The Synoptic problem and source criticism: student handout

Module 6: The Synoptic Problem and Source Criticism.

Name: _____ **Date:** _____ **Class:** _____

Central question: Matthew, Mark and Luke share many stories and sayings, often in nearly the same words. How do scholars explain who used whom, and how strong is the evidence for each explanation?

Read each document's source note first. Fill in the chart and organizer with your partner. Documents A and B quote the Gospels in a public-domain translation, Document D quotes two early church writers, and the rest summarizes the explanations as ExtantBible presents them.

Document A: The baptism of Jesus, three times

Source: The chapter pages for Mark 1, Matthew 3 and Luke 3 on ExtantBible, in the Berean Standard Bible.
Primary source: the Gospels of Mark (written about 65 to 75 CE), Matthew and Luke (about 80 to 90 CE), the dates most scholars give, in the Berean Standard Bible (public domain, 2023).

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As soon as Jesus came up out of the water, He saw the heavens breaking open and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased.””

Mark 1:9-11, Berean Standard Bible (public domain): Mark's whole account.

“But John tried to prevent Him, saying, “I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?” “Let it be so now,” Jesus replied. “It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness in this way.” Then John permitted Him.”

Matthew 3:14-15, Berean Standard Bible (public domain): the middle of Matthew's account (3:13-17).

“When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as He was praying, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in a bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased.””

Luke 3:21-22, Berean Standard Bible (public domain): Luke's whole account.

- All three tell that Jesus was baptized, that heaven opened, that the Spirit came down like a dove, and that a voice from heaven spoke.
- In the BSB, Mark and Luke have the voice say "You are My beloved Son"; Matthew has "This is My beloved Son" (Matthew 3:17).
- Only Matthew has John hesitating to baptize Jesus (Matthew 3:14-15). Only Luke says Jesus was praying, and that the Spirit came "in a bodily form" (Luke 3:21-22).
- Mark and Matthew name John as the one who baptized Jesus. Luke, who has already told of John being put in prison (Luke 3:19-20), does not say who baptized him.

On ExtantBible: Mark, chapter 1

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Document B: How much is shared, and how closely

Source: The published figures and "What word for word looks like" on /synoptic.

A summary by ExtantBible (2026) of A. M. Honoré's statistical study (1968), with one passage from all three Gospels in the Berean Standard Bible (public domain).

Gospel	Greek words (Honoré)	In material all three share	In material Matthew and Luke share without Mark
Matthew	18,265	8,336 (about 46%)	4,461 (about 24%)
Mark	11,328	8,630 (about 76%)	None (Mark lacks it by definition)
Luke	19,360	7,884 (about 41%)	4,476 (about 23%)

“But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins…” Then He said to the paralytic, “Get up, pick up your mat, and go home.””

Matthew 9:6, Berean Standard Bible (public domain).

“But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins…” He said to the paralytic, “I tell you, get up, pick up your mat, and go home.””

Mark 2:10-11, Berean Standard Bible (public domain).

“But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on the earth to forgive sins…” He said to the paralytic, “I tell you, get up, pick up your mat, and go home.””

Luke 5:24, Berean Standard Bible (public domain).

- Honoré counts Greek words and ends the shared material at Mark 16:8. The material in all three Gospels is called the triple tradition; the material only Matthew and Luke share is called the double tradition.
- In Honoré's counts about 94% of Mark's words fall in material Matthew also has, and about 79% in material Luke also has. Counting only identical words gives a much lower figure: about 41% of Mark's words recur word for word in Matthew.
- In the healing of the paralyzed man, all three break off Jesus' words at the same point with the same aside in the narrator's words, "he said to the paralytic," and go on almost word for word.
- Raymond Brown (1997) gives this interrupted sentence as an example of agreement in order and wording too close to come from word of mouth alone: the writers used written sources.
- Matthew and Luke follow Mark's order of events for long stretches, and where they leave it they rarely agree with each other.

On ExtantBible: What word for word looks like (on /synoptic)

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Document C: The Two-Source explanation and Q

Source: The Two-Source explanation and the Q card on /synoptic, citing Raymond Brown (1997), Carson, Moo and Morris (1992) and Ehrman and Méndez (2024).

A summary by ExtantBible (2026) of the Two-Source explanation and the objections to it, as Brown, Carson, Moo and Morris, and Ehrman and Méndez describe them, with two verses of Matthew and Luke in the Berean Standard Bible (public domain).

“But when John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his place of baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”

Matthew 3:7, Berean Standard Bible (public domain); John's warning goes on to 3:10.

“Then John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”

Luke 3:7, Berean Standard Bible (public domain); the warning goes on to 3:9. Mark does not have it.

- Mark wrote first; Matthew and Luke each used Mark and a lost collection of sayings, Q, without reading each other. The site labels this view "Most scholars agree": widely held, but a real minority disagrees.
- Q gets its name from the German Quelle, "source". It is a proposed collection of Jesus's sayings, which Brown estimates at about 220 to 235 verses' worth. No copy has ever been found; Ehrman and Méndez say scholars who posit it agree it must have been a written document.
- Why scholars propose it: Matthew and Luke share much material not in Mark, often in nearly identical Greek, yet place it in different settings and seldom agree against Mark, so neither seems to have copied the other. The Gospel of Thomas, a different work found in 1945, shows that collections of Jesus's sayings without a story existed.
- The objections: no copy of Q exists, and in small places Matthew and Luke agree with each other against Mark (scholars call these the minor agreements), which is harder to explain if they never read each other.

On ExtantBible: The Q card on /synoptic

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Document D: Three other explanations, and all four compared

Source: The Farrer, Two-Gospel and Augustinian explanations on /synoptic, each with its sources; the excerpts are from public-domain translations.

A summary by ExtantBible (2026) of three explanations and their defenders, with two primary sources: Irenaeus, written about 175 to 185 CE (translation of 1885), and Augustine, written about 400 (translation of 1888).

Explanation	Order	Where the shared sayings came from	The site's label
Two-Source	Mark; then Matthew and Luke, each on its own	Q	Most scholars agree
Farrer	Mark, Matthew, Luke	Luke took them from Matthew	Some scholars hold
Two-Gospel (Griesbach)	Matthew, Luke, Mark	Luke took them from Matthew	Some scholars hold
Augustinian	Matthew, Mark, Luke	Luke took them from Matthew	Few scholars accept

“Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him.”

Irenaeus, Against Heresies 3.1.1, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1 (1885).

“Mark follows him closely, and looks like his attendant and epitomizer. For in his narrative he gives nothing in concert with John apart from the others: by himself separately, he has little to record; in conjunction with Luke, as distinguished from the rest, he has still less; but in concord with Matthew, he has a very large number of passages.”

Augustine, The Harmony of the Gospels 1.2.4 ("him" is Matthew), trans. S. D. F. Salmond, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, series 1, vol. 6 (1888).

- The labels: "Most scholars agree" means widely held, but a real minority disagrees; "Some scholars hold" means a serious position, held by fewer specialists; "Church tradition" means what early Christian tradition says, which most modern scholars do not rely on. None is a verdict that a view is true or false.
- Farrer (Austin Farrer, as Carson, Moo and Morris report; Mark Goodacre, whose book Ehrman and Méndez describe as a comprehensive argument against Q): its main evidence is the minor agreements, and the fact that no copy of Q has ever been found. The objection: Luke would then have broken up Matthew's long, well-ordered sermons, such as the Sermon on the Mount.

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- Two-Gospel (set out by J. J. Griesbach in the 18th century): Mark often seems to stand between the other two, following one and then the other, and early writers placed Matthew first. The objection: Mark would then have left out teaching such as the Lord's Prayer and the Sermon on the Mount while making the wording rougher.
- Augustinian: Augustine set out this order about 400 in The Harmony of the Gospels, calling Mark Matthew's "epitomizer" (one who shortens), and it was the church's usual view for most of its history. Early writers such as Papias and Irenaeus name Matthew first. The objection: Mark's shorter, rougher text looks earlier than Matthew's polished one.

On ExtantBible: The first three Gospels

Evidence organizer

	Question	Your notes and evidence (names and dates)
1.	Name two details all three baptism stories share.	
2.	Name one detail only Matthew has and one only Luke has.	
3.	In Honoré's word counts, about what share of Mark's words is in material all three Gospels share, and about what share of Matthew's and of Luke's?	
4.	In the healing of the paralyzed man, what do all three Gospels share besides Jesus' words, and why does Raymond Brown think it matters?	

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	Question	Your notes and evidence (names and dates)
5.	What is Q, and what is the main objection to it?	
6.	What are the minor agreements, and which explanation relies on them most?	
7.	What does Augustine say about Mark, and how does it compare with the counts in Document B?	
8.	Which label does the site give the Two-Source explanation, and which the Augustinian order? What does each label mean?	

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Your written answer

In one or two paragraphs, argue which explanation best fits the evidence. Cite at least three documents by letter, use at least one piece of evidence from inside the texts (wording, order, or what a writer added or changed), and name the strongest objection to your choice.

Homework: Students who need more time finish the part of their answer on the strongest objection at home, using the handout and the organizer.

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Check your work: the single-point rubric

The middle column is the target. Note where the work falls short on the left and where it goes beyond on the right.

Concerns	Target	Going beyond
	Close reading: Points to specific shared wording and specific differences in the baptism story or the healing of the paralyzed man (Documents A and B).	
	Weighing explanations: States the evidence for the chosen explanation, including at least one piece from inside the texts (order, shared wording, what a writer added or smoothed), and at least one objection, and explains why the evidence outweighs the objection.	
	Corroboration: Uses at least two kinds of evidence (the passages, the counts, the explanations' arguments, the early writers) that point the same way.	
	Descriptive, qualified language: Attributes each view to those who hold it ("most scholars", "the Farrer explanation") and keeps judgments about sources separate from statements of belief.	

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