

The “Synoptic Problem”

(in quotes because I don't think it's nearly as much of a problem as some people make it out to be)

Since the three Synoptic Gospels are clearly related to each other, in what order were they written? Which one comes first? Who borrowed what from whom, and where did they get the material they didn't borrow?

The stages of Gospel formation

1. The life of Jesus
2. Oral tradition--the stories people told about what Jesus said and did
3. Written tradition--writing down a selection of those stories
4. Writing the Gospels--selecting and arranging material from steps (2) and (3)

What makes the “Synoptic Problem” a problem?

IF you assume that at each stage, there was a drift away from an accurate account of the life of Jesus, then the earlier Gospels and the earlier material in the Gospels is more accurate.

(*BUT* there is no particular reason to believe that is what happened.)

Possible Answers:

There are six possible arrangements of 3 Gospels, and I suspect someone has suggested each of them at some point in the last 2,000 years.

The traditional answer is the order they're found in the Bible: Matthew, then Mark, then Luke. Mark was regarded as a summary of Matthew, along with its own special material. and Luke was thought to have used both Matthew and Mark, along with *his* own special material.

The Modern Answer

(I don't like this answer, and more and more scholars are starting to question it, but you need to know about it.)

Mark goes first, because his is the shortest. Matthew and Luke both use him, along with their own material. But Matthew and Luke have some material in common that Mark doesn't have.

They are said to have gotten this common material from "Q" (from the German *quelle*, meaning *source*). No one has ever seen Q, and there's no mention of it in any ancient histories. It's entirely an assumption.

Target Audiences

Too much is made of this, too, but it is true that the various Gospels seem to have been written with different primary audiences in mind.

St. Matthew: Said to be originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, and seems to have had a mostly Jewish audience in mind. He very often points out how Jesus fulfilled prophecies and how He is the promised heir of King David.

St. Mark: Said to have preserved the preaching of St. Peter and to have been written for a mainly Roman audience. He has a few more Latin-derived words than the others do.

St. Luke: Said to be written for a Gentile audience (remember that St. Luke was a Gentile himself!) Highlights Jesus's concern for the poor, and talks about what women are doing more than the others do.

The Rest of the Story ...

St. John's Gospel is generally agreed (even by me) to have been written much later than the others, near the end of the first century A.D. Because it was written after the Fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple (what year?), he is less concerned with the Pharisee/Saduccee distinction, and just refers to "the Jews."

He is concerned with telling things the other Gospels left out, and leaves out some things that they all told--not because they aren't important, but because he knew that his audience already knew about them.