation even though it does not accurately convey historical truth.

For our purposes, we will stick to our perspective of inerrancy set forward earlier in this class. The perspective we hold is that scripture is perfect and without error in what it claims to be and in what it sets forward for itself. However, as we examine the synoptic problem and read various works from others, we always need to be mindful of the author's view of scripture because it will affect the approach on the synoptic problem.

III. RELATION OF THE GOSPELS

This issue of how the gospels are related to one another can be somewhat complicated. There have been a number of theories advanced for who wrote which of the synoptic gospels, when the gospels were written, and how the three gospels relate to each other. There are four basic approaches:

A. Oral Tradition.

This view holds that the three gospels were written based upon oral traditions that were in circulation at the time. This view also holds that natural differences would be recorded depending upon the version in oral circulation used by each author.

This view presents a number of problems. First, it assumes late authorship for the gospels. Second, this approach is inconsistent with our inerrant view of scripture. Third, it seems inadequate in explaining some of the identical phraseology of the various synoptic gospels.[2]

B. Successive writers.

This view is much more consistent with the inerrancy approach to scripture. It holds that the books were written in an order where the various authors had use of the earlier synoptics. A key to this approach involves determining the order in which the gospels were written. In other words, Matthew may have been authored first, followed by Mark and Luke. When Mark was writing his gospel, he had access to Matthew, Luke had access to Matthew and Mark, or some other combination depending on the order written.

C. Unknown Primitive Gospel.

This view holds that there was an unknown primitive gospel of which we no longer have any copies. Often this unknown, hypothetical gospel carries the name or label of "Q." Q stands for the German word *quelle*, which means "source." A glaring problem that plagues this approach is that we have literally over 7,000 copies of all or part of the New Testament along with a great number of other "Christian era" writings that Orthodox faith does not consider scripture. Yet, there is not even one copy, whole or partial, of this alleged source document Q. Surprisingly, this theory (in some form or another) holds sway in most scholastic circles today.

D. Multiple Gospelets.

[2] While we did not detail the many similarities of the synoptics, we should point out that Matthew, Mark, and Luke frequently use identical Greek phrasing in a number of passages. While it is possible that in the Mediterranean world where these gospels were written, the oral tradition used identical phrasing (like "Little pig, little pig, let me in" when people tell the story of the Three Little Pigs). It is highly unlikely that the many, many examples of identical phrasing in some minor places that do not merit special attention were the fruit of oral tradition.

This view holds that there was not one Q, *i.e.*, not one unknown source gospel, but rather there were many small gospelets. These would have been small tracts that spoke about various events in the history of Christ. Many scholars do not endorse this view. It has the problem of the Q theory, in that there is no record or copy of such gospelets, multiplied by the fact that many more tracts are missing.

Among these four, I posit the successive writer theory as most credible. This view is consistent with the statements of scripture and with the accounts of early church history. There are a few adjustments I make to the theory!

In looking at the successive writer theory, it is useful to theorize about the authorship and order of the gospels. In working through this theory, we should emphasize that we are theorizing…these are not "known facts." Still, it is useful because it shows that the synoptic problem does not invalidate our view of scripture. While we may not have the definitive answer, we can certainly see possibilities that are cogent, realistic, and make sense.

IV. ORDER OF THE GOSPELS

Do you ever wonder why the gospels are put into our Bibles in the order they are? This question is especially pertinent when we remember that Luke wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. Then why, at the least, are the books not ordered Matthew, Mark, John, Luke, and Acts?

Our ordering of the gospels in today's Bibles is based on the order the early church gave in lists as well as in most codexes (the early "books"). Most scholars recognize that this order of the gospels is premised upon the early church's belief of the order of authorship of the gospels, *i.e.*, Mathew first, followed by Mark, Luke and John. Reading the early church father's for the first four centuries confirms this ordering. It was not until the 19th Century that scholars began to argue that the gospel of Mark was authored first, followed by Matthew (usually). The last few years are seeing a return to the belief that the early church fathers were right in their ordering, putting Matthew first.

I follow the belief of the early church fathers and place Matthew as the first composed gospel. I believe in this placement for several reasons. First, the principle reason given for Mark being the first written gospel I find inadequate. Most who place Mark as the first written do so on the principle that Mark is the briefest of the gospels. The reasoning is that the gospel material would be expanded upon in later writings, not condensed. While that might be true, there are many other reasons that a second gospel could be briefer.[3] Second, I find the clear early church teaching on this matter quite authoritative and believable.

Third, the issue of "similar phrasing" makes sense to me with the "Matthew first" position.[4] Finally, the idea that Matthew relied upon Mark and even copied certain phrases from Mark is incredible to me if we believe in Matthew as the author of his gospel. Why would an actual witness and apostle of Jesus turn to Mark, a non-apostle/non-eye witness and quote Mark for the writing of the events? That premise seems hard to believe.

What Did The Early Church Say On This Issue?

While a comprehensive review of early church comments is far beyond this lesson, a few samples illustrate the points of the lesson. On Mark's authorship, the earliest, non-biblical reference comes from Papias (c. 60 – 130) as quoted by Eusebius:

> Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or

[3] As will be noted later, if church tradition is accurate that Mark recorded the teachings of Peter, then Peter may have taught the abbreviated material Mark recorded. Also, if we correctly assumed that Mark had access to Matthew, his writings would be supplemental and logically shorter. Mark would be repeating Matthew only where necessary to put the supplemental material into context or to emphasize certain points.

