

The Synoptic Phenomenon

New Testament Survey – Lesson 7

Over the last almost 30 years in courtrooms across America, I have examined well over a thousand witnesses. I have examined both honest and dishonest witnesses. I have learned to distinguish those witnesses who truly *know* what they are saying versus those who are giving their best reasonable guess. I have seen those with good memories, faulty memories, and memories that are fading with time. Not only have I seen these diverse witnesses, but I have also had to learn to discern what type of witness I am confronting each time. Does this witness give the signs of someone who is dead-on accurate or simply in the ballpark? When examining a witness, it is important to smell out the veracity of a witness and his or her testimony. This regularly involves discerning the basis of each witness's testimony. Many witnesses merely recite things they know or experienced first hand. Others have their memories refreshed by reading documents before testifying. Still others are building their testimony around the information that was given to them orally by others, what we call "hearsay" in the law. Over the thousands of witnesses, it has become second nature to determine the sources for a witness who is speaking from first hand, or who is speaking from documents, or who is building into their testimony facts they learned from others rather than first hand.

Throughout my career, I have seen certain things so consistently that I have adopted "rules" that govern my trial decisions. My "rules" came into play recently in a case I was trying in West Texas. My client had fallen 13 to 19 feet landing headfirst on asphalt (before he fell, his feet were 13 feet off the ground, his head was 6 feet higher). He had been working without any fall protection. The only witness to the event was a man who might have actually caused the fall, he certainly at least witnessed it. Short of a confession, we will never know his role for certain.

Immediately after the incident, the witness was required to fill out an injury report detailing what he saw. He did so. A little over a year later, with the lawsuit imminent, the witness's employer (who was going to be sued) had the witness re-write his statement, making a number of significant changes, that arguably helped protect the employer in the face of a suit. A year or so later, after the suit was filed, the witness was required to give sworn testimony in a procedure called a "deposition." This is where the witness is placed under oath and is required to answer questions of the lawyers in the presence of a court reporter. The reporter then types up the testimony and the parties can use it in court as actual testimony of the witness. Like courtroom testimony, deposition testimony is given under penalties of perjury. In his deposition, this key witness did not stick with version

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one or version two from his two prior statements. Recognizing that both his first versions left something to be desired, the witness came up with version number three in his deposition. Fast-forward over a year later, and we catch up to my story of the recent trial.

I put this witness on the stand and began to cross-examine him. I had expected him to stick with his deposition testimony, what I call “version three” of his recounting of events. I had carefully measured his version three against the facts, and knew I could show that he was not honest. My plan was simple: reveal the obvious flaws in his latest version (version “three”) of the events, followed by proving that he had already tried out two other similarly inadequate versions of events. I wanted the jury to see that his stories shifted as readily as the West Texas sands outside the courthouse.

One minute into his testimony, as I started to exploit the obvious holes in his latest version, he pulled what he thought was a fast one! He said that his sworn deposition testimony was not his version of the day, and he started in with a brand new version four! In my brain, my options rapidly ordered into a decision tree of how to best handle this witness and his surprise testimony. Should I let him ramble on with version four or should I try to lock him into version three, the version that I had prepared to cross-examine him on? The danger of letting him proceed down the path of this new unknown version four was that I might not be able to show readily that version four was bogus, as I knew I could do with version three (or two or one). It was then that one of my “rules” flashed into my mind:

Lanier Rule of Court: One cannot practice vice virtuously.

It is one of my most fundamental rules, honed out over decades of practice in thousands of examinations. If one is going to practice vice, and I include lying as a vice, then one cannot do so and come across as a good person telling the truth. As my grandfather used to say, “the truth will out.”

So I let the man give version four, and sure enough, as it unfolded under the scrutiny of cross-examination, it was more absurd than versions one through three. After tearing into his version four, I continued the cross-examination pointing out each of his earlier versions, demonstrating the ever-changing story. The jury didn’t know whether to laugh at the absurdity of the testimony or recoil in disgust.

In preparation for this lesson, and over the last four decades as I have studied the gospels and the synoptic issues, I am impressed by the hard work of many scholars. Occasionally, I find scholarship that flies in the face of fundamental rules of character demonstrated by witnesses. For example, is someone who devoutly cares about truth, who believes that truth has personal eternal

implications, going to work hard to lie and deceive people? This may seem plausible to one in a sterile academic environment, but in the real world? Hardly ever would this happen! And when it does, the character flaws that would allow such inconsistent actions are readily apparent.

Similarly, is someone who is brilliant enough to structure a complicated presentation, carefully utilizing source material to ensure fullness and accuracy, quoting in depth many references and passages that support the presentation, going to make huge obvious gaffs that belie the presentation? Again, maybe in a sterile academic environment, this might be considered possible, but in the real world, you just do not see that, at least not without obvious markers of carelessness and thoughtlessness.

Ultimately the gospels are witnessed accounts to historical events, and my tendency and approach is to consider those witnesses just as I do the thousands in my career. When I do so, and when I apply my “rules” of witnesses, I find that some of what is set out as scholarship is, if not untenable, at least quite a reach. I will relate back to my rules as we go through this lesson, and at least ask if they don’t make common sense, even if not agreeable as absolute rules.

