

## Do the Synoptics Depend on Each Other?

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What is the literary relationship between the Synoptic Gospels? How does one explain the many similarities of content and wording within the Gospel accounts while at the same time accounting for the numerous differences between the individual records? This article examines the theories which have been proposed in an attempt to arrive at an acceptable solution to the question of literary dependence in the Synoptic Gospels.

Much of the discussion in this regard is hypothetical, and some might question the validity of engaging in such a study. However, as Scroggie points out, a problem does exist and it should not be overlooked.

That there is such a problem is a fact, and everyone who is interested in the Gospels should know something about it. In detail it is a matter for the scholars, but the average student of these Records cannot afford to overlook it....

We are in possession of three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which are called Synoptic, because they survey the life of Christ from a common viewpoint.... In these Gospels are resemblances and differences, and the problem consists in the harmonizing of these, and so of determining the relation of the Synoptics to one another.<sup>1</sup>

### The Synoptic Problem

What exactly is the problem between the Synoptic Gospels that raises the question of literary dependence? Actually there

are four aspects to this problem which must be understood. Guthrie presents a helpful summary of the four points.

Arising out of a detailed study of the three Synoptic Gospels is the important question of their relationship to each other, and this is affected by the following main considerations.

*a. Similarity of arrangement*

All these Gospels are based on the same general historical structure.... Moreover, there is a high proportion of the Gospel material common to all three Gospels.

*b. Similarity of style and wording*

In many sections of the Gospels not only is there similarity of contents but also of vocabulary....

*c. Similarities in two Gospels only*

(1) There are some cases where sections recorded in all three Gospels agree more closely in style and wording in two as compared with the third.... (2) But the more important data under this heading relate to Matthew and Luke, which contain a

considerable amount of material common to both but omitted from Mark....

#### d. *Divergences*

The problem would be less difficult to solve were it not for the considerable differences both in arrangement and vocabulary over many points of detail. Some sections of common material have little verbal similarity, while others are placed in different historical settings.... In addition to the differences just mentioned, each of the three Synoptics has certain sections peculiar to it.<sup>2</sup>

Each of these problems mentioned by Guthrie needs to be examined in more detail.

### **Similarity Of Arrangement**

The first problem is the similarity of arrangement. A glance at any harmony of the Gospels shows that the three agree in the general outline of materials.<sup>3</sup>

1. Ministry of John the Baptist
2. Baptism of Christ
3. Temptation of Christ
4. Ministry of Christ in Galilee
5. Last public ministry of Christ in Jerusalem
6. Betrayal and arrest of Christ
7. Trial and crucifixion of Christ
8. Burial of Christ
9. Resurrection of Christ

Any explanation of the relationship between the Gospels must explain this unity of arrangement.

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### **Similarity of Style and Wording**

The second problem is the similarity between the style and wording. In many instances two or more of the Gospels present strikingly parallel accounts for extended passages. One example among many is the account of Christ receiving little children and speaking to the rich young ruler (Matt 19:14-20; Mark 10:14-20; Luke 18:16-21). It is obvious that these accounts are closely related, and any explanation must be able to account for these similarities.

### **Similarities in Two Gospels Only**

While all three Synoptics have much in common, large sections of material are found in two of the Gospels but not in the third. To compound the problem, these additions usually consist of Christ's words which are found in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark. A list of some of these sections can be quickly gained through examining a harmony of the Gospels.<sup>4</sup>

1. Genealogy of Christ (Matt 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38)
2. Preaching of John the Baptist (Matt 3:7-10; Luke 3:7-14)
3. Explanation of Christ's temptations (Matt 4:3-11; Luke 4:3-13)
4. Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7, Luke 6:17-49)
5. Christ's healing of the centurion's servant (Matt 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10)
6. Exhortation to follow Christ (Matt 8:19-22; Luke 9:57-62)
7. Eulogy for John the Baptist (Matt 11:2-19; Luke 7:18-35)
8. Christ's lament over Jerusalem (Matt 23:37-39; Luke 13:34-35)

In addition to these major passages which are entirely lacking in Mark, the other two Synoptic writers, Matthew and Luke, often "flesh out" Mark's basic statements with additional material.

Once again, any explanation of the relationship between these Gospels must take into account the large amount of material common to just two of the three.

## Divergences

The problem of divergences within the Synoptics seems to cause the most difficulty for those who attempt to arrive at a unified explanation of the relationship between the Gospels. One

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problem is the use of parallel materials in different settings. For example, Matthew's account of Christ's lament over Jerusalem occurs in the Temple in Jerusalem *after* His triumphal entry into the city (Matt 21:9-10; 23:37-24:1). However, Luke's account of Christ's lament over Jerusalem occurs somewhere on the road to Jerusalem *before* His triumphal entry into the city (Luke 13:22, 31-35; 19:28-40).

A second problem with the differences between the Gospels concerns the materials that are unique to one Gospel. Since so much of the material is similar, these unique sections must be accounted for. Scroggie lists twenty-two such sections for the Gospel of Luke. He concludes that just over half of the Book of Luke is unique to itself.<sup>5</sup> The same phenomenon is repeated in both Matthew and Mark though to a lesser degree. Each of these Gospels has material peculiar to it alone, and any solution to the problem must account for this material.

Basically the problem comes down to this: Why are these three Gospels so similar and yet so distinct? Did the Gospels draw on some common source or sources; and if so, can the content of these sources and the order of borrowing be determined? These are the questions that need to be answered.

## The Proposed Solutions

Suggestions on possible solutions to the Synoptic problem are abundant. In fact if the many different variations are considered separately, the field is crowded with suggested hypotheses. It would be a waste of time to examine many of these variations which have long since been rendered improbable. For the sake of conciseness this section will present only the three major views which currently hold sway in this debate: the oral tradition theory, the mutual dependence theory, and the documentary hypothesis.

### The Oral Tradition Theory

The first major theory to gain some measure of acceptance is the oral tradition theory. Iverach detailed the essence of this view. "It assumes that each of the evangelists wrote independently of the others, and derived the substance of his writing, not from written sources, but from oral narratives of sayings and doings of Jesus, which, through dint of repetition, had assumed a relatively fixed form."<sup>6</sup>

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The idea behind this theory is the belief that a fixed oral tradition soon developed in the early church. Christ's words were repeated verbatim by the Apostles and their followers and were committed to memory by those who heard them. Much as someone today might memorize the Preamble to the United States Constitution or the Gettysburg Address, the words of Christ were memorized by His followers. This would account for the striking similarity among the Gospel accounts.

A second concept inherent within the oral tradition theory is the belief that Christ repeated His teachings in a stereotyped form, that is, Christ delivered the same message in nearly the same

form on different occasions.

But can we say something more about the character, especially the form, of this old oral tradition? Indeed we can. The written Gospels themselves allow us to do so. The Gospels inform us that the oral tradition had two peculiarities: (1) it was the custom of the preachers to repeat their teachings, especially the sentences in which the greater part of their instruction was given. (2) Their teaching assumed a stereotyped form, the words were almost always the same....

We cannot give full details in this paper. But we believe there is but one good interpretation of the facts we have named, and it is: Jesus had the habit of teaching in a stereotyped form.<sup>7</sup>

Grosheide's point is well taken. There are indications that Christ gave the same message on different occasions (e.g., Christ's lament over Jerusalem in Matt 23:37-39 and Luke 13:34-35). These different settings could account for the differences between some of the Gospel accounts.

## **The Mutual Dependence Theory**

The mutual dependence theory was first propounded by Augustine. It was reconsidered following the work of Griesbach in the eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> This theory holds that one Gospel was used by the others and thus accounts for the similarities.

The problem comes when one tries to decide which of the Gospels was written first and which two borrowed from the original source. Iverach has given a brief synopsis of the confusion which has developed. "There have been many variations of the theory. Each of the 3 Gospels has been put first, each second, and each third, and each in turn has been regarded as the source of the others. In fact, all possible permutations (6 in number) have been exhausted."<sup>9</sup>

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By the early part of the twentieth century the hypothesis as revived by Griesbach had largely fallen into disfavor.<sup>10</sup> However, it has shown signs of recovery during the past decade.

At first, reaction to the re-emergence of the Griesbach hypothesis was almost wholly negative. But within a few years its merits began to be noted. During the past twelve years certain major developments of the Griesbach hypothesis have taken place, so that today a new situation exists. We are actually living between two epochs.<sup>11</sup>

Farmer feels that the position is now gaining in ascendancy.

There are basically two reasons why the Griesbach hypothesis is receiving favourable attention. The first has to do with the rediscovery of its central and essential strength—viz. that it offers a credible explanation for the order of the episodes in the synoptic gospels.

The second reason has to do with certain new developments in synoptic criticism. These developments are three in number. The first has to do with the characteristics of textual conflation. The second concerns the cultural context in which the evangelists did their work. And the third has to do with the use Luke may have made of Matthew.<sup>12</sup>

Farmer's technical explanation is far too long to reproduce here, but he does offer much proof for his position. It is safe to say that the foundation stone for the reemergence of this theory is the denial of Marcan priority among the Gospels.<sup>13</sup> This relates closely to the next theory, but the essence of the argument is this: The next theory developed from the mutual dependence theory by assuming that Mark was written first. If the priority of Mark is denied, that theory falls and the mutual dependence theory again becomes dominant.

Farmer's order of priority is probably the one which will become dominant in this theory. He basically repeats the ideas first presented by Griesbach.

On the Griesbach hypothesis Luke omits much of Matthew, and adds a great deal from his special source material. Mark omits most of this same material from Matthew which Luke has omitted while taking very little of what Luke has added. The result is that Mark is shorter than either Matthew or Luke, but not because he has "abbreviated" either one of them. The fact that his text of individual episodes is generally fuller than that of Matthew and Luke suggests that Mark may not have cherished brevity for its own sake.<sup>14</sup>

Thus the basic idea behind this theory is that one of the Gospels (probably Matthew) was written first. The other Gospels then used that first Gospel as a source to guide them in their

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composition. However, while the second Gospel (Luke) only used the first Gospel as his source, the third Gospel (Mark) used both of the earlier Gospels as sources. The literary dependence in this type of scheme is rather obvious.

## The Documentary Hypothesis

At the present time the theory which holds the greatest sway in the study of the Synoptic Gospels is the documentary hypothesis. This theory in all its varied forms holds that the writers of the Gospels used various *sources* in their composition of the Gospels, The similarities in the Gospels occurred when the writers copied from the same sources, and the differences resulted when they used different sources. There are two main schools of thought regarding the documentary hypothesis—the two-source theory and the four-source theory.

*The two-source theory.* The two-source theory of the documentary hypothesis is actually an outgrowth of some of the initial conclusions developed by the mutual dependence theory. One of those early results was the acceptance of the priority of Mark. Mark was considered to be the Gospel on which Matthew and Luke were dependent.

One of the stable findings of synoptic criticism has been the priority of Mark. It is a striking fact, that whereas the order of Mark and Matthew may agree against Luke and that the order of Mark and Luke may agree against Matthew, the order of Matthew and Luke never agrees against Mark. In other words, Mark is the stable factor. Most prob[ably], Mark was the source common to the other two, which they generally followed, but sometimes altered. This common material is almost entirely narrative.<sup>15</sup>

Once the priority of Mark was accepted, though, the mutual dependence theory was hard pressed to explain the material common to Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark. The obvious answer was to postulate a second source that was available to Matthew and Luke in addition to Mark. That source is commonly called *Q*.

*Q* is a hypothetical source. Modern man has never seen it, but a careful study of Matthew and Luke has caused many scholars to assume its existence. These two Gospels have in common about 207 verses that are missing in Mark.... The hypothetical document is commonly called *Q* after *Quelle* which means "source."... *Q* was not a gospel, which is a literary form in which the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection was narrated. *Q* consisted

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largely of a collection of miscellaneous sayings arranged topically.... The fact that

these Gospels relied so heavily on *Q* testifies to the high esteem in which this document was held in the early church. *Q* probably ceased to circulate independently after it was incorporated in Matthew and Luke.<sup>16</sup>

The two-source theory rests on two foundational pillars—the priority of Mark and the existence of *Q*. Both of these have gained a wide acceptance as attested by Marxsen.

The Two-Source theory has been so widely accepted by scholars that one feels inclined to abandon the term “theory” (in the sense of “hypothesis”). We can in fact regard it as an assured finding—but we must bear in mind that there are inevitable uncertainties as far as the extent and form of *Q* and the special material are concerned.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of Marxsen’s optimistic appraisal, the “inevitable uncertainties” of the two-source theory continued to plague scholars who accepted the basic premises of the documentary hypothesis. They accepted the conclusions of the two-source theory as far as those conclusions went, but they still felt that this theory failed to account for all of the evidence. More specifically, it failed to account for the extensive material which was unique to Matthew or Luke. Scroggie quotes Westcott who estimated that 42 percent of Matthew and 59 percent of Luke are unique to their respective books.<sup>18</sup> The origin of this material is not explained by the two-source theory.

*The four-source theory.* Because of the inability of the two-source theory to account for all of the relevant facts, Streeter proposed a basic expansion of the theory. He posited a four-source theory to account for the unique material in Matthew and Luke.<sup>19</sup> Connick gives a detailed explanation of these two additional sources.

*L* stands for another hypothetical source. There are about 300 verses in the Gospel of Luke, excluding the first two chapters, which have no parallel elsewhere. The supposition is that they came from an independent source. They contain both narrative and teaching material and include such memorable parables as the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. Incidents in the ministry of Jesus from the preaching of John the Baptist to the ascension of Jesus are related with little concern for chronology....

*M* stands for a...hypothetical source, the material peculiar to Matthew. It contains about a dozen quotations from Hebrew Scripture, a like number of narratives (Nativity, Peter walking on the water, etc.), and many parables and sayings. Its spirit is markedly Jewish, and it exhibits a keen interest in Jesus’ relation to Judaism. Jesus is pictured as a second Moses. This characteristic has

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fostered speculation that Jerusalem was the birthplace of the collection<sup>20</sup>

The four-source theory thus seeks to explain all of the similarities and distinctions between the Gospels through the use of three hypothetical sources (*Q*, *L*, *M*) and through the acceptance of Marcan priority. However, this multiplicity of sources also poses its own problems, and thus the four-source theory is not widely accepted today. As Hobbs notes, “Streeter’s *M* and *L* will not do, for they are simply further props to the *Q* hypothesis.”<sup>21</sup>

Several variations of these theories have been proposed to explain the origin of the similarities and differences in the Gospel accounts. However, the three which have just been examined are the most popular. The others are generally modifications of these basic presentations. The remainder of this article examines these three theories in an attempt to arrive at the best solution to the question of literary dependence.

## **A Suggested Solution**

The underlying presuppositions of the three theories already presented must be examined to see if the theories correspond to reality.

## The Priority of Mark

The cornerstone of the documentary hypothesis is the priority of Mark. Both the two-source and four-source theories are built on the presupposition that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a written source. But what proof is given to support this assumption? Guthrie gives an excellent summary of the major arguments which have been presented.

(i) *The proportion of Mark reproduced* Almost the whole of Mark is paralleled in Matthew (about 90 per cent)... About half of Mark also appears in Luke...

(ii) *The primary order of Mark.* In the main the three Gospels keep to the same general outline, but where they diverge in matters of detail it is more rare for Matthew and Luke to agree against Mark than for Mark to be in the majority....

(iii) *The literary characteristics.* There are a number of ways in which Mark's language and style appear to give a more primitive account. First, Mark's amplification of details and even of whole sections are made more concise in Matthew and Luke.... Secondly, Mark's style is polished by Matthew and Luke....

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(iv) *The greater historical candour.* Because Mark often records evidences of Jesus' human emotions where Matthew and Luke in parallel passages either omit or modify, it is supposed that he must represent an earlier tradition. The modifications are regarded as signs of increasing reverence....

(v) *The least explicit account.* In the narrative of Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi Mark has only "Thou art the Christ," but both Matthew and Luke add further descriptions...<sup>22</sup>

It is the opinion of this writer that these arguments are not as solid as many scholars believe. Each of the "proofs" is capable of an alternative interpretation. For example, it can be argued that the order of Mark is followed more closely because his is the Gospel with the greatest percentage of narrative material. He is seeking to present the life of Christ with a minimal amount of discourse material (parables, sermons, etc.). When the other Gospels also present their narratives of Christ's life, one would *expect* them to parallel Mark. It is when they add additional discourse material that they would tend to differ from Mark's order.

Closely related to this argument on the order of events was the argument based on the percentage of Marcan material reproduced. Basically this argument holds that Mark must have been written first because so much of it is reproduced in Matthew and Luke. However, this argument is not so strong as it might seem. This writer would like to postulate two literary "rules" which seem self-evident and which can explain the phenomena without assuming literary dependence.

1. Multiple accounts of the same event will exhibit striking similarities.
2. The shorter version of two or more parallel accounts will generally have a greater percentage of its material included in the other accounts.

The basic idea in these two "rules" can be explained rather easily. First, if several people write an account of the same event (whatever that event might be so long as it was observable), one would expect their accounts to be similar. Second, the shortest of the multiple accounts would be expected to have the greatest percentage of its words and phrases repeated in the other accounts since its brevity would force it to focus on the major events which would be the most

likely items to be included by the others.

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These “rules” can explain the high proportion of Mark which appears in Matthew and Luke. If each Gospel is faithfully recounting the events of Christ’s life, then similarities in arrangement and content should be expected. Moreover, if the shorter account is only detailing the main events, then a greater percentage of that account should appear in the longer versions.

Another error in the arguments for Marcan priority can be noted. According to those arguments, if Mark’s account were *more detailed* than Matthew’s or Luke’s it supposedly proves Mark’s priority because he has the more primitive account. “Mark’s amplification of details and even of whole sections are made more concise in Matthew and Luke.”<sup>23</sup> However, if Mark’s account was *less detailed* than Matthew’s or Luke’s it supposedly proves Mark’s priority since the “least explicit account” must be the earliest.<sup>24</sup> Thus the proponents of this view use opposing arguments to prove the same point. They are inconsistently applying their assumptions to make the evidence fit their preconceived conclusions.<sup>25</sup>

The arguments for Marcan priority from literary characteristics and greater historical candor must also be rejected because they attribute to Mark an inferiority that the later writers supposedly had to correct. If the Gospels are viewed synthetically, the “historical candor” of Mark is no problem. Each writer emphasized a different aspect of the person of Christ. If Mark emphasized Christ’s humanity it was *not* to the exclusion of His deity.

The presupposition of Marcan priority cannot be proven by a careful study of the three Gospels. Such a presupposition is based primarily on an evolutionary bias which believes the shortest and least extensive Gospel *must* be first with the other Gospels being later embellishments of that early account. This is a tenuous assumption.

## **The Reality of Sources**

Both the mutual dependence theory and the documentary hypothesis depend on the concept of sources (though in varying degrees). Each theory holds that the individual writers borrowed their material to some extent from an earlier source. Actually there is some validity to this basic concept. Unless one believes that the Gospels are a product of divine dictation to human scribes, he seems bound to accept the necessity of sources. For example, Matthew and Luke obtained their genealogical records from some source (e.g., perhaps Temple records, oral tradition

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from Christ’s family, etc.). In Luke’s report that Mary “treasured up” all the events that surrounded Christ’s birth and “pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19), this writer sees no problem in attributing these thoughts to Mary whom Luke might have interviewed and used as a “source” for his Gospel.

These examples could be multiplied, but most conservative scholars have no problem seeing the Gospel writers employing outside sources in gathering material about incidents they had not witnessed—all the while being guided by the Holy Spirit who was guaranteeing the accuracy of the completed documents. Luke himself acknowledges his familiarity with other written accounts of Christ’s life and states that he has “carefully investigated everything from the beginning” (Luke 1:1-4).

The problem is that what conservative scholars mean by “sources” is *not* what the critical scholars mean. The word has different meanings to the two groups. Many critical scholars see the sources not as independent eyewitnesses or isolated records employed by the Gospel

writers, but rather they view the sources as extensive writings which provided the majority of the material in the present Gospels. The writers of the Gospels were then no more than skilled editors who utilized and combined these available sources to produce their own accounts. Thus if any material is common to Matthew and Luke it must have been copied from *Q*. If any material is unique to Matthew alone it must first have existed in *M*. Connick shows how this concept of sources is used to explain the origin of Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew's principal source was Mark. He reproduced about 90 percent of the earliest Gospel, making his own writing a second edition of Mark, revised and enlarged.... He abbreviated it, added to it, omitted from it, and corrected it to suit his purposes. In addition to Mark he used *Q*, *M* (material found only in Matthew), a list of Old Testament quotations, a genealogy of Jesus' ancestors, and a nativity narrative. From these diverse and sometimes discordant parts he fashioned an artistic and memorable whole.<sup>26</sup>

This writer rejects the critical view of sources for at least two reasons. First, no objective evidence for these sources can be found. No one has yet produced a copy of *Q*, *M*, or *L*. If these sources were so well known and highly respected that they were used by the original Gospel writers, one can well wonder why no trace of them can be found while other apocryphal gospels (which are far inferior) managed to survive. A theory that rests on such extensive invisible evidence should immediately be suspect.

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Second, the critical view of sources fails to account for the present structure of the Gospels. It is one thing to speak of the percentage of Mark reproduced in Matthew; it is quite another to see *how* that material is "reproduced." The impression one gets is that vast sections of the Gospels are often reproduced word for word. However, a study of the texts reveals a far different picture.

Farmer has produced the *Synopticon* which is a color-coded text of the three Synoptic Gospels showing the extent of verbal relationship between them.<sup>27</sup> A detailed examination of even a single pericope shows that the writers would have had to perform literary gymnastics with their sources to produce their final product. Often the verbal agreement involves isolated words separated by other words unique to that one Gospel. If the Gospel writers were copying from each other, one would expect more consistency. Also much of the alleged "literary dependence" involves words that must appear due to the nature of the story. For example, it would be difficult for any writer to describe the baptism of Christ without using words such as *Jesus, John the Baptist, Jordan River, baptize, water, Holy Spirit, dove, etc.*

The Gospel writers did employ sources, but not in the sense proposed by the critics. They did not resort to wholesale copying of some earlier (now lost) texts, nor did the later writers edit, adapt, or plagiarize the accounts of the earlier writers. Rather, they selectively gathered information from various sources (including eyewitness accounts) which they used to compose their records. God superintended the process to insure that the final product as it came from the authors' pens was without error.

## **The Necessity of Literary Dependence**

This presupposition was dealt with in the preceding discussion. There is no need to posit literary dependence. The similarities between the records can be explained by seeing the accounts as accurate witnesses of actual events. Parallel accounts of the same occurrence are bound to be similar.

Davidson made an observation that is important to the discussion of literary dependence. He

noted that “the verbal coincidences are more numerous in reciting the words of Jesus, and in the reports of words spoken by others in connection with his language, than in the narrative parts.”<sup>28</sup> Davidson is saying that the greatest areas of verbal agreement occur in the discourses rather than in the narratives. Literary dependence cannot explain this phenomenon, but the Bible does offer an explanation.

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Just before Christ was arrested and crucified He gave His disciples a promise. “All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things *and will remind you of everything I have said to you* (John 14:25–26). Christ was promising a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit which would enable the disciples to recall all of Christ’s words. Thus one would expect close verbal agreement in the discourses since Christ promised this very thing. In contrast, the narratives have less verbal agreement since each Gospel writer tends to use his own words to describe events as they transpired.

The similarities in accounts do not demand literary dependence. The unity in the discourses can reflect the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit to guarantee an accurate account of the words which were spoken. The similarities and differences in the narratives can be explained by understanding that each author described the same events in his own words.

## **The Uniformity of Oral Tradition**

This is another area that has some basis in fact. It is well known that extensive memorization was common among the Jews of Christ’s day.<sup>29</sup> To understand the extent of their memorization, one need only remember the vocalization of the unpointed Hebrew text which was accurately passed from generation to generation. If such care were taken to preserve accurately the sacred text given by God, how much more would the early Jewish Christians seek to preserve accurately the words and deeds of God Incarnate?

The words of Jesus would be regarded as sacred and committed to memory because of their intrinsic worth and because of the regard in which the Christians held their Lord. This surpassed any rabbinical teacher-pupil relationship. They recognized His divine nature which invested His words with such authority that every effort would be made to retain as far as possible the very words in which He taught. This accounts for the fact that fewer deviations occur in parallel accounts of His sayings than in the narratives of His doings.<sup>30</sup>

The one objection to the idea of oral tradition is the presence of variations within the sayings of Christ. Sometimes the sayings are different, and sometimes the sayings are the same but the settings are different. One obvious answer is that Christ often repeated His message. He probably delivered the same message

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or used the same illustration or parable on numerous occasions. Guthrie notes, “The probability that He repeated His teaching material many times would in itself account for some of the differences in the Synoptic record.”<sup>31</sup>

## **Conclusion**

After viewing all of the above data it is this writer’s opinion that there is no evidence to postulate a tradition of literary dependence among the Gospels. The dependence is rather a parallel dependence on the actual events which occurred. The Gospels are similar because they are all recording the same events. And yet they are different because each writer under the guiding

hand of the Holy Spirit carefully chose the material which accorded best with the purpose of his book. Matthew based a good portion of his work on his eyewitness account as a disciple. Mark based his on the testimony of Peter, and Luke wrote after consulting several authorities which he met in his travels with Paul through Palestine and the rest of the Roman world.

One need not postulate an extensive scheme of literary dependence or hypothetical sources in order to account for the similarities and differences in the Gospels. There are other options which accord with the facts given and which restore the authors to their rightful places as God's chosen servants who composed accurate accounts which are divinely inspired.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Graham Scroggie, *A Guide to the Gospels* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1967), p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1970), pp. 121-22.

<sup>3</sup> A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels for Students of the Life of Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950). This list is very general; further items could be included.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Scroggie, *A Guide to the Gospels*, pp. 349-50.

<sup>6</sup> *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (1939 ed.), s.v. "Gospels, The Synoptic," by James Iverach, 2:1282.

<sup>7</sup> F. W. Grosheide, "The Synoptic Problem: A Neglected Factor in Its Solution," *Evangelical Quarterly* 3 (1931): 62-63.

<sup>8</sup> Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, p. 129.

<sup>9</sup> *ISBE*, "Gospels," 2:1282.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> William R. Farmer, "Modern Developments of Griesbach's Hypothesis," *New Testament Studies* 23 (April 1977): 276.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 275.

<sup>13</sup> William R. Farmer, "The Synoptic Problem: The Inadequacies of the Generally Accepted Solution," *Perkins Journal* 33 (Summer 1980): 20-27. In this article Farmer develops five "inadequacies" of the hypothesis of Marcan priority.

<sup>14</sup> Farmer, "Modern Developments of Griesbach's Hypothesis," pp. 283-84.

<sup>15</sup> *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. "Gospels," by C. H. Pinnock, 2:788.

<sup>16</sup> C. Milo Connick, *The New Testament: An Introduction to Its History, Literature, and Thought* (Encino, CA: Dickenson Publishing Co., 1972), pp. 74-75.

<sup>17</sup> Willi Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament: An Approach to Its Problems* trans. Geoffrey Buswell (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), p. 118.

<sup>18</sup> Scroggie, *A Guide to the Gospels*, p. 189.

<sup>19</sup> B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1925).

<sup>20</sup> Connick, *The New Testament*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>21</sup> Edward C. Hobbs, "A Quarter-Century without 'Q'," *Perkins Journal* 33 (Summer 1980): 13.

[22](#) Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp. 133-35.

[23](#) Ibid., p. 133.

[24](#) Ibid., p. 135.

[25](#) Sanders notes the problem this poses and attributes the difficulty to “the evangelists’ knowledge of overlapping traditions. “The only solution he can offer to the problem is to postulate the existence of additional, overlapping sources.” A theory which takes account of multiple and partially overlapping sources, despite the uncertainties inherent in such a view, may prove to be the most satisfactory overall solution” (E. P. Sanders, “The Overlaps of Mark and Q and the Synoptic Problem,” *New Testament Studies* 19 [July 1973]: 464). However, there comes a time when a system must collapse under the sheer weight of its multiplicity of sources.

[26](#) Connick, *The New Testament*, pp. 83-84. Some scholars have reacted against this wholesale use of sources because of its failure to grant any independence to the authors of the Gospels or to account for the distinctive message or argument of each book. Kingsbury notes, “In times past, the Gospel according to Matthew has often been described as an expanded and revised version of Mark. What is correct about this assessment is that it takes account of the fact that virtually the whole of Mark reappears in Matthew.... Nevertheless, when it comes to the matter of distinctiveness, Matthew possesses a character all its own...” (Jack Dean Kingsbury, “The Gospel in Four Editions,” *Interpretation* 33 [January 1979]: 367).

And yet Kingsbury is still forced to speak of Matthew “dropping Marcan references,” “editing out a number of queries Jesus poses in Mark,” and “modifying or omitting Marcan expressions” (ibid., pp. 368-69). Even though he recognizes the problem inherent in positing an extensive use of sources, he is still unable to break with this basic assumption. Thus he is left on the one hand arguing for the uniqueness of Matthew while on the other hand explaining away similarities by speaking of Matthew being “indebted to” Mark and explaining away differences as “an editorial revision by Matthew” (Jack Dean Kingsbury, “The Structure of Matthew’s Gospel and His Concept of Salvation History,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 35 [October 1973]: 470).

[27](#) William R. Farmer, *Synopticon* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1969).

[28](#) Samuel Davidson, *An Introduction to the Study of the New Testament* 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1868), 1:461.

[29](#) Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1961).

[30](#) Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp. 224-25.

[31](#) Ibid.

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