The Synoptic problem and source criticism: study guide

Module 6: The Synoptic Problem and Source Criticism.

Cover each answer, try to recall it, then check. Testing yourself like this builds memory; rereading and highlighting feel productive but build little. Come back on the days in the tracker.

Review schedule: tick each box when you have done it

- [ ] First study and self-test (today)
- [ ] Review 1 (one day later)
- [ ] Review 2 (one week later)
- [ ] Review 3 (one month later)

Warm-up

1. On the dates most scholars give, when were Mark, Matthew and Luke written?
2. Which Gospel do most scholars think was written first?
3. What does the label "Most scholars agree" mean on this site?

Key terms

The Gospels

- Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke, so alike in content, order and wording that they can be set side by side and read together ("synoptic" means "seen together").

Why it matters: Why is John not counted among them?

- Triple tradition: Material found in all three Synoptic Gospels. Most of Mark belongs to it: about 76% of Mark's Greek words, in A. M. Honoré's count (1968), against about 46% of Matthew's and 41% of Luke's.

Why it matters: Why does the order of this material matter for deciding who used whom?

- Double tradition: Material Matthew and Luke share that Mark does not have, mostly sayings: about a quarter of each Gospel's Greek words (4,461 of Matthew's and 4,476 of Luke's), in Honoré's count.

Why it matters: Why is this the material each explanation must account for most carefully?

The explanations

- Q: A proposed lost collection of Jesus's sayings, which Brown estimates at about 220 to 235 verses' worth, that Matthew and Luke used; the name comes from the German Quelle, "source". No copy has ever been found.

Why it matters: What would it take for a source that does not survive to be a good explanation?

- Two-Source explanation: Mark first; Matthew and Luke each used Mark and Q, without reading each other. The site labels it "Most scholars agree".

Why it matters: Why does it need Q at all?

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- Farrer explanation: Mark first, then Matthew, then Luke, who used both; no Q. Set out by Austin Farrer, as Carson, Moo and Morris report, and argued by Mark Goodacre, as Ehrman and Méndez report; the site labels it "Some scholars hold", and Ehrman and Méndez call it increasingly popular.

Why it matters: Why would agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark support it?

- Two-Gospel (Griesbach) explanation: Matthew first, then Luke, then Mark, who combined the two. Set out by J. J. Griesbach in the 18th century; the site labels it "Some scholars hold".

Why it matters: What would a writer who came last be expected to leave out or add?

- Augustinian order: Matthew, then Mark, then Luke, the order of the Gospels in the Bible. Augustine set it out about 400 and called Mark Matthew's "attendant and epitomizer" (one who shortens). The site labels it "Few scholars accept".

Why it matters: Why did it hold for so long, and why do most modern scholars set it aside?

The method

- Source criticism: Studying which earlier written sources an author used.

Why it matters: How does knowing a writer's sources help a historian read what the writer changed?

- Evidence inside the texts: What the texts themselves show: their wording, their order, and what one writer adds, cuts or smooths compared with another.

Why it matters: Why does an aside in the narrator's own words, shared by all three Gospels, point to written sources?

- Minor agreements: Small places where Matthew and Luke agree with each other against Mark.

Why it matters: Why are they hard for the Two-Source explanation?

Timeline

- 30 CE: Crucifixion of Jesus (Most scholars agree). Dated to about 30 CE. Ehrman and Méndez say no one knows for certain, but scholars agree it was around 30; Brown, and Carson and Moo, give 30 or 33, and Carson and Moo find 30 slightly preferable.
- 65 to 75 CE: Mark (Most scholars agree). Written between 65 and 75 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 80 to 90 CE: Matthew (Most scholars agree). Written between 80 and 90 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 80 to 90 CE: Luke (Most scholars agree). Written between 80 and 90 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 110 to 130 CE: Papias (Scholars are split). Dated about 110 to 130 CE, a date scholars dispute (positions run from about 100 to 130 to 140).
- 110 to 200 CE: Gospel of Thomas (Most scholars agree). Written between 110 and 200 CE. Brown reports that most scholars think it a second-century work; within that century the works cited here differ, Ehrman and Méndez dating it 110 to 120, Metzger about 140, and Gallagher and Meade probably to the latter half.
- 170 CE: Tatian. Dated to about 170 CE, when Ehrman and Méndez date his Diatessaron; Gallagher and Meade give about 170 as its traditional date.
- 175 to 185 CE: Irenaeus (Nearly all scholars agree). Dated between 175 and 185 CE, a date scholars broadly accept.
- 1945 CE: Nag Hammadi Library (Nearly all scholars agree). Dated to 1945, a date scholars broadly accept.