We will begin by setting out the synoptic phenomenon, and then look at an approach that makes sense to me (and doesn’t violate my rules of witnesses!) We should note before beginning this study that many marvelous scholars have spent decades researching and considering the data that comprises the questions and potential answers to those questions. In one lesson, we cannot even fairly discuss the full analysis of one approach, much less provide a synopsis of all the differing answers of scholasticism. Our goal is to outline the core issues in play, and offer one set of ideas for solving the puzzle. Those who are interested in this subject are urged to explore the ideas more fully in the wealth of publishable material.¹

THE SYNOPTIC PHENOMENON

What is the “synoptic phenomenon”? Our explanation will start at the ground and work up, emphasizing certain core issues along the way.

As noted in earlier lessons, the first three gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are often called “synoptic” gospels because they see the gospel material similarly.

¹ One word of warning before treading into those waters, a number of scholars frequently write from their own presuppositions assuming that certain core opinions are beyond discussion and are accepted by the intelligent as true. In truth, most elements are open to debate, and you can usually find a scholar who lands on almost any knoll of opinion, believing it to be true.

This term distinguishes these three gospels from the Gospel of John, which sets out the gospel in a distinct framework and structure, including additional material and narrative beyond that of the synoptics. Here we see a first issue:

Issue 1: Why are there three gospels telling much of the same material instead of just one?

To understand the issue, we should note the similarities of the synoptics. The synoptics overlap each other with material that relates to (a) **content**, (b) **structure**, and even at times to (c) **language**.

(a) **Content** similarity is best appreciated by simple statistics. Consider the verses in each:

Matthew: 1,068 verses

Mark: 661 verses

Luke: 1,149 verses

By one scholar's count, and his numbers are generally aligned with most every other scholar's count², 606 of Mark's 661 verses are found, to some degree, in Matthew. 350 of Mark's verses are found in Luke. Mark has only 31 verses that are not paralleled in either Matthew or Luke. Focusing simply on Matthew and Luke we find that they share 250 verses with common material that is *not* found in Mark. Some of this material is practically word-for-word identical, while some is quite distinct, even while the subject matter is the same. This leaves roughly 300 verses in Matthew that are unique to Matthew, and about 550 verses unique to Luke.

(b) The **structural** similarities of the gospels are apparent to even a cursory read through. Each synoptic follows a basic structure built around Jesus' ministry in Galilee, followed by Jesus in Jerusalem and the passion, and ending with the crucifixion and resurrection. Distinguish these synoptics in their structure from that of John's gospel. John has Jesus weaving from Galilee in ministry to Jerusalem multiple times over several years.

(c) The **language** similarities are most apparent when studying from the Greek text. Reading the gospels in parallel in the Greek text repeatedly shows many instances of identical language across the books. That might

² We have used the count of Bruce, F. F., *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (IVP 1981), at 27ff. Other scholars count much the same. See similarly, Freed, Edwin, *The New Testament: A Critical Introduction*, (Wadsworth 1986), at 45.

not seem too unusual in English, but it is a recognized rarity in Greek. The Greek language is not word order dependent like English. Sentences do not need to be subject-verb-object. It is fully normal to place a subject at the beginning, middle, or even the end of a sentence. Similarly, the verb can start a sentence, end a sentence, or get buried in the middle. For Greek verses to have identical wording is most unusual unless the writers were working from a common text.

Analyzing the similarities raises a second issue that might bear a relation to the first:

Issue 2: What is the common source behind the synoptics, if there is one, and if not, what explains the similarities?

It really is a perplexing puzzle. Why do Matthew, Mark, and Luke all use the exact same words in some places, yet distinctly different ones in others? Why sometimes do Matthew and Mark use identical words, but Luke uses different ones? Why sometimes do Mark and Luke use identical words, but Matthew uses different ones?

Because of the verbal similarities in many of these passages, 19th century scholars generally thought that the gospel writers were reproducing oral stories. There is a consensus that in the first century, people were more accustomed to memorizing large pieces of information and stories, reciting them with precision. So one early view was that the repeated oral stories explained both the places of identical language and the places of distinction. Later scholars began to examine other suspected sources that might have supplied the various gospel writers, either written (“source criticism”) or in various oral forms (“form criticism”).

As the scholars broke the material in the synoptic gospels apart, they discovered that much of the material common to Matthew and Luke, yet missing in Mark’s gospel, were sayings and discourses of Jesus, as opposed to miracles or events. This brought about what became a general scholastic consensus that one or more written sources, long lost in the history of time, were behind these sayings. This alleged common source for Matthew and Luke’s sayings of Jesus became identified by the simple abbreviation of *Q*, drawn from the underlying German word *Quelle*, which means “source.”

Among the biggest problems associated with the *Q* theory is the fact that no document we could consider or identify as *Q* has ever been found. Furthermore, there is no consensus agreement that there is any explicit reference to such a document in any early church writing. It seems bizarre, and actually violates one of my “trial rules” to think that there was a document so formative and authoritative that two of the gospel writers accessed it and used it to compose what

became canonical gospels, and yet not only does the document not survive, but there is no explicit historical reference to it. This is even more troubling when one considers that we have over 5,000 ancient manuscripts that have some portion of the Greek New Testament, but not one of *Q*. Certainly some ancient but now lost *Q* might solve the issue of Matthew and Luke's source for Jesus's sayings, but as we will show later in this lesson, the common view of *Q* is not the only possible solution to this issue.

