The Synoptic Problem

Outline

Introduction to the New Testament

Winter 2016

What is the Synoptic Problem?

* Synoptic problem is the attempt to explain the overlap among the synoptic gospels: Matt, Mark, Luke. Understanding the synoptic problem will influence how you read and understand the synoptic gospels
* Explainable by oral tradition? This argument has many weaknesses:
  + Selection of same material in the synoptics. The gospels do not contain everything Jesus did – they are comprised of selected materials, based on what was most important for the purpose of achieving the goals of the narrative. The miracles in the synoptics are mostly the same miracle stories. The miracles Jesus performs in John, however, are different. What are the odds that Matt, Mark and Luke would all independently choose the same miracle stories. A similar argument could be made for the parables.
  + Verbatim agreement. Such verbatim agreement is not found from oral transmission.
  + Agreement of the order of events, sometimes in ways not necessary or unusual. For example, the story of the death of John the Baptist is told as a flashback at the same point in the narrative. This is the only flashback in both narratives, all other events told in consecutive order.
* Synoptic gospels have a literary overlap, which must be explained by appeal to written sources.
* Double Tradition: Material that is shared between Matt and Luke, but not Mark. (This is mostly true.)
* Triple Tradition: Material shared between Matt, Mark and Luke.
* A solution to the synoptic problem must contain explanations to both these kinds of overlap.

Proposed Solutions to the Synoptic Problem

* The Traditional, Augustinian position: Matthew was first; Mark used Matt (but wrote an abbreviated gospel); Luke used both.
* The Two-Gospel/Griesbachian Hypothesis: Matthew was first; Luke used Matt; and Mark used both, following Luke and Matt only where they agree with each other except for the extended speeches.
* The Farrer Hypothesis: Mark was first; Matt used Mark; Luke used Matt and Mark.
* Two-Source Hypothesis: Mark was first; Matt and Luke used Mark; this explains the triple tradition. Matt and Luke also used another source, not used by Mark = Q. Q explains the double tradition.
* The Four-Source Hypothesis is the Two-Source Hypothesis plus accounts for the “special” material of Matt and Luke as unique literary sources.
* What is Q? Q = (Matt + Luke) – Mark. Q is mostly sayings. There must be agreement in wording, otherwise it’s not Q.
* Arguments for Markan priority:
  + Additions easier to explain than omissions. For example, the resurrection appearances, birth story, speeches.
  + Order: Regarding triple tradition, both Matt and Luke agree with Markan order far more than they agree with each other. In other words, when Luke or Matt deviate from Markan order, they don’t agree with each other.
  + Variations in Content: Like the question of order, Matt and Luke usually agree with Mark in describing events within triple tradition much more than they agree with each other. **See Par Jesus arrested** (did not photocopy)
  + Mark’s Greek style poor. Matt’s better, Luke best. Why, if Mark had Matt and/or Luke in front of him, would he choose to write in a more awkward style?
  + Theological Developments: Easier to explain when proceeding from Mark to Matt and Luke than the other way around. **See Par Jesus rejected at Nazareth.**
  + First two theories leave too much unexplained.
* Arguments for Q and the 2/4 Source Hypothesis:
  + If Luke is dependent on Matt than why does he omit so much of Matt? For example, the birth narratives, certain speeches. Postulating Q eliminates the need to explain omissions.
  + Order: The order of triple tradition more consistent than double tradition. The lack of parallel order in double tradition is easier to explain by Q than by one of them copying the other. See Genealogies.
  + Doublets: some material appears twice in Matt and Luke. If Q and Mark have some of the same material, doublets are explained by sometimes coming from Mark, sometimes coming from Q.
  + Theological developments: Easier to explain the variations in the sayings between Matt and Luke by postulating Q than by one copying the other. See par. Lord’s Prayer.
* Problem for the Two-Source Hypothesis: Minor agreements
  + See **Par Introductory scene with John the Baptist**
  + **Par Mustard Seed**

Terms

Synoptic Problem

Q

Double Tradition

Triple Tradition

Two-Source/Four Source Hypothesis

Sayings Gospel

Minor Agreements