

Dr. Robert C. Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Lecture 9, The Synoptic Problem

© 2024 Robert Newman and Ted Hildebrandt

We're continuing our course in Synoptic Gospels. We've looked at six topics so far: historical Jesus, Jewish background, introduction to exegesis and the narrative genre, authorship, and date of the gospels, parables, the parable genre, the gospels as literary works, and we come now to topic seven, which is the synoptic problem. So, let's have a look at that.

Well, what is the synoptic problem? Well, synoptic means looking together. The first three gospels are very similar to one another, as though looking at the life of Jesus from about the same perspective, especially when compared with the gospel of John. Yet they also have a number of puzzling differences.

The problem, as it's generally raised, is what is the relationship among the first three gospels that will explain what makes them so similar and yet significantly different? We expect reports concerning historical events to be similar, but the histories of Jesus are unusual. In over three years of ministry involving many long speeches, only a few hours of speeches are recorded, while hundreds were healed, and we see that in a number of summary verses, only a few healings are recorded individually. The same ones are generally mentioned in the various gospels.

Those who reject the inspiration of scripture, the inspiration of the gospels, say the similarities are due to copying and the differences are due to changes made intentionally or because the authors were unaware of each other. Well, what we want to look at first of all is the phenomena of the problem, and then we will do a little bit about the history of the problem, and then we will come up with some suggested solutions and then suggest the one we think works best. First, we start with verbal agreements and disagreements as found in the gospels, and what I have here basically in my notes is the Parable of the Sower in Greek with Matthew in one column and then Mark and then Luke, so you can kind of see the similarities and differences.

I'm not sure whether we want to walk through all of this. It's a little over a page and a half, but for instance, the parable starts out, behold, a sower went out to sow or something of that sort, and Matthew and Mark have the adieu, behold, at the beginning, but Luke does not. All three of them have exactly the same verb, the same person, the same tense, and all of that.

They all call the sower, the sower, though the thee there is probably what we think of as a generic use of the definite article, and then to handle to sow, to scatter seed, Matthew does it with a definite article in front of his infinitive, and he used a present

infinitive. Mark doesn't have a definite article; he uses an aorist infinitive, and Luke uses an aorist infinitive like Mark, but a definite article like Matthew, okay? And Luke adds to sow his seed, so a little phrase of actually three words in Greek. All of them then connect the next clause with a chi, and Mark has an addition, and it came to pass, whereas the others just go on, and while he was sowing, into spay rain is what all three of them use at that point, and one of them adds while he was sowing, and then we begin to get the different cases here.

Matthew, some of it, boy, I'm going to have to get up close to it to read the Greek here. Some of it fell beside the road, and Matthew has one of them fell beside the road, it'd be the path would work as well also, and Luke has one of them fell beside the path, so we're going to see through the cases that Matthew uses a plural for each case, so some seed, okay? Mark and Luke both use kind of a representative: one seed fell here, one seed fell there, et cetera, it goes on. Well, I think it probably won't be terribly, what should we say, edifying to plow through the rest of that, but instead, I'll give you just a little short summary that Henry Alford in his Greek Testament gives of this kind of phenomenon.

He says the phenomena presented will be as follows: First is perhaps we shall have three, five, or more words identical, then as many wholly distinct, then two clauses or more expressed in the same words, but different order, then a clause contained in one or two, and not in the third gospel, then several words identical, then a clause not only wholly distinct, but apparently inconsistent, and so forth, with recurrences of the same arbitrary and anomalous alternations, alterations, coincidences, and transpositions. So basically, we see something that is rather puzzling when looked at on the word-by-word level.

We can try to convert this merely anecdotal evidence to numbers by giving statistics on verbal variation within the Synoptic Gospels, only in those sections where they overlap, and noting the frequency of identical and different wording. Agreement for verbs means they have the same tense, not nearly the same root. Philip Schaff, in his church history, gives statistics for this, and he basically gives the three books, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and then a column, the number of unique words, a percentage of unique words, and then the percentage in which the one gospel agrees with both the other two, and the percentage in which it agrees with one of the other two, and they look like this.

Mark has 40% unique words, Matthew has 56% unique, and Luke has 67% unique. We moved over to an agreement with the other two. Mark, in 22% of its words, agrees with both Matthew and Luke.

Matthew, in 14% of its words, agrees with both Mark and Luke, and Luke, in 12% of its words, agrees with both Mark and Matthew. Then, it agrees with one of the other, but here, it does not specify which one of the other two it agrees with. Mark agrees

with one of them 38% of the time, Matthew 30% of the time, and Luke 21% of the time.

What you can see pretty clearly is that Mark is more like the others than the others are like each other. So that's basically the picture you get there. If you think about the order of events, the order of events in the Synoptic Gospels is mainly the same as can be observed in taking a Harmony of the Gospel like Robertson's and just going through it and seeing that virtually all the time, each gospel has successive sections in the Harmony.

However, there are some differences. For instance, the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, section 43 in Robertson, is in Matthew 8, Mark 1, and Luke 4. The healing of a leper, which is two units down, is a little earlier in Matthew, but it's later in Mark and Luke. So, the question would be, well, which one did Jesus really do first? And part of the answer is we don't have time machines.

Okay, so we've got the data here. Mark and Luke have the one order, but Matthew has the reverse. Presumably, one or the others is not in chronological order.

Well, narratives don't have to be in chronological order. You can use topical order. Narratives regularly come through some of their prime chronological order, and if you like, they will diverge to pick up a new character coming in and may give you a little background on the character.

Then he comes into the narrative. When a character leaves the narrative, they may say something about what he did. So, the demoniac, which we'll see something about when we do that passage.

After he is, when he's first introduced in the narrative, they're told a little bit about how he got that way. Not a whole lot, but just his history that the people had given up trying to restrain him. When he's dismissed at the end of the narrative, it says he went off into the Decapolis and told people what the Lord had done for him.

So that's common enough. Within a narrative of a given incident, we'll sometimes see differences. So, the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness, Matthew, and Luke vary, depending on which is the second and which is the third of the temptations, if you like.

In the Lord's Supper, was the cup given first in Luke? There is a textual problem there, however. And so it may be that we're looking at more than one cup, and anyone who knows at least the current Passover Seder knows that, in fact, there are four cups in the service. So, which of these is Jesus used as the one for the cup that shows up in the Lord's Supper and then later? I don't know.

Some of the problems that arise in trying to discern something about the order of events in the Synoptic Gospels are whether there are textual variants, which there often are, which is the correct text. And then, when you've got two similar events, if you like, are they really describing the same event, or are they describing two different events that were similar? For instance, one we've mentioned already but didn't say much more about is the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew five through seven, the same as the Sermon on the Plain in Luke. Well, a mountain is not the same as a plain, but those names are kind of invented, and some have suggested that Jesus came down from the top of the mountain to a flat place, somewhere on the slope, and that's where he gave his sermon, et cetera.

So, are these two different reports of the same occasion or are they similar sermons on different occasions? And again, without a time machine, how can we be sure which way to get with that? Your more radical interpreters say the two cleansing of the temples are the same event, but one of the Gospels got it wrong on where to put it, and you get that kind of thing very, very frequently in more liberal commentaries. Agreements in the order of events in which Matthew and Luke agree against Mark are very, very rare compared with other combinations, and this has been used to argue for certain solutions to the synoptic problem. A third thing to consider is the overlap and uniqueness of content among the three Gospels, and this is most easily done by what mathematicians call a Venn diagram where you have two or three or four or five circles, and for this one, we have three circles, a circle that represents Matthew, a circle that represents Mark, circle that represents Luke and you have it set up in such a way that the circles have a region in which all three overlap, three little sort of blossom-like, petal-like sort of things in which two overlap and then sort of three sort of somewhat moon-shaped things in which each circle does not overlap, either of the others.

And if you look at that then, you can put numbers in it, and that's what I've done using Tyson's study of early Christianity as a chart of that sort, and so in the outer section, here's stuff that's only in Matthew, stuff that's only in Mark, stuff that's only in Luke and Tyson does it by verses, which is not totally satisfactory because the verse divisions, whoever made the diverse divisions later don't always correspond exactly but he says basically, Luke has the biggest uniqueness stuff. He has 500 verses that don't occur in either of the other Gospels. Matthew has 280, and Mark has 50, and then overlap, the complete overlap, all three of them together, there are about 480 verses of that, and then Matthew and Mark overlap in about 120 besides that 480.

Matthew and Luke overlap in about 170, and Mark overlaps in about 20. So that's one way to see this. Alan Barr, in a work called *A Diagram of Synoptic Relationships*, does this with colors and, instead of a Venn diagram, just does a long strip in which you have red and yellow and blue, I think it is, to show the different, where the

different Gospels show up and allows you to see where there's clusters of that and where that's spread out and things of that sort.

Early in the church, a church father named Ammonius had devised sections, if you like, and divided each of the Gospels into sections. We don't know how early that was; it was before Eusebius and Eusebius used these to try and sketch for us which Gospels overlapped, where Gospels overlapped materials. So, he took these sections that Ammonius had made, and he looked at the sections in Matthew and said, for this particular section, does this overlap with either Mark or Luke? He did it for four Gospels, and so did John.

He then put the ones with the same kind of overlap into headings in a list. So, he made up what is called the Eusebian canons, the Eusebian list. List one listed all the sections in which all four Gospels overlapped.

And then canons two, three, and four, or lists two, three, and four, lists the place where the three synoptics overlapped, the place where Matthew, Luke, and John overlapped and where Mark, Luke, and John overlapped. Then five, six, seven, eight, and nine listed the overlaps by twos. Then, the last list, list 10A, is all the stuff that's only in Matthew, 10B is all the stuff that's only in Mark, 10C is only in Luke, and 10D is only in John.

Well, when you look at those lists, he then has the number of entries in each of those. For instance, there are about 74 entries in which all four Gospels overlap. That is, they each have about 74 sections that overlap all together.

The second list is what we call synoptics, and they have 111 overlaps. The other ones are by threes: Matthew, Luke, and John have 22 overlaps, and Matthew, Mark, and John have 25.

And the fourth possibility has none. And so, it doesn't get a list. And that would be Mark, Luke, and John.

So, it would be zero if you made a list for it. Then, the same kind of thing happens with the pairs. Matthew, Luke is the biggest list, 82.

Then Matthew, Mark, 47. But Mark, John, very small. Luke, Mark, 13.

Luke, John, 21. And then Mark, John is missing. So, if I try to summarize those, it looks like this.

Let's see how I did that. Okay, looking at the phenomena of overlapping uniqueness in these lists, two possible combinations don't appear in the list. Matthew, Luke, and John, as I mentioned.

One set of two, Mark and John, also do not occur. The canons two, three, and four, in which the overlap is exactly three gospels. You can see where you get the name synoptic from.

That's the one that's got all of those, and the overlaps with John, on the other hand, are much smaller. And then, when you look at the ones that occur in exactly two gospels, Matthew, Luke dominates, and Matthew, Mark is second. Matthew and Luke thing would be what writers later come to call Q. Stuff that's in Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark.

Summary of overlap. Almost all of Mark is found in either Matthew or Luke. Matthew and Luke have much in common, but not Mark.

So, the Q material, and this so-called Q material is mainly discourse material. Only one narrative, the temptation of Jesus, shows up in that. And then Matthew and Luke each have a good deal of material unique to each, whereas Mark has rather little of that.

So that's a kind of quick sketch of the phenomena. You have these peculiar verbal variations, which, if you imagine it's copying, then somebody was doing some pretty considerable editing in the copying. And then you have the matter of order, and the orders generally quite the same, but once in a while, you have something reversed, something of that sort.

And then we have these, which things are included, left out that you can see where the ideas in the two-document theory that you're going to look at, where the idea of Q comes from, if you like. Well, let's sketch the history of the synoptic problem here. Something of the problem was recognized as soon as the second gospel began to circulate, perhaps as early as the 60s.

When you have one gospel out there, people can argue about it, opponents can dislike it, et cetera. But once you've got two, then people start making comparisons, and those who are opponents can then begin to use one gospel against the other to attack Christianity. And that, in fact, is what the pagan fellow named Celsus, C-E-L-S-I-U-S, does in his work, *The True Account*.

Okay, that sounds like one of the things that you see around Easter every few years now, or somebody's trying to debunk the gospels. The heretical attacks against Christianity in that particular line, setting one gospel against another, motivated Christians to try and solve the synoptic problem. And here we're going to try and sketch some attempts of that.

The earliest one we know about is Tatian's Diatessaron, which was perhaps put together around 170 AD. Tatian's procedure is to prepare what we call a woven harmony. That is, he takes the four gospels and makes one narrative with basically no repetition in it.

So, he selects material out of any of the four gospels and weaves it together the way he thinks it goes. So, he takes all the accounts and edits them into a single narrative. The second thing we know about is the Canons of Eusebius.

So, from sometime before about 340, Eusebius used Ammonius' divisions but made the lists that we noted above. These tables then index parallel accounts. And in the manuscripts of a lot of your early gospels, you have a little notation over on the left side that tells you the section number for this particular thing.

The sections are longer than verses and shorter than chapters, which tells you the number. And then a number that tells you what Canon of Eusebius it's in. If you know what their canons represent, then you can immediately see that there are two parallels to this.

And then you can go find Eusebius' list, which, by the way, is published in the front of the Nestle Greek New Testaments. You can then find the other two parallels and then go look them up. So that's basically the way the Canons of Eusebius work.

The first book-length discussion that we know about on the synoptic problem is Augustine's Harmony of the Evangelists, written around 400 AD. He makes the first attempt to go incident by incident through the gospels and suggests how to harmonize them. So, he basically starts a belief first with Matthew and goes through all the passages in Matthew where there are parallels. He then discusses the parallels and differences and what he would suggest on how to harmonize that sort of thing.

Then he goes back and picks up the ones that don't overlap with Matthew and does the same thing. Augustine, as far as we know, is also the first to suggest a theory on how the synoptic gospels arose. It's a version of what comes later to be called the Successive Dependence Theory in which one gospel is written. First, the second gospel that's written makes use of it, and the third gospel that's written makes use of the previous two, basically the idea.

In Augustine's theory, Matthew is written first, and then Mark, when it's written, makes use of it. And Luke, when it's written, makes use of both of them. So, it's the Matthew-Mark-Luke Successive Dependence Theory.

Well, shortly after Augustine's time, military and economic disaster struck the Roman Empire. Literacy fell drastically. Some have estimated it might've been as high as 80%

before the disaster and as low as 5% afterward over a period of roughly 200 years, 300 to 500 AD.

Well, this type of study, the synoptic problem, did not really resume until the Renaissance Reformation period. So, we've got Tatian's Diatessaron, the Canons of Cepheus, Augustine's Harmony, and now we come to Reformation harmonies. With the resumption of academic biblical studies in the Renaissance and the Reformation, attempts to harmonize the gospels resumed, and the sort of work Augustine had done centuries earlier was rethought.

The problem was how to make a decision when to treat two similar events as the same event or two different events, and you had some fairly widely divergent solutions. Compared with what biologists do in working out species, you had lumpers and splitters, okay? You had people who tended to put together anything that looked fairly similar and other people who, if there were any differences between them, were made separate. Well, we're going to continue on with more recent theories.

These picked up around 1780 and came down to the present, and the earliest of these is the so-called primitive gospel or Ur-Evangelium model. Ur-Evangelium is just Latin; is just German for the original gospel, okay? This was proposed independently by Lessing in the 1780s and Eichhorn a little bit later. Basically, the idea is there was one original gospel, the Ur-Gospel, the original gospel, and generally that seemed to have been Aramaic, and then Matthew, Mark, and Luke all extracted material from that and translated it into Greek.

So, similarities between the Synoptics are due to all three using this Ur-Gospel as a source, and differences arise when they edit or translate the gospel, that original gospel differently, the Ur-Evangelium theory, primitive gospel theory. Then we have the successive dependence theory, which had been proposed a century earlier by Augustine, and is now revived by Hugo Grotius, and in its most general form, you have the one gospel, and then the second gospel makes use of it, and the third gospel makes use of the second and of the first. These kinds of models were very popular in the 19th century, and interestingly, every possible order was suggested at that time; both Thysen and Alfred, in their discussions, it's not a big problem, sketch that and give you proponents for each of those varieties.

It's still used today by some, and the Augustinian successive dependence theory is the one we mentioned earlier, Matthew first, Mark second, and Luke third. Another one that's been rather influential is the Griesbach hypothesis, which is Matthew first, Luke second, and Mark third. We'll come back and say a word or two about that in connection with the synoptic problem.

And then the third one, which is perhaps a little less common than the others, is the Markan successive dependence; Mark first, Luke used it, Matthew used it, and then

Luke used both of them. Successive dependence theory. Another 19th-century theory was a so-called fragmentary theory proposed by Friedrich Schleiermacher. His suggestion is that there were lots of written fragments, typically written anecdotes, floating around in the early church and that Matthew, Mark, and Luke each independently made collections of these and put them together in their gospels.

So, for a diagram, you have lots of little fragments up here with arrows going down to Matthew, Mark, and Luke at the bottom. A somewhat similar idea comes from Westcott and Alfred, who are relatively conservative compared with a lot of these guys, and they basically had an oral tradition theory, that is, that oral sources lie behind the three gospels, and they independently made use of the oral traditions and wrote them up. So, you'd have up here a cloud of tradition instead of these little written fragments coming down to Matthew, Mark, and Luke at the bottom.

They're basically saying the common basis synoptics is entirely oral. The apostles who were present when the events occurred unified the oral traditions into continuous written narratives, and the traditions themselves may have come directly from the apostles. So that's been a fairly conservative version, at least in that particular way of stating it.

The one that has come to be dominant up to the present is what's called the two-document theory. It was proposed by Eichorn, Bernard Weiss, and H.J. Holtzman in the 19th century, and is, let's say, the dominant theory today. The idea here is that Mark was one of the two sources of Matthew and Luke, and the other source was a written source that came to pick up the name Q in the theories.

There's actually some debate today on where the name Q comes from. The commonest idea is it comes from the German *Quelle* source, but that apparently has not been verified by any strong proof, so interesting that that kind of information can get lost. That quickly.

Q and Mark, or sometimes in some models of it, an *Ur-markus*, an original mark, are seen as the sources, and Matthew and Luke had access to both of those sources, but they did not know about each other. So, Matthew uses Q and Mark, and Luke uses Q and Mark. The scheme is hypothetical because there was no surviving Q manuscript.

Q has also been called sometimes the *Logia*. That was A.T. Robertson's favorite term for that, based on the assumption that this is what Papias was talking about when he spoke of the *Logia*, which each translated as he was able. Another name that is commonly used is a saying source. As we suggested a little bit earlier, the overlap of Matthew and Luke that doesn't include the Mark material does look like it's largely words of Jesus rather than narratives, so that term saying source is sometimes being used.

As there's some material in Mark that is unique to Mark and not in Matthew and Luke, some proponents have said that Matthew and Luke used a proto-Mark, or an Ur-Markus, an original mark, that was later edited into the modern Mark. Well, we add a couple more theories here. To this one, a development of the two-document theory called the four-document theory was proposed by B.H. Streeter, early in the 20th century, basically said, well, there are, in fact, two more documents that were used as sources.

Besides Mark and Q up here, Matthew had his own written source, which Streeter called M, and Luke had his own written source, which Streeter called L, and so you've got four source documents, but each of Matthew and Luke, each of them used only three of them. Not many people accept this particular model, but the terms M and L, for the material unique to Matthew and unique to Luke, have been preserved, and you'll still see that show up in discussions of the synoptic problem. So, in a lot of discussions of synoptic problems, M, L, and Q are used just to represent material with the particular people debating it, not specifying whether these were ever written sources or even sources at all, but just a way of labeling certain material.

We're going to talk about form criticism later in the course, but I might mention it here because form criticism sort of looks like a combination of Westcott and Alfred's oral tradition theory with the two-document theory. So, you'd have Mark and Luke down here as the final documents, and right above them, excuse me, Matthew and Luke, down here, and above them, Mark and Q, but then above that, a big cloud of oral tradition. And this oral tradition did they not get all of it or use all of it, and Matthew and Luke also had access to the tradition as well as to these two sources.

And that's basically the model that Bolton Lawn and other form critics tend to work with. They accept the two-document model, but they also accept that there was oral tradition floating around as well. Well, here is a little bit of discussion of these various theories.

Take, for instance, the original gospel, primitive gospel, or evangelium theory. It has some advantages. It explains the similarities in a natural way.

They come from a common source. Lessing and Eichhorn proposed that this source was a written gospel in Aramaic and that this Aramaic gospel was not the original. It was preserved because few people spoke it after Aramaic died out in the church, which is after 100 AD, so it was not copied.