Aside from the unknown source "*Q*," how are Matthew, Mark, and Luke related? A *Q* source only explains the added material shared only by Matthew and Luke. What about the material common to all the synoptics? As far back as Augustine (354-430), scholars have proffered explanations for the common material. Augustine believed that the gospels were written in the order that we have them now, and which was well established in the church before Augustine's day, namely Matthew first, followed by Mark and Luke. Augustine believed that each subsequent writer had access to the earlier materials, but sculpted his own gospel to meet his own needs, including at times a need to supplement with additional material or a need to draw some previously unexpressed distinction.

In modern times, scholars have published different opinions on the order of the gospels. Some give Matthew or Luke "priority" (meaning they were written first and used by the other synoptists), but by a large consensus, scholars today support Markan priority, believing that Matthew and Luke accessed Mark in writing their gospels. All of this leads to a third issue closely related to the common source concerns of Issue 2:

Issue 3: In what order were the gospels composed and which gospel writer, if any, had access to the other gospels?

Adding Issues 2 and 3 together leads to marvelous scholastic explanations and disagreements, replete with schematic drawings, explaining how two sources, or four sources, sources written and oral, sources known and unknown, have combined to produce the material we read as three single gospels. It is almost entertaining, though at times mind numbing, to read the many permutations of theories developed to solve the fascinating synoptic puzzle.

Multiple reasons are frequently cited for believing that Mark was written first, but among the core justifications is the ordering of the material the three gospels have in common. When scholars carve out of the synoptics the material that is held in common, it is readily apparent that the material that the gospels share is arranged in a very specific common order. There are times where Matthew deviates from the order that Mark and Luke followed. There are times where Luke deviates from the order that Matthew and Mark followed. But there is no time where

Matthew and Luke follow the same order with Mark deviating. This leads most scholars to conclude that Mark was first, and that Matthew and Luke then followed Mark's order except where they chose to deviate for some specific reason.

While there are certainly exceptions, scholars generally posit that Mark was written first, that Matthew and Luke then used Mark, but attached infancy narratives (missing in Mark) and used the *Q* or some other source(s) to insert the sayings of Jesus that are also missing in Mark. We are remiss if we fail to add the corollary issue relevant on these issues:

Issue 4: What are the problems with this ordering of the books and the belief that Matthew and Luke used Mark?

Like so many theories in the area of the synoptic phenomenon, the dating answer placing Mark first, an answer commonly held by many scholars, does not convincingly satisfy all the evidential questions. While it makes sense in light of the earlier discussion to think that Matthew and Luke used the earlier authored gospel of Mark as a principal source, it is not so simple. For example, Mark has four stories that are completely missing in Matthew and Luke. Only in Mark do we read of Jesus' family coming to "seize him...saying, 'He is out of his mind.'" (Mk 3:20-21). Neither Matthew nor Luke record the parable of the growing seed in Mark 4:26-29.³ Jesus healed a deaf man in the pagan region of the Decapolis in Mark 7:31-39, and the miracle is entirely missing in Matthew and Luke. Also missing is Mark's record of Jesus healing a blind man at Bethsaida found in Mark 8:22-26. So while 85% of Mark is found in Matthew or Luke, the 15% missing contains some significant material!

So troubling is the idea that Matthew and Luke would leave out these significant stories, that it has led some scholars to conclude that the Gospel of Mark we have today, which is the gospel as evidenced by the earliest church manuscripts, must have been a later gospel that added these sections *after* Matthew and Luke used some earlier version. This "*proto-Mark* version" does seem a stretch, however, for several reasons. For one, just consider the gospels where we do have passages that we know were inserted after original composition. It is so obvious that most everyone agrees the passages were added to the gospel later, and most readily adduce that they were not in the original. One merely need consider the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 7:53 – 8:11. This story is missing in the

³ "And he said, 'The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.'"

earliest manuscripts, and in those where it is found, it is placed in various places within John, and even occasionally in Luke! The placement at the end of John 7 and beginning of John 8 is clearly out of context with the flow of John's gospel. So even the most conservative Biblical scholars generally agree that the story of the woman caught in adultery was not in the first version of John's gospel. Importantly, there are no such signs pertaining to the four Mark passages referenced earlier. They are in every early manuscript (and late ones), and they fit into the flow and context of the story line around them.

In itself, this leaves a perplexing problem of explaining why Matthew and Luke chose to eliminate these important gospel stories in their own accounts. However, even more problems surface upon closer examination. Mark 9:14-29 tells of Jesus healing a boy possessed by an unclean spirit. Matthew and Luke both tell the story, but they shorten it so much that much is left out (Mt. 17:14-21; Lk 9:37-43). In fact, Mark's account is longer than Matthew's and Luke's put together! Only in Mark do we find Jesus happening upon a ruckus between a crowd and the disciples because of the disciples' inability to heal the boy. So also Matthew and Luke fail to supply the details about the demon exhibiting an epileptic attack on the boy when Jesus is present. Only Mark speaks of the conversation between Jesus and the boy's father about the duration of the illness that had been with the boy since birth. At the end of the story, Matthew recorded Jesus telling his inquisitive disciples that they failed to cast out the demon because of a lack of faith. Mark ends the story recounting Jesus explaining the role of prayer in casting out the demon. Meanwhile, Luke says nothing at all about how or why the disciples were ineffective.

To hold that Matthew and Luke had a copy of Mark and used it as the backbone of their *expanded* gospels, yet rewrote this story reducing it down by eliminating important parts, and then choosing to insert other parts of conversation without referencing what was left out, is not readily sensible. Again, to appeal to the idea that Matthew and Luke had an earlier version that was shortened, also seems to flow against the greater weight of the evidence.

We are beginning here to rub against another of my "trial rules" I have shaped after hearing thousands of witnesses recount their stories:

Lanier Rule of Court: A good witness is a good witness.

In other words, if someone is a good and reliable witness, then you can most always know that his or her testimony will be good and reliable. People are not one thing one day and something entirely different another, without giving indications to that end. Putting this rule into the synoptic discussion under consideration, I would suggest the following. It is unrealistic, and against

common sense, to think that Matthew had a copy of Mark, chose to follow that copy for structure, for stories, and for details, even to the point of copying Mark word for word in many places, with a goal of expanding the account and placing it into a frame of reference for Matthew's audience. Then, for reasons no one can think of, Matthew then deliberately (or accidentally?) left out important stories, omitted very important points about other stories, and then deliberately altered the final point of the stories. This makes no sense. If Matthew were to freelance his way through the stories, he would do it consistently or in rare occasions where it met an obvious need. But such random and scattered omissions and alterations do not fit with one who was assiduously following the content, structure, and language of Mark. The same holds true for Luke.

We now reach another issue that has troubled many, one that is tied directly both to the discussion just held and to the larger synoptic phenomenon:

Issue 5: If Matthew, Mark, and Luke are so closely related, why do they differ so starkly on some important stories?

To better understand these differences, we might categorize them. Some are (a) differences in words; others are (b) differences in details; (c) in order; and at times, (d) seemingly in content.

(a) **Differences in words.** As previously noted, at times the words chosen by each synoptist are identical. Consider the dispute that arose about which of the apostles was the greatest. When reading the Greek, the words of Jesus are almost identical in both Matthew 20:25-28 and Mark 10:42-45. In Luke Jesus responded with some different wording. Even in the English, you get a great deal of the similarity and yet also the distinctions:

Matthew 20:24-28

But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Mark 10:42-45

And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Luke 22:25-27

And he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves."

In the excerpts above, the differences in the words are set out in italics. It is readily seen that Matthew and Mark have an amazingly identical story, while Luke's has major differences. The Greek is even more amazing when you read Matthew and Mark alignment in word order and word form.

Why are these differences present? There are a number of legitimate theories, but for our overview purposes, we will note several at this point, and explore one in particular later in this lesson. Ascribing to Augustine's view that the gospels have subsequent supplementations would promote a view that Luke's gospel was written after Matthew and Mark, and Luke was intent on supplementing the earlier gospel accounts with details they had not included. This theory would suggest that the real conversation would have lasted longer than the twenty seconds it would take for Jesus to say what he said as recorded by Matthew and Mark. Surely they discussed and Jesus taught for five, ten or fifteen minutes on such an important point. Luke then simply supplemented with more of what Jesus said. This is certainly possible. Many times one witness has said one thing in a deposition, and then added more details in court. When asked, "Why didn't you say that in your deposition?" the ready response is always, "Nobody asked me!" In other words, simply because Matthew and Mark give one part of the conversation, they never say, nor should we assume, that they gave the entire conversation.

Of course there is no way to know for certain whether supplementation is the proper answer. Many other opinions have developed over the centuries including: (1) Luke getting his information from another source; (2) Luke wanting to emphasize a different point than Matthew or Mark; (3) Luke targeting a Greek audience more than Matthew's Jewish audience or Mark's Roman audience; (4) Luke using a different tradition as his source and hence have a different account; and (5) the Luke passage reflecting different events or speech than Matthew's and Mark's.

(b) Differences in details.

The above account also illustrates the differences in details that are sometimes present. In Matthew and Mark, the dialogue with Jesus was instigated by a request by the mother of James and John to have her sons sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in his kingdom. The other disciples were indignant, and Jesus chose the moment to teach an important lesson. Yet in Luke 22:25-28 the events arise not from the Zebedees' mother, but in the midst of the Lord's Supper. Are these in fact different stories that happened at different times? Maybe. It is hard to believe that over a three-year period, those disciples never fussed over their ranking but once. Still

there are other suggestions on why Luke put the story into the Lord's Supper. Following again the supplementation view, it is important to remember that Matthew and Mark do not always seek to write in a chronological order. We have likened the gospel of Mark in this regard to a flower arrangement. The flowers are not put in by order of size or age. They are placed in the arrangement to compliment each other and bring the fullest beauty to the overall arrangement. Luke, on the other hand, often works at making the account more orderly.

Hence, the precipitating event could have been the mother of James and John talking to Jesus. Then the interaction with the other ten disciples might have taken place at the Lord's Supper. Matthew and Mark left out the time element, merely adding that Jesus' discussion with his apostles happened "when the ten heard" about the efforts to secure the greater positions. Luke thought it important to inform that the later conversation took place at the Lord's Supper.

Of course, just like the differences in wording, there are many other theories offered by others.

(c) Differences in order.

Perhaps this difference is most easily seen in comparing the accounts of Matthew and Luke regarding the temptations of Jesus. In Matthew 4:1-11, we read of Satan tempting Jesus to turn stones into bread, followed by tempting Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple, and concluding with Jesus being shown the kingdoms of the world and offered them in return for bowing to Satan. In Luke 4:1-13, the order changes. Luke also begins with turning stones into bread, but his second temptation is that of the kingdoms of the world, what Matthew placed third. Luke ends his recounting of the story with what Matthew placed second, the temptation for Jesus to throw himself off the temple pinnacle.

(d) Differences in content. The differences in content are perhaps most readily apparent in the genealogy accounts at the beginning of Matthew and Luke. These differences have been subject to scholarly work since the earliest days of the church. Some simply write the differences off to the errors that occur from sloppy records or poor writing. To deal with these differences in detail, would take more time and space than is allotted in this lesson. Other than noting they are here, and looking at general principles behind them, we will leave this for a subsequent lesson.

A SYNOPTIC SOLUTION

We must start this section with a warning: It is written by a trial lawyer, not a PhD academic. We nowhere suggest that this is *the* only reasonable solution to the issues set out. We do suggest, however, that it is *a* reasonable solution to the issues. With that warning in hand, we take a good bit of material that was built into earlier lessons on Mark and Matthew in arriving at these conclusions, and will readily trust that those lessons can be consulted by those interested in more detail or in the references that support certain affirmations below.⁴ These points are built around my trial rules.

Lanier Rule of Court: As a *general rule*, and not as an absolute rule, all things being equal, the witnesses and accounts closer in time and proximity are more reliable than the later ones.

Synoptic parallel: Give some measure of respect, if not deference, to the earliest witnesses.

If we begin with the ministry of Jesus, we can look at a number of historical sources that date within 100 years of his life. Those sources include by everyone's reckoning the first four gospels and certain apostolic fathers. We will set the core source material out in bullet points:

- From the gospels, we are informed by the titles associated with each, "According to Matthew," etc. These titles were affixed very early, most likely within the generation of authorship.
- Luke adds some important insight into both his gospel and the historical process:

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 (Lk 1:1-4).

- Papias (60-130AD) is the earliest church witness to the authorship of Matthew:

⁴ Those lessons are all available for download at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

So then Matthew wrote the oracles in the Hebrew [Aramaic]⁵ language, and every one interpreted them as he was able.⁶

From these sources, we can note several important things. First, by the time Luke was writing his gospel, there were other efforts to do so. It is apparent that Luke used other source material. Second, Luke was relying for his source material on that which came from those who were “eyewitnesses” and “ministers of the word” “from the beginning” or “from the start.”

Lanier Rule of Court: Look for ways the stories of witnesses can integrate, while maintaining vigilance to the integrity of their testimony.

Synoptic parallel: Can we integrate the witnesses to authorship in a fair manner to find a consistent and reasonable storyline about how the gospels were composed?

How do these early accounts mesh with the evidence about the gospel authorship. If we begin with the gospel of Matthew, we can resume a discussion from the lesson on who wrote Matthew. Goodspeed, Francis, and other noteworthy scholars gave compelling arguments in favor of Matthew as a scrivener who was taking notes during the ministry of Jesus. It was something that would have been typical for a tax collector to make written accounts and records, and it would have likely been done in his native language of Aramaic.⁷ If we agree to this reasonable supposition, it gives a possible explanation for the tradition cited by Papias. Matthew did indeed write the oracles in the Hebrew language, allowing others to translate as they saw fit. Most scholars recognize that the Gospel of Matthew is not a translation of a Hebrew or Aramaic original, so the history behind Papias’s reference is either invalid or refers to something other than the finished Gospel of Matthew.

⁵ Most scholars accord that Papias’s usage of *Hebraidi* (Ἑβραϊδὶ) would by 100 AD include both Hebrew or Aramaic. There was no real Greek word for one over the other by the time of Papias. See, e.g., Fassberg, Steven, “Which Semitic Language Did Jesus and Other Contemporary Jews Speak?,” *Catholic Bible Quarterly*, 74-2 (Apr. 2012), at 265.

⁶ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Bk 3, at 39:16. Papias was quoted by Eusebius 200 years later, and the last copy of the original work of Papias disappeared around the 11th century. Eusebius was a renown historian whose work shows he was assiduously careful in the quotations and sources he used. No scholar of note challenges the accuracy of Eusebius’s quoting of Papias. Obviously scholars disagree on what Papias meant and whether Papias was accurate.

⁷ Good arguments are advanced that Matthew would have necessarily been conversant in Aramaic and Greek, because of his job and the location of his tax collecting along trade routes from the Greek cities of the Decapolis and the Mediterranean Sea. It is also reasonable to suspect he may have had Hebrew fluency as well, both as part of the Levitical Priesthood and as an Israelite living in Palestine. See Lesson on Matthew: The Hebrew Gospel and cites therein.

We surmised earlier that this would have provided written notes on the papyrus typical for such note taking with tax records, so it is not anything that would have survived for a long time in the damp climate and rough Mediterranean world. We would not expect these notes to be found or even be around hundreds, much less thousands of years later. Still, these notes could easily be copied and made available to others. This seems to be implied by Luke in the opening of his gospel. Matthew would certainly qualify as an “eyewitness” from the “beginning” of Jesus’ ministry, as referenced by Luke. It seems fair to assume that if Matthew had made such contemporary notes during the ministry of Jesus, that Luke might have availed himself of copies of those notes for his gospel as well as for his evangelizing work.⁸ Luke, as he set out in Acts, did evangelizing with Paul, as did Mark and several others.

If we read Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, written from the mission field, we read Paul quoting words of Jesus as well. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 11:24ff, when Paul recounts the events of the Lord’s Supper and the words of Jesus, we find Paul writes with several of the exact phrases of Luke from Luke 22:19ff (down to the smallest nuances and word ordering). This is easily understandable if Paul and Luke are working from some of the same notes, or copies of the same notes. We know based on Paul’s Damascus Road conversion, Paul did not know Jesus personally during Jesus’ life on earth, so where did Paul get these notes? He says in 1 Corinthians that the words were received “from the Lord Jesus,” but not in the sense that Jesus spoke to Paul. Rather, Jesus gave these words and they were noted, and Paul received them accordingly. Paul launched into the mission field from Jerusalem, having interacted with the apostles. It is reasonable that Paul would have also had a set of notes of Matthew’s. In fact, it is almost unreasonable to think he would not have availed himself of such. Even toward the end of his life, we have a reference to Paul’s concerns for notes and writings he kept. He asked Timothy to bring his cloak left at Troas as well as “the books, and above all the parchments” (2 Tim. 4:13). The Greek for “books” is *biblia* meaning “scrolls or papyrus sheets, while the Greek for parchment is *membranas*, referencing the animal skins treated for writing. In this same passage, Paul spoke of his help in ministry by Luke and Mark. Luke was with Paul at the time, and Paul wanted Timothy to bring Mark long with the notes! This places the notes in the hands of Paul, of Mark, of Luke, and of course Matthew.

⁸ There is an interesting add to this if one reads Papias and Luke both in the Greek. Luke said that there were people who had undertaken to “compile” a narrative as delivered by eyewitnesses. The Greek he chose for compile is a composite of *ana* and *tasso*. It means “to place into an order” or “put together.” This is the same root used by Papias to describe the work of Matthew. Where Papias is translated as saying Matthew “wrote” the oracles, the Greek word used is also a composite. It is *suv* with *tasso*.

What of these notes? If they were being used by numerous believers, being translated by different people as they were able, then we have a growing corpus of authentic references in written scraps, none too big, that are on the road, being used, recopied, and doubtlessly worn out fairly rapidly. We would not expect to have copies of them today, especially if they were later “ordered” or “compiled” by Matthew, Mark, Luke, or others. Why keep a worn out scrap of papyrus where you copied Matthew 26:26-29 if you had recopied it onto a parchment with a number of other gospel records?

Certainly there is a lot of conjecture in this suggested account, but it really is not unreasonable conjecture. There is certainly just as much, if not more conjecture in the ideas of many that are set out in scholastic writings as a “reasonable reconstruction of events.” There are many scholars who believe that none of the apostles kept any contemporary records, and that they were all illiterate country fishermen who did nothing more than pull a ruse on the world and convince people that the country carpenter Jesus had miraculously come back from the dead in the presence of Roman guards in the most populous city in Palestine. Then these country folk managed to convince enough people that these events had happened and a movement started. The movement was blasphemous to those in authority, and they tried killing its adherents in the very earliest stages, but the adherents gladly died for their cause, even though it was fictitious. Then as the adherents continued to grow in spite of the immediate persecution, they started making up stories and legends about Jesus as a miracle worker for three short years before he died. These stories got repeated enough to where they finally got into the hands of some literate folks who managed to write them down. Somewhere, a combination of the written made-up stories, along with the oral stories were combined by some unknown person into a primitive gospel that would eventually become our Gospel of Mark. Then this gospel was taken by other enterprising and brilliant people and put into two follow-up gospels we call Matthew and Luke. In the process, Matthew and Luke also utilized another writing we have no record of called *Q*, which is its own story as well. *Q*, we are to believe, was another accounting of the sayings of Jesus, evidently devoid of biography or the miraculous events that justified the title of Jesus as Son of God, worthy of worship. So somewhere, some unknown person who was not one of the illiterate country followers of Jesus, authored this *Q*, and it was used, even as it disappeared into history. This is not the end of the scholastic conjecture, however. It continues with all this being done between 70 and 130AD, right under the noses of the early church who never picked up on it. Either that, or the church picked up on it and worked to propagate the lie.