[4] Early church tradition holds that Matthew wrote his gospel in a "Hebrew dialect," most likely Aramaic. The Matthew we have is in Greek. There are no copies of an Aramaic Matthew causing many scholars to doubt the early church teaching on this matter. I suggest a logical explanation: In 70 A.D., most still viewed Christianity as a cult or break-off of the Jewish faith. In that year, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, the Temple, and many of the Jewish people. The Romans also burned any Jewish writings that were to be found. It would be quite surprising should any Aramaic scriptures from that era be found, hence the amazement of finding the Dead Sea Scrolls. As a Tax Collector, Matthew would not only have been fluent in Aramaic, but he also would have been conversant in Greek. It would not be unexpected for him to render his Aramaic gospel into Greek either by translating it or rewriting it (or for someone else to do the translating). Whoever did such could easily have used Mark as a reference for some of the phrasing.

> done by Christ…So that Mark committed no error while he thus wrote.[5]

Iraneus (c. 185) remembered Papias, the fellow Eusebius quoted, as "an ancient man who was a hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp [a student of John]."[6] So, this attribution seems to come from first generation listening of apostolic preaching.

Papias also referenced the apostle Matthew's writing: "Matthew wrote the oracles in the Hebrew language, and every one interpreted them as he was able."[7] In the *Epistle of Barnabas*, written c. 130, Matthew 22:14 is referenced as "holy scripture" ("Many are called but few are chosen").[8] The letters of Ignatius and Polycarp (before 110) also indicate that the recipients of the letters were conversant with the gospel of Matthew.[9]

As to order of authorship, Origen (185-254) accepted the tradition that Matthew was written first.[10] As noted earlier, the early listing of New Testament scriptures by Iraneus as well as the Muratorian canon (c. 170) indicated belief of Matthew as first written.[11]

---

[5] Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History* 3:398-399.

[6] Iraneus, Quoted in Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History* 3:379

[7] Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History* 3:399

[8] *Epistle of Barnabas*, 4:40

[9] For example, Ignatius, *Epistle to Polycarp* 2:2, "Be in all things wise as a serpent, and harmless as a dove" clearly references Matthew 10:16, "Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."

[10] Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, Book One reads, "Concerning the four Gospels which alone are uncontroverted in the Church of God under heaven, I have learned by tradition that the Gospel according to Matthew, who was at one time a publican and afterwards an Apostle of Jesus Christ, was written first; and that he composed it in the Hebrew tongue and published it for the converts from Judaism." The second written was that according to Mark, who wrote it according to the instruction of Peter, who, in his General Epistle, acknowledged him as a son, saying, "The church that is in Babylon, elect together with you, saluteth you; and so doth Mark my son." And third, was that according to Luke, the Gospel commended by Paul, which he composed for the converts from the Gentiles. Last of all, that according to John.

[11] See discussion by Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford 1987).

V. THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM

If we examine the resurrection passages set forward at the beginning of this lesson, we see how the perspective we are offering addresses the synoptic problem.

First, of course, we should not pass over that which is constant throughout the gospels: Jesus Christ rose from the dead. This fact was realized by multiple people and proclaimed as so.

The stories themselves need to be read carefully to see how they harmonize and supplement each other. Matthew tells us that the angel who rolled the stone away then sat on the stone. This angel so frightened the guards (who was also outside the tomb) that the guards fainted (or "became like dead men"). Matthew then continues to note that the women were told that Jesus was resurrected. We are making an assumption NOT provided by Matthew when we read the text as if the angel were still sitting on the rock when he told the women of Jesus' resurrection. The account does not tell us where the angel was at that time.

Similarly, Matthew tells us of the two Mary's that came to view the burial place. He never says that these two women were alone. In fact, just several verses earlier, Matthew indicates that the Mary's were with other women in observing the death of Christ (Mt 27:55-56). Additionally, we must be careful not to read more into Matthew as to where the women were when the angel spoke to them. Matthew does not tell us the women went into the sepulcher, but neither does he say they stayed out! Matthew is just silent on the subject. So, we have no idea from Matthew where the women were when the angel told them of the resurrection. The angel does tell the women to come look where Jesus had laid to see that he was gone. Again, though, this doesn't mean that the women were outside the tomb when this statement was made.

Finally, whether there were one or two angels is not a dispute. Matthew and Mark both reference one angel speaking to the women. Luke and John(!) both reference the presence of two angels. That there would be two angles with only one angel speaking is not an inconsistency. We see here supplemental information from the other gospels writers.

Why Supplement the Story?

Remember, we are dealing with the core of the Christian message here. Christ not only died for our sins, but he was also resurrected into a new life we can share. As Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 15, without a resurrection, our faith is useless; we waste our time. In a very real fashion, we are dealing with history and with actual people in history. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome, and Joanna no doubt told many for the rest of their years this resurrection story. The need to supplement where Matthew only mentions the Mary's, for example, is obvious. Salome's story is invalidated as an eyewitness before many if she is not receiving some mention. The same is true for Joanna.

There are very understandable reasons to supplement not only the people present, but also the movements and presence of the angels. People who had these gospels were in a position to compare the recorded stories with the oral testimony given by these women and handed down by their families and friends. The accounts would need supplementation to contain the fullness necessitated by the people involved.

Why not a final all-in-one account? One such account does not make sense. Each gospel manages to meet its purposes, keeping the flow of history going consistently with necessary supplements.

VI. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Christ Is Risen.
2. The Resurrection Story is Reliable.
3. The Bible is Ripe for Good Study.
4. We Should Read Carefully.
5. We Should Never Fear a Close Examination of Scripture.