This tendency is seen in history. Documents in a foreign language are generally not copied if the language is not known, particularly if a translation is already available. Hebrew and Greek, for instance, were lost in the Western church for centuries during the Middle Ages.

Problems with the Ur-Evangelium theory. We have no direct or indirect evidence for such a document, as nobody speaks about such a document in antiquity and such, and we don't have any fragments of it. If it was an Aramaic Matthew, as some have proposed, then the question would be, why is it so different from the Greek Matthew? Because you still have to explain where the Luke stuff came from, and it supposedly came out of this.

Why did the writers use this source in such a peculiar way? Sometimes, they quote directly; sometimes, they make sense and wording changes and even change the order occasionally. And then there's the problem that Aramaic, in some sense, never really did die out of the church. It just gradually drifted over to what we call Syriac, and there's a Syrian church even today.

So, this would work better, I suppose, if it were a Hebrew, which did die out of the early church. But that just suggests various complications there. How do we explain the material that is unique to each gospel, especially if it has apparent discrepancies, if there's only one source? And if the gospels are condensations from it, why did Mark happen to extract only the same material as in Matthew and Luke? That kind of complication arrives.

So, the Or Evangelium theory explains similarities rather well but doesn't really account for the differences too well. Successive dependence theory, advantages, well, it claims we have all the original documents, so there's no need to hypothesize lost documents. Or proto-gospels or something of that sort.

Problems: who borrowed from whom? Different scholars have been able to make some kind of case for each of the three orders, and part of the reason for this is that writers do condense, and in fact, that was a very common phenomenon in antiquity of making condensed versions of longer works because papyrus was expensive, parchment was more expensive, scribes were skilled workers, so you had to pay a lot of money to have somebody copy something. So, various condensations of various histories and things were often made in antiquity. And of course, people will sometimes expand on something.

So, something shorter might be a condensation, but something longer might be an expansion. So, we don't know whether the authors expanded the source narratives or condensed them. How did the verbal differences arise? Why did the writers feel free to make changes in their sources if they knew only the inspired gospels in front of them? Where does the material come from in later gospels that are not in the earlier gospels, particularly when it appears inconsistent in some ways? Robert Gundry's commentary on Matthew takes a somewhat similar view.

It argues that Matthew had Mark and Q and that Matthew modified the Shepherd story, which was apparently then in Q, into the Wiseman story using a midrash style.

That seems a big strain on inspiration, it would seem to me. Well, that's a success of dependence theories.

Fragmentary theory, written fragments. Well, advantages, Luke 1.1 tells us that there was much-written material available. Many have attempted to draw up accounts, et cetera.

Of course, these need to be fragmentary. They might have intended to draw up as a complete account as they could. Schleiermacher did see that the gospels look like a series of anecdotes, and there are only a few examples of connections between these anecdotes.

For instance, Jesus is doing several events, one after another, on the same day, but in general, you don't have that kind of connection. And apparently, there were a variety of sources. We see Luke shift from a Semitic style in Luke 1:1 to a Hellenistic style in Luke 1:2. In the rest of his gospel, this implies that he had a different source for Luke 1:2, which we'd suggested was perhaps from Mary.

Problems Schleiermacher and Bultmann, after him, downplay the reliability of the fragments to the point where we can't know their order or historicity. This view has the same problems as form criticism, which we're going to discuss later. There's probably some merit in a fragmentary type view, that is, there are multiple sources, but it needs some repair, I think.

Oral tradition theory, advantages, and the events of Jesus' life are presented orally in the early ministry of the apostles. In evangelical churches, the connotation of tradition is negative, implying many generations of transfer, but that connotation is not necessary in the corresponding Greek word, it just means something handed over. And so a tradition might come directly from an apostle if you like, rather than six generations away or something.

The terms that are used for tradition in the New Testament are *paradidomi*, to hand over, and *paradosis*, materials handed over. They show up in the New Testament and can be translated from tradition, but they don't have the sense of a long, cloudy history with no known source. Greek sense refers to what a teacher hands over to a student to guard carefully and keep from error.

Similarly, in rabbinic schools, a good student was, as one of them says, like a plastered cistern, which did not lose a drop of the material stored in it. Whether rabbinic handing over went back reliably to Moses, as the rabbis claimed, 2,000 years and 30 or 40 transfers is one thing. Whether New Testament tradition is reliable within one generation, 30 generations or less, is quite another question.

Problems with the oral tradition model. This possible view, if we do not insist that the only New Testament sources were oral, shorthand did exist at that time, not modern shorthand, and was used for recording court cases and such. Educated followers could have taken notes, written diaries, things of that sort.

So, it seems to me that a combination of written and oral sources is going to make the best sense. We'll treat the two and four-document models together. Their advantages are basically the same.

Matthew and Luke appear to depend on Mark in that they follow Mark's orders most of the time. When Matthew and Luke do not follow Mark, neither one follows the other. Thus, we can see how Luke and Matthew might have had Mark in front of them, but not each other's gospel.

That is, Matthew didn't have Luke, or Luke didn't have Matthew. With this strength, we can see why this particular view is dominant. However, it's not the only way to explain the data.

Griesbach had a reverse explanation of the data, and he explained the problem by saying that Mark had both Matthew and Luke in front of him, and Mark followed both Matthew and Luke where they agreed, but where they didn't agree, he followed one or the other, okay? And you get exactly the same result. Hmm. Nearly any borrowing scheme can be argued both ways.

Simple is not always earlier than complex, and it's very difficult to tell which account was first in other literature as well. Problems of the two and four document theories. We have no evidence for the background documents Q, or even worse, for the four documents M and L2.

Not even comments regarding their existence exist unless we take Papias as referring to one of them, Q, but the early church took these as referring to Matthew. And although we can hypothesize that the early church didn't know, they were just shooting in the dark, and it's perfectly reasonable to assume that Papias was only one strand of the information that came from the apostles and that other church fathers had access to the other strands, and so they knew, in fact, that Papias was referring to Matthew. There are these verbal differences between Matthew and Luke that are peculiar if they're copying from Mark.

Why did they change some things, often trivial things, and then use other wording? Why did Luke omit a large section of Mark, 6:45 to 8:9? There is no easy rationalization for that. If we propose this section is missing in an Ur-markus, then we invent another missing document. The two and four document theories, I think, are a particular problem for evangelicals, and that's this.

Why did Matthew the apostle follow Mark as slavishly as he did if Mark is secondhand, and Matthew was an eyewitness and was there himself? Why not use his own notes instead of Peter's memoirs? The biggest problem, though, is that this view, two and four documents, throws away all the traditional, that is, all the historical information regarding gospel origins. All tradition says that Matthew was written before Mark, and this view reverses the order. Well, that's where we are on the synoptic problem.

I'm going to give you a proposed solution. I wasn't there. I don't have time machines.

We'll find out one day, I believe, that Christianity is true. We'll find out one day how the whole thing worked. But here's what my proposed solution looks like.

Having looked at both internal and external evidence, it appears that the gospels were written by the traditional authors, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, who probably used both oral and written sources. Internal evidence, on the other hand, suggests that Luke and Matthew followed Mark in some way. An apparent contradiction to this is that the external evidence says that Matthew was written earliest and that Luke was probably also written before Mark.

Well, I suggest a model in which Mark's oral source is also a primary source of Matthew and Luke, but Matthew and Luke were written before Mark. How do we work that? Well, we've got the oral apostolic testimony. We can make this as kind of an arrow coming down the middle.

And Peter was one of the major spokesmen for the Apostles, and the apostles got together and organized their material in the time they were together, after Jesus' ministry, if you'd like. Matthew made use of this oral apostolic testimony, and he wrote, as I think, a Hebrew Matthew. And of course, he used his own memory, but he also used material that had been supplied by the other apostles as they were discussing these things together.

Later, that's followed by a Greek Matthew, whether Matthew himself translated that or we don't know. Meanwhile, the apostles are not only speaking in Aramaic or whatever to the other Jews in Jerusalem and such. They're beginning to branch out to Hellenistic Jews, and then they're going to move out of Israel and go to other places. So, their oral testimony is also going to be developed in Greek, and so it's possible that the Greek Matthew made use of the oral testimony of the apostles in the form of Greek as well.

Meanwhile, over on the other side of this big arrow, you have Luke, and Luke is in Israel for the two years that Paul is in prison at Caesarea, and he goes around, interviews people, he interviews apostles, he interviews people who were part of the Seventy, interviews people who were across to the Jordan and Perea and saw Jesus'

miracles over there, and he puts this material together, and some of that's the apostolic testimony of the apostles, and puts together his gospel. And last of all, Mark in Rome has been with Peter while he's giving this material, and people ask him to write up what Peter had to say, so he does. And so, although he writes last, he's writing directly from one apostle rather than from selections as the other people had.

Well, that's my model, if you like. It's in some ways more complicated than the others, but in fact, it doesn't make any assumptions about detailed written documents, though obviously, some of the apostles and other people may have had written notes of one sort or another. So, I ask three questions that I need to respond to in presenting this model for critique. The first is how are the similarities to be explained. First of all, we suggest that Matthew, Mark, and Luke use mainly oral sources with some written supplements.

And so, what are we going to have? Well, first of all, all the Synoptics depend on the life of Christ in an actual series of events in history. So, part of the similarities between them comes from the fact that they aren't making it up. It's stuff that really happened.

Some of the similarity is due to the fact these events actually happened, yet how to explain the common selection of certain events from a martial art or whole? Maybe 20 healings scattered over the three gospels, where there must have been hundreds or even thousands of healings, et cetera. Secondly, it all depends on the oral preaching and teaching of the apostles. The apostles experienced all of Jesus' public ministry.

They preached and taught together for a number of years afterward, and they were in communication to some extent thereafter. Doubtless, as the apostles were together, they talked through which incidents in Jesus' ministry best captured who he was, what he did, and how best to present these items. Teachers, as we teach over and over again, we have to think through, well, how well did that go? Did they understand this? How could I have explained that better and things of that sort? And so, all the Synoptics depend on the life of Christ, which is an actual series of events.

They all depended on the oral preaching and teaching of the apostles, where they got together and selected the materials that would work best if you like. Third, Mark's apparent priority may be a result of Peter's influence as spokesman and leader among the apostles during the early years while they were together in Jerusalem. So, Mark preserves the teaching of the most influential apostle but is not the written source of Matthew and Luke.

Peter's preaching, the oral source of Mark, is also the main oral source for Matthew and Luke because of Peter's influence in the selecting and shaping of the material

which constitutes the apostolic testimony of Jesus. And presumably, Peter, too, was influenced by decisions made among the apostles on which were better and such. So, you've got that working both ways.