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Explain it

In your own words: why does the order in which Matthew and Luke tell Mark's stories matter for deciding who wrote first?

Worked example: the baptism of Jesus

How a source critic compares Mark 1:9-11, Matthew 3:13-17 and Luke 3:21-22, in four steps.

1. Lay the versions side by side: All three tell the same event at the same place in the story: Jesus is baptized, heaven opens, the Spirit comes down like a dove, and a voice speaks from heaven. Mark and Matthew name John as the baptizer; Luke does not.
2. Mark what each adds or changes: Matthew adds John's hesitation (3:14-15) and has the voice say "This is My beloved Son". Luke adds that Jesus was praying (3:21) and that the Spirit came "in a bodily form". Mark has none of these.
3. Ask which direction is easier to explain: If Mark came first, Matthew and Luke each added their own details. If Mark came last, as the Two-Gospel explanation holds, Mark dropped them. Most modern scholars, as Carson, Moo and Morris and Ehrman and Méndez report, judge that Mark's shorter, rougher text looks earlier than Matthew's polished one.
4. Reach a qualified judgment: This fits Mark coming first, which most scholars hold. Supporters of the Two-Gospel explanation read the same evidence the other way, with Mark combining the two, so one passage supports a judgment without settling it.

Your turn: John the Baptist's warning

Matthew 3:7-10 and Luke 3:7-9 share a passage Mark does not have. The first two steps are done; write the last two before you open the answer.

1. Lay the versions side by side: In the BSB the words of the warning are almost the same, from "You brood of vipers" to "thrown into the fire".
2. Mark what each adds or changes: Matthew addresses "many of the Pharisees and Sadducees"; Luke addresses "the crowds".

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3. Ask which explanation accounts for it: How would the Two-Source and the Farrer explanations each account for this shared passage?

4. Reach a qualified judgment: Does this one passage decide between them? How sure can you be?

Common misconceptions

Historians, journalists and lawyers all work out how one text used another when two documents share words.

- Some people think Q is an ancient document that scholars have found and can read. No copy of Q has ever been found. Q is a proposed source, reconstructed from the sayings Matthew and Luke share without Mark. No copy has ever been found, and the Gospel of Thomas, found in 1945, is a different work. That is why some scholars, following the Farrer explanation, think Q is not needed.
- Some readers assume that if Gospel writers used sources, they must have copied mechanically and added nothing. Using a source did not mean copying it unchanged. Scholars learn what each writer cared about by comparing what each changed. In the baptism story, Matthew and Luke each keep Mark's core and change it in their own way (Matthew adds John's hesitation, Luke adds that Jesus was praying), and most modern scholars judge Mark's rougher text to be the earlier one.
- Some take it for granted that scholars all agree on how the Gospels are related. They do not; the site labels the main view as held by most scholars, not all. The Two-Source explanation is the majority view, but the Farrer and Two-Gospel explanations each have scholarly defenders, and the Augustinian order, the church's traditional view, is one few scholars accept today. When you write about it, name the view and say how widely it is held.

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Self-test: the answer, then the reason

1. In A. M. Honoré's word counts, which Gospel has the largest share of its words in material all three Gospels share?

A. Matthew

B. Luke

C. Mark

Reason: Why does that matter?

A. Early church writers said that Matthew and Luke copied from Mark.

B. Most of Mark is in Matthew or Luke, which fits Mark being a source both of them used.

C. Mark is the longest Gospel, so it has the most material to share.

2. What is Q?

A. The Gospel of Thomas, a collection of sayings found in 1945

B. A proposed lost collection of sayings, reconstructed from what Matthew and Luke share without Mark

C. The oldest surviving copy of Matthew

Reason: What is the main objection to it?