Is this possible? I guess so, but it does violate many of my rules of court and witnesses! My point is that this is actually believed by most non-evangelical

scholars in academia. It might be true, but it is no less speculative than the account that I have provided.

How does my suggested solution resolve some of the difficulties we find in the synoptic phenomenon? We will reproduce the issues below, followed by an explanation.

Issue 1: Why are there three gospels telling much of the same material instead of just one?

Each of the three synoptic gospels exist for the reasons apparent by careful study. As the early church recorded, Mark was written to bear testimony to Peter's gospel. Mark's gospel bore testimony to the life of Christ along with his death and resurrection. It is written consistent with the manner in which Peter preached. We see this consistency when we look at the sermon Peter delivered to Cornelius in Acts 10. This was Peter's first sermon to Gentiles. Peter began his sermon with John the Baptist and starting from Galilee explained how Jesus when forth doing good and healing those who were oppressed. From Galilee and the country of the Jews into Jerusalem Jesus continued to minister until he was put to death by crucifixion. God then resurrected Jesus on the third day and Jesus appeared to many people. It was a physical resurrection with Jesus eating and drinking after he rose from the dead. This is the very same pattern that Mark follows in his Gospel. He begins with John the Baptist rather than infancy narratives. He then has Jesus in Galilee where he works miracles and ministers until he finally arrives in Jerusalem. At that time Jesus is crucified, and resurrected on the third day. Jesus then appeared in a bodily form. Some may note that Peter's sermon in Acts 10 is much more brief then the Gospel of Mark. We should remind ourselves that we could read Peter's sermon in Acts 10 in less than a minute. Luke is clearly providing a shorthand rendition of the sermon that probably went on for quite some time. The effect of the sermon was to bring Gentiles to faith.

It makes sense that Mark's gospel would follow the same basic paradigm, especially as the early church taught that Mark recorded the gospel from Rome with a Roman audience in mind. We have already noted in earlier lessons that Mark makes most sense if we read it from that perspective.

Matthew would have had available not only his notes, but also later interactions with the family of Jesus in Jerusalem, with other witnesses, and with other nonbelievers. As Matthew stayed in Jerusalem for some time, evident from the book of Acts, we can assume that Matthew continued to preach as charged by Jesus and the great commission. It is also reasonable to assume that Matthew would not only have his notes, but would also have an ability to assimilate those notes supplementing them with other events. Matthew was clearly writing with a

Jewish audience in mind, as we have noted in an earlier lesson. It explains why he would paint events with a different brush and in different colors, so that the message would come across to his intended audience.

Luke tells us why he was writing his Gospel. He wanted to write an orderly account so that Theophilus, and doubtless others, would have "certainty in the things you have been taught" (Lk 1:4). Accordingly, Luke would have had access to Matthew's notes variously translated by a number of people. He may have had access to Mark's gospel, or he may simply have heard Peter preach innumerable times. We do see Luke and Mark together in the ministry of Paul. It would seem unreasonable to think that they did not share notes!

Issue 2: What is the common source behind the synoptics, if there is one, and if not, what explains the similarities?

The similarities behind the Synoptics makes perfect sense under our scenario. The common source is primarily the notes of Matthew. Those notes were likely made fairly contemporaneously in Aramaic. If we accept what Papias said, then those notes were translated at various times by a number of different people into Greek. Matthew may have translated a number of them himself into Greek, or perhaps he trusted the better translations of others. Regardless, under our scenario, the notes of Matthew in various translations lie behind much of the synoptics.

The similarities of the Synoptics down to the precise language in some places, and distinct language in others, fits well with the idea that there were multiple translations of Matthew's notes. We still have the question, however, of why there is such similar material in Matthew and Luke, which is missing from Mark. In this, we would suggest that Matthew freely composed his Gospel, using his notes that were also available to Mark. Matthew undoubtedly followed the same basic Gospel outlined as Mark, because Mark used Peter's outline. Peter had delivered the very first gospel sermon (Acts 2), had delivered the very first sermon to the Gentiles, and was clearly a major leader in the church and its early mission efforts. It would probably not be fair to stereotype Matthew as a tax collector/numbers man more comfortable with math than public speaking. This is especially true when one considers the infusion of the Holy Spirit in assisting the apostles to bear witness to Jesus. Still, one would suspect it reasonable that Matthew, after hearing Peter preach day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, decade after decade, would naturally follow the same basic outline in presenting the gospel that Peter did. Matthew added a good bit of detail, and even left out several core stories.

As Luke traveled with Paul, Luke not only made his way through the Mediterranean world, but also back to Jerusalem. Luke had time to interact with a

number of eyewitnesses, likely including Matthew. It makes sense that Luke would have access to Matthew's gospel, and especially to Matthew's stories about Jesus and his sermons. That Luke and Matthew share a number of things missing in Mark, is not at all surprising. These ideas in this scenario also make sense of issue number three:

Issue 3: In what order were the gospels composed and which gospel writer, if any, had access to the other gospels?

As shocking as it would sound to a number of non-evangelical scholars, it is entirely plausible, and even more likely than not, that the Gospels were composed by each of the writers to whom they are attributed. Matthew wrote Matthew; Mark wrote Mark; and Luke wrote Luke. The first several hundred years of church history bear witness to this authorship, and it makes very reasonable sense.