Fourth, the similarity between Matthew and Luke, where Mark is not present, what we call the cue material, may be due to each having used Jesus' oral teaching materials. Those who've studied Synoptic Problems are well aware that this material in Matthew is not always put in the same place as this material in Luke. Matthew arranges these sayings and discourses in blocks while Luke scatters them throughout his narrative.

Some suggest that Luke uses Matthew, but Luke often has these discourses in a different context than Matthew. Why would Luke have changed the context to Matthew? One of the strengths of hypothesizing a cue document is that it explains this feature by seeing cues having no narrative context. Matthew and Luke selected our sayings independently and put them into their stuff.

But this still has the author's inventing context in that kind of scheme. It's better, it seems to me, to say that Jesus is an itinerant speaker. He often repeats materials so that Luke and Matthew place items differently because Matthew reports one occasion and Luke another as determined by Luke's interviews and whether Matthew knew all the ones that Luke knew and Luke knew all the ones that Matthew knew, we have no idea.

If I'm right, the Perean narrative material in Luke indicates that Luke interviewed people over in Perean. It may be that Matthew considered that secondary or wasn't even aware of certain venues where those things happened and such. Sayings are typically reported only once in the gospel. The writings are, after all, trying to avoid, writers are, after all, trying to avoid monotony, and they're trying to keep the book-length down.

So, since book production was very expensive, my suggestion here is that Matthew made decisions on even where he knew several contexts or something, made decisions on, put them in one particular context, and Luke may have done the same as well. Well, the idea so far, then, is actual events in history produce the similarities, the selection of which events to present was partly done by the single group process among the apostles, and that Jesus is an itinerant speaker, so his oral materials could have been found in a lot of different contexts and in slightly different forms. I'm an itinerant; well, I was an itinerant preacher if you like.

When I taught at seminary, I would get invited to preach in various churches, and so I would go around and I had certain sermons which I used again and again and again and other sermons which I used once or twice and decided I didn't do a great job on it and gave up on it rather than trying to polish it or something and yet surely if you

had tape recordings of these different sermons, they would not be word for word. So, but they would have some overlaps where I had settled on some way of giving an anecdote or something that was pretty closely repeated. I mentioned two more things under similarities.

Number five, the students of Jewish rabbis learned their master's teaching by rote. Perhaps this was also done in Christian circles. This, in fact, is a pretty common phenomenon in educational circles throughout the world of memorization.

It's kind of going out of vogue in the West but has been common over many, many centuries. There are great similarities in wording, particularly in Jesus' teachings, as I mentioned before, but the similarities in the Gospels are much stronger when Jesus is speaking than they are when the narrators are narrating. Okay, so the great similarities there suggest some kind of memorization.

It might be intentional memorization, or it might be what we call accidental memorization. I tried hard several times to memorize Bible verses and never was great at it because I don't have a great verbal memory, but having read through the Bible now, I am probably getting towards 75 times or something of that sort, and that in a bunch of different versions, I know some verses, okay? And that kind of thing happens. Newspaper reporters, back in the time when the presidents used to go from town to town on a train and give their speeches, often say that they could give the president's candidate's speech five or six times.

And so that does happen. There are some clear parallels between Jesus and the rabbis. Both had disciples, both sometimes taught in parables, both debated with opponents, and both were called rabbis, okay? Both in Greek and Jewish cultures, learning was mainly by memorization from oral recitation rather than by reading books or taking notes and such.

Berger Gerhardsson, in his book *Memory and Manuscript*, gives us a detailed discussion of this kind of material. Some students had great memories and could quote teachers like an encyclopedia. Others could perhaps not remember that quite so well but could recall the logic and the argumentation very well, different ways in which our brains have gotten wired over their growth, I suppose and may have some genetic component to it as well.

Lastly, under similarities, some documents or notes were likely used. Luke 1:1-4 mentions many who wrote accounts, though Luke does not tell us whether or not he used any of these written materials. Papias comments on Mark accurately but not in order perhaps should be understood as Mark's note-taking during Peter's sermons, which he later organized into the final gospel rather than something else as though Mark actually wrote the gospel accurately but not in order.

So that's how similarities are to be explained, I think. How are the differences to be explained? Recall that the gospels sometimes contain exactly the same incidents and wordings clustered with some striking differences in event, order, and words. Well, let's see.

First of all, Jesus' teaching was doubtless somewhat but not exactly repetitive as he spoke to different audiences. This would help his disciples to learn his teachings and yet may account for some of the variations. Some of Jesus' actions were also repeated.

Many miracles, doubtless people with the same kind of maladies, so very similar type healings, the gospels themselves typically do not repeat those kinds of things. So you don't generally get four or five narrations of lepers healing or something of that sort. There are two cleansings of the temple if we take the gospel seriously.

There are two miraculous catches of fish. There are two feeding of the multitudes, etc. So, some of Jesus' actions were repeated.

Thirdly, different witnesses see and emphasize different aspects of the same event. The easiest way to check this is to go to a reunion with your siblings, perhaps, and discuss things that happened. And you were, you know, slightly different ages, and so you remember some different items, but you remember some same items, but you remember different things about the same items.

The same thing will happen in a college reunion: high school reunion or something of that sort. So basically, different witnesses see and emphasize different aspects of the same event.

Fourthly, oral repetition, even by the same person, regularly produces the kind of verbal variation observed here. Striking similarity with random variation of tenses and things of that sort. Our minds, I guess, some people's minds anyway, perhaps work verbally in such a way that you're eventually essentially spinning out a tape of some sort, but others don't work that way.

And you may have some stuff that you have exactly the same way on two occasions and other things that you have put a different clause in, or you've done something like that, and you get a different result. There's no need to postulate, by the way, a mini-linked chain in the case of rabbinic oral traditions allegedly going back to Moses. They have to because you've got 1,500 years or so.

Even with Matthew writing in the 40s, you still have about 10 years of oral repetition between his writing it down and such. And that may be oral repetition by Matthew. The striking similarities are due to the apostles being together.

Variations in tense and wording are natural features of personal differences and even repetition by an individual. The writers are speaking, and the speakers, anyway, are telling us what happened. They're not attempting to be identical in their accounts.

Fifth, the gospel writers apparently did not always intend to convey the very words of Jesus, many of which were probably not spoken in Greek anyway. They tell us what Jesus said, but an exact transcript would be impractical because of its length. All the gospel writers were seeking to communicate widely, not just to a wealthy elite.

So, we contrast with Josephus 20 volume of Antiquities. So, they kept their costs down by selecting and summarizing events and discourses. Papyrus rolls were not that long, and they were fairly expensive.

The gospel message was compressed to the medium book style and economy of the day. Summaries, of course, can omit details and still be accurate. Sixth, presumably, the gospel writers did not know everything known by the other.

They had their own curricula conditions and their own research. Something may have happened when a particular apostle was not around, or he may not remember it. And lastly, under differences, the evangelists certainly did not use everything they did know.

Remember John 21:25, but rather they selected, as John himself says a chapter earlier, John 20, 30, and 31 selected their materials to keep their accounts within bounds and to give the emphasis that they intended. Shortening an account by generalizing and being vague makes the story drab. It is better to retain the dialogue in concrete detail, even if it means the selection of only a few incidents or key sentences of a sermon to retain the vividness.

Note the use of sound bites by modern TV newscasters. So, how do you explain the similarities? How do you explain the differences? Thirdly, how does this fit with inspiration? If the Bible really is God's inspired word, etc., how does all this fit with that? Well, let's see. First of all, inspiration does not require dictation.

It allows the author's style to come through without losing truthfulness. God has done even better than dictation occasionally. Okay, he wrote the commandments with his own finger, whatever that involves, on the stone, if you like.

And God certainly dictated some things to some of the prophets, etc. But inspiration, that is that scripture is fully trustworthy as it's taught in many places, presumably also involves the narrators who are selecting events, and the narrators of Samuel and Kings and Chronicles mention sources they use and put them together, etc.

Inspiration does not rule out some dictation, but inspiration is consistent with approximate language, such as round numbers.

It's consistent with summarization. It's consistent with non-chronological arrangements, a topic, or something, as long as the author doesn't acclaim chronological order and then doesn't do it if you like. It's not, of course, consistent with contradiction or explicit chronological error.

A summary, of course, may seem misleading if you're trying to extract points from the story which the author is not providing. And that reminds you that a hostile critic, commentator, reviewer, etc., can find contradictions in something where the person is not really contradicting himself.

We see that all the time in election campaigns. So that's just a common feature. A writer may use a logical arrangement rather than chronological order, and he is not under obligation to tell you this explicitly.

Inspiration does assure us that the accounts are harmonious, but it doesn't tell us how to harmonize them. It tells us that these are harmonizable and that we should think in that direction, though that doesn't mean we need to move heaven and earth to harmonize them. We might not know enough to do a proper job.

Typically, we can suggest two or three possibilities or even five or ten possibilities, but we are not sure which one is right. An example I can think of is harmonizing the three denials by Peter, etc. I know one writer who comes up with six denials to have all the material harmonized, and I don't think it's the right way to go.

That's Harold Lindsay. It's Harold Lindsay in one of his books. But I wasn't back there.

My own scheme is that on at least the second and third occasion, Peter has got several people around him saying, yeah, what about this, etc. So, one narrator picks out one person, and another picks out another. Lastly, inspiration is revealed doctrine.

We don't derive inspiration from scripture by inductively resolving all the known difficulties. We deduce it from what the Bible teaches. The Bible says God cannot lie that the writers were guided and that Jesus and the apostles and the prophets, etc.

treat scripture as inerrant. That's the sort of direction we go in deriving inerrancy from what the Bible teaches. Thus, we don't need to be able to answer all questions before accepting them, though we should still work at answering such questions in order to help others and in order to strengthen our own confidence in God and his words.

Liberals have an advantage here, if you want to call it that, in that they can pile up apparent inconsistencies and then claim a high probability that at least one of these is a genuine error. But the same technique can be used against the sinlessness of Christ or against the goodness of God. If Christianity is true, then God is good, Christ is sinless, and his word is trustworthy.

And remember that any single event is improbable as too many other things might have happened. We can argue that the scriptures give positive evidence of their supernatural source, and that's what I would do. They are impressive enough that their historical accuracy is testable. And we can argue then that we have no excuse that will stand in the judgment for rejecting scriptures.

Okay, well, that's where we are on the synoptic problem, and I think we will quit at that particular point. Thank you for your attention.