A. No copy has ever been found.

B. Its sayings are found only in Mark.

C. It was found and then judged a late forgery.

3. Which explanation keeps Mark first, does without Q, and has Luke write last?

A. Two-Source

B. Farrer

C. Two-Gospel (Griesbach)

Reason: How does it explain the sayings Matthew and Luke share beyond Mark?

A. Each took them from stories told by word of mouth, not from a written source.

B. Both took them from Q.

C. Luke took them from Matthew.

4. Matthew and Luke follow Mark's order of events, and where they leave it they rarely agree with each other. Which view does this support most?

A. That Mark came first and the other two each used it

B. That Matthew came first and the other two each used it

C. That Luke came first and the other two each used it

Reason: Why?

A. The first Gospel written is always the shortest.

B. Early church writers placed Mark first.

C. Two later writers each following one earlier source would leave it at different points.

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5. Only Matthew has John hesitating to baptize Jesus. On the view that Mark came first, what happened?

A. Matthew added the detail to Mark's shorter account

B. Mark had the detail, and later copyists of Mark dropped it

C. Luke removed the detail from Mark

Reason: Which reasoning does this use?

A. The longest version of a story is always the original.

B. On that view Mark's account was Matthew's source, so a detail only Matthew has came in with Matthew.

C. Whatever most of the Gospels lack cannot have happened.

6. How does the site label the Augustinian order (Matthew, Mark, Luke)?

A. Few scholars accept

B. Some scholars hold

C. Church tradition

Reason: What does that label say?

A. That specialists today largely set the view aside, though the church held it for most of its history.

B. That the site has judged the view false.

C. That most modern scholars hold the view.

7. Which statement is about literary sources rather than religious belief?

A. Luke was inspired by God.

B. Luke appears to have used Mark.

C. Luke should be read in church.

Reason: What makes it a statement about sources?

A. It can be checked by comparing the wording and order of the texts.

B. Most scholars hold it, so it is a proven fact.

C. Luke names Mark as his source in his opening verses.

Flashcards

Fold the page along the dashed line, or cover the right column, and say each answer before you look.

Question	Answer
Which three Gospels are the Synoptic Gospels?	Matthew, Mark and Luke.
What is the triple tradition?	Material found in all three Synoptic Gospels.
What is the double tradition?	Material Matthew and Luke share that Mark does not have.

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Question	Answer
In Honoré's word counts, about what share of Mark's words is in material all three Gospels share?	About 76%.
What does the Two-Source explanation say?	Mark first; Matthew and Luke each used Mark and Q.
Where does the name Q come from?	The German Quelle, "source".
What does the Farrer explanation say?	Mark first, then Matthew, then Luke, who used both; no Q.
What order does the Two-Gospel (Griesbach) explanation give?	Matthew, then Luke, then Mark.
Who set out the order Matthew, Mark, Luke, and how does the site label it?	Augustine, about 400; "Few scholars accept".
What are the minor agreements?	Small places where Matthew and Luke agree against Mark.
Which detail of the baptism story is only in Matthew?	John hesitating to baptize Jesus.

Answers

Warm-up

1. Mark between 65 and 75 CE; Matthew and Luke between 80 and 90 CE.
2. Mark.
3. A view is widely held, but a real minority disagrees.

Why it matters

- Synoptic Gospels: The name is for Gospels so alike that they can be read side by side. John is too different from the other three for that, so it is studied on its own.
- Triple tradition: Matthew and Luke follow Mark's order for long stretches, and where they leave it they rarely agree with each other. That fits two later writers each following Mark in their own way. Raymond Brown notes that, on its own, the pattern shows only that Mark stands between the other two, which is how the Two-Gospel explanation reads it.
- Double tradition: It is where the explanations part ways: the Two-Source explanation traces it to Q, and the Farrer, Two-Gospel and Augustinian explanations to Luke using Matthew.
- Q: It would have to explain the evidence better than the alternatives. Supporters point to sayings Matthew and Luke share almost word for word but place in different settings, and to the Gospel of Thomas (a different work, found in 1945), which shows that collections of Jesus's sayings without a story existed. Critics answer that no copy of Q has ever been found.