Issue 4: What are the problems with this ordering of the books and the belief that Matthew and Luke used Mark?

The problems that are referenced earlier in this lesson, dissolve readily under this scenario. The minor differences are explained by alternate translations of the Aramaic original. Additionally, Augustine's belief that each author supplemented the other writers adds a perspective that makes sense if we modify it slightly. All of the authors were working from a common set of notes and a common historical record. They chose different perspectives within that record to fit their intended thought process. Think of it in these modern terms. You can find three very good preachers, and assign them all the same text for their sermon. Each of the preachers may use a different translation when delivering their sermon. The text may read slightly different as a result. Further, each preacher will likely emphasize different aspects of the text. Each preacher will have his own preference for how to best communicate the subject of the sermon. It was surely no different 2000 years ago. Each gospel writer had aspects of the historical record that made better sense to him, and was used accordingly. They did not have to have the previous Gospels in front of them, as Augustine thought. They merely needed to write as they preached.

This also explains the fifth issue:

Issue 5: If Matthew, Mark, and Luke are so closely related, why do they differ so starkly on some important stories?

Matthew wrote consistent with his themes and issues; Mark and Luke did the same. So, for example, in Matthew we see a theme of Jesus achieving great things on the top of hills/mountains. Repeatedly in Matthew, Jesus ascends the mountains to teach (i.e., the Sermon on the Mount). Jesus ascends the mountain

for the transfiguration with Moses and Elijah. Jesus gives the Great Commission from a mountaintop. Mountains were recognized in ancient times as the visual place where heaven met earth. It was a place of worship among the ancients; the temple was built on Mount Zion. It was where Moses received the Law. It was important to Matthew as a theme in this vein. So Matthew orders the temptations ending with Jesus in victory on the mountaintop. Luke does not write with a mountain theme. In his ordering, there is no reason to emphasize the victory of Jesus by putting the mountain top temptation last. We must remember that the gospels are not written as chronological histories. Again, a flower arrangement is a good illustration of how Matthew and Mark ordered their presentations.

CONCLUSION

So as we read the Gospels, it is fair and reasonable to conclude that we are reading reliable testimony from reliable witnesses. In the introduction to this lesson, I spoke about a trial I recently had. In that trial the witness proved one of my cardinal rules:

You can't practice vice virtuously.

This is the problem with scholars who believe falsehood lies at the root of the Gospels. We are told by many scholars that the gospel writers obscured their own identity, and allowed false identities to be associated with their work. The people who accepted the works, were then either the deceivers or allowed later believers to deceive people. Now no one who was doing these acts of vice were doing so for corrupt reasons. It did not bring them fame or fortune. These were people who were often called to give their lives for their beliefs. It is almost inconceivable that someone would fictitiously write a gospel that teaches that God is truth, that lying is a sin, and that ethics are of paramount importance. For someone to do so is to practice vice on an ultimate level. Yet there is no sign of such vice. There is only virtue. The thousands of witnesses I have examined, will not allow me to accept this. You cannot practice vice virtuously. The Gospels must be authentic.

So many nonbelieving scholars, go a step further in their analysis of the Synoptics. Although the scholars do not use blunt language, what they really say, in essence, is that the gospel writers made some really stupid mistakes within the Gospels themselves. This point arises when these scholars point to alleged discrepancies among the synoptic gospels, and argue that the writers accidentally made these errors, which violates another one of my rules:

A good witness is a good witness.

You're not going to have a brilliant person make simpleton mistakes. Idiots did not write the Gospels; that much is apparent. The writers were very bright people, who readily cited both basic and obscure Old Testament texts. They weaved together, in brilliant prose, stories that proclaim some of the most profound truths in the history of recorded literature.

So as I conclude this lesson, I do so appreciating the synoptics as reliable and worthy of attention and study, especially as they differ!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant”* (Mt. 20:26).

This passage runs contrary to human nature. By definition, humanity thinks of greatness as the top of the ladder, not the bottom. Matthew and Mark placed this quotation on the heels of a mother's request that her sons be great in the kingdom of Jesus. Luke explained that the mother's request prompted the discussion among the disciples and Jesus, but the discussion itself occurred at the Lord's Supper. There is an added poignancy to these words when one considers that they are given by Jesus on the eve of the cross. It is the amazing Jesus, who practiced what he preached, even when it ran contrary to his own interests. As Paul would later write to the Philippian church: Jesus "made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:7). Amen. As it was with Jesus, so should it be with us.

2. *“Even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Mk. 10:45).

Here Mark finishes the story that Matthew tells as well. Mark's finish to the story is also carried out in Paul's letter to the Philippian church. The Philippians quote from the previous point for home in its fuller form reads as follows: Jesus "made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:7-11). Amen. Thank you Jesus, Savior of the world.

3. *“Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves” (Lk. 22:26).*

As we see Luke's additional material, we see an emphasis that removes any doubt about the message. Even a leader is to serve those he or she leads. There are no exceptions. The people of God exist on earth with a higher calling. They live as the body of Christ to serve and to minister until Jesus returns. There really is no greater calling nor any greater achievement than to serve in the name of the Lord God. Amen.