

New Testament Survey

The Synoptic Problem

I. The Synoptic Problem Defined

Matthew, Mark, and Luke appear very similar in subject matter and overall outline. John is markedly different.

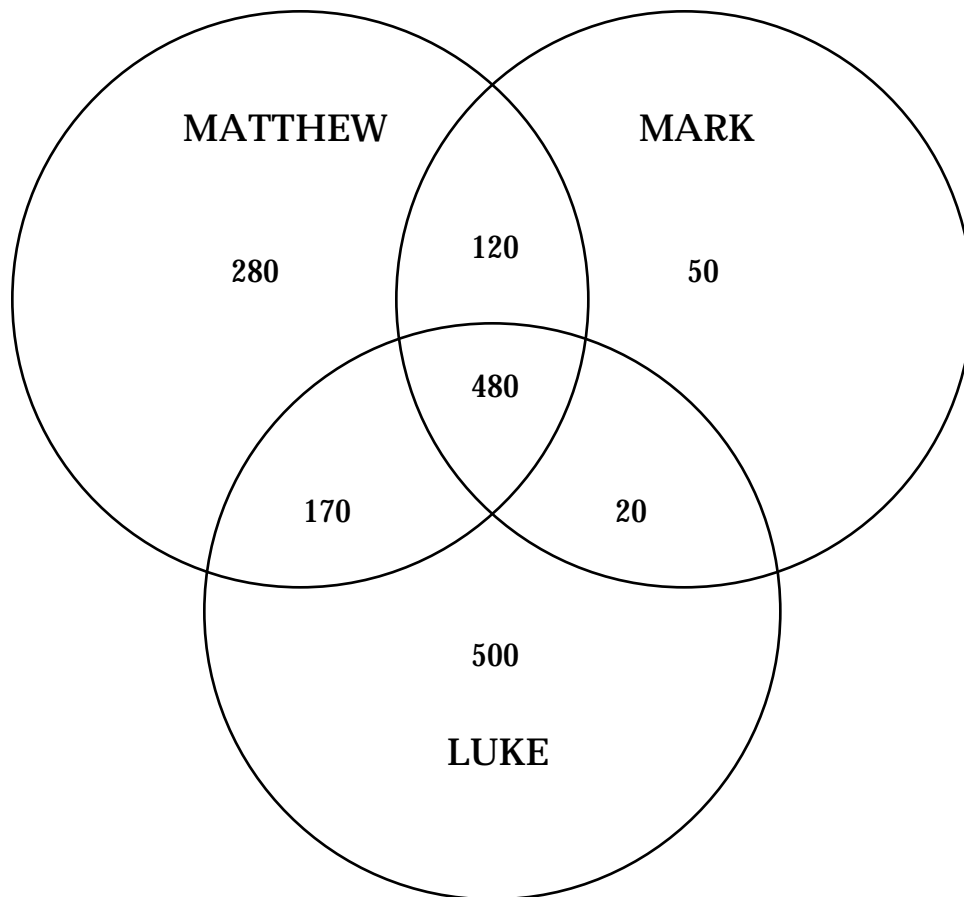
Matthew, Mark, and Luke - Baptism, Galilean Ministry, Last Judean Ministry
John - Baptism, last six months ministry

Mark - 93% agreement with Matthew and Luke.

John - 92% difference with Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The Synoptic Problem - How can Matthew, Mark, and Luke be so similar, yet so different?

Verse Comparison of Synoptic Gospels



II. Possible Solutions¹

- A. A common original (*urevangelium* theory) - one of the gospels was an original and was copied by the others. Problems are:
1. No historical support.
 2. Improbable to a high degree.
 3. Does not account for the many omissions in the synoptic gospels of material relevant to their purpose.
- B. Mutual dependence - one of the writers wrote first, the second used the first writer as a model, and the third used both the first and second writers. Problems are:
1. How does one determine who wrote first? Every permutation has been debated and supported.
 2. Does not account for the many differences in the gospels.
- C. Two document - Mark and "Q" were used to produce the gospels. Problems are:
1. Based on an evolutionary concept. The "simpler" Mark gave rise to the more developed and complex Matthew and Luke.
 2. Where did Matthew and Luke get their extra material?
 3. There is no historical evidence of the "Q" document.
 4. There is an underlying assumption in this theory that Matthew and Luke could not have produced their Gospels independently of Mark.
- D. Four Document - Mark, "Q", "L", and "M". The same problems exists with this viewpoint as that of the Two-Document theory.
- E. Form Critical - reduces the gospel writers to mere editors of existent material. Problems are:
1. The early church points to the fact of the Gospels writers as being original.
 2. There is no historical evidence of the many fragments that were supposedly used to construct the Gospels.
 3. This view is based on an evolutionary model which says that the Gospels evolved over a period of time to become what they are today.
- F. Oral Tradition - the message of the gospels was passed on orally at first (Acts 10:37-39), and then written down by the gospel writers.

III. A Balanced Solution²

- A. The writers were early witnesses - they did not need to depend on others for their viewpoints.

¹ Henry C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Co., 1987), pp. 102-111.

² Thiessen, pp. 112-129.

1. Matthew was an original eyewitness being one of the twelve.
 2. Mark, a close disciple of Peter, received his material from Peter, an eyewitness.
 3. Luke collected data from eyewitnesses.
- B. The writers probably followed an oral tradition.
1. Oral teaching was the way information was passed from generation to generation in NT times.
 2. This would account for the similar chronology of the synoptic Gospels.
- C. The writers may have used short, written accounts.
1. Luke himself used short, written accounts to compose part of his Gospel (Luke 1:1-2).
 2. There is nothing to deny the possibility that some of Christ's sayings were written down by the twelve during his ministry.
- D. The writers were verbally inspired by the Holy Spirit.