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- Two-Source explanation: Because it holds that Matthew and Luke did not read each other, the sayings they share beyond Mark must come from another source both used.
- Farrer explanation: If Luke knew Matthew, small changes to Mark that Matthew and Luke share are easy to explain: Luke saw Matthew's wording. If the two never read each other, as the Two-Source explanation holds, those agreements are harder to explain.
- Two-Gospel (Griesbach) explanation: Supporters see Mark following Matthew and Luke where they agree and moving between them where they differ. Critics answer that Mark would then have left out teaching both had, such as the Lord's Prayer, while making the wording rougher, which seems unlikely for a later writer.
- Augustinian order: It follows early writers such as Papias and Irenaeus, who name Matthew first, and it was the church's usual view for most of its history. Most modern scholars set it aside because Mark's shorter, rougher text looks earlier than Matthew's polished one. The label "Church tradition" means what early Christian tradition says, which most modern scholars do not rely on; it is not a verdict that the view is false.
- Source criticism: If we know what a writer started from, each addition, cut or change of wording shows a choice, and the choices show what that writer cared about. A claim about sources, such as "Luke appears to have used Mark", can be checked against the wording and order of the texts; it is a different kind of claim from a statement of belief.
- Evidence inside the texts: In the healing of the paralyzed man all three break off Jesus' sentence at the same point with "he said to the paralytic". Jesus' words could be remembered and retold, but the aside is the writer's own; Raymond Brown (1997) gives it as an example of agreement too close to come from word of mouth alone.
- Minor agreements: That explanation holds that Matthew and Luke used Mark without reading each other, so each should change Mark in his own way; places where they change it the same way need another explanation. The Farrer explanation uses them as its main evidence.

Explain it

Matthew and Luke follow Mark's order for long stretches, and where they leave it they rarely agree with each other. If each followed Mark separately, each would leave it at different points, which is what we see, so the pattern fits Mark coming first. It does not settle the question alone: Raymond Brown notes that it shows only that Mark stands between the other two, and the Two-Gospel explanation reads the same pattern as Mark combining Matthew and Luke.

Your turn: John the Baptist's warning

3. Ask which explanation accounts for it: The Two-Source explanation says both took it from Q. The Farrer explanation says Luke took it from Matthew and changed the audience.
4. Reach a qualified judgment: No: both explanations fit near-identical wording. Scholars decide on the pattern across many passages, which is why the site labels the Two-Source view "Most scholars agree" while the Farrer view, "Some scholars hold", keeps real support.

Self-test

1. Answer C, reason B. Honoré finds about 76% of Mark's words in material all three share, against about 46% of Matthew's and 41% of Luke's. Mark is the shortest of the three (11,328 Greek words, against 18,265 in Matthew and 19,360 in Luke), and early writers such as Irenaeus put Matthew first, not Mark. Supporters of the Two-Gospel explanation read the same overlap as Mark combining the other two.

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2. Answer B, reason A. Q is a proposed source for the double tradition, the material Matthew and Luke share without Mark. No copy has ever been found. The Gospel of Thomas is a different work; supporters of Q cite it only to show that collections of sayings without a story existed.
3. Answer B, reason C. The Farrer explanation has Luke use both Mark and Matthew, so the shared sayings came to Luke from Matthew. The Two-Source explanation needs Q, and the Two-Gospel explanation puts Mark last, not Luke. Brown and Ehrman and Méndez hold that the close wording points to a written source, not to word of mouth alone.
4. Answer A, reason C. If Matthew and Luke each followed Mark, their departures from it would be independent, so they would rarely agree when they leave it. Length is no rule for order, and the early writers placed Matthew first. Raymond Brown adds that the pattern alone shows only that Mark stands between the other two.
5. Answer A, reason B. If Mark came first, Matthew worked from Mark's account and added the hesitation; Mark never had it to drop, and Luke had nothing to remove. The reasoning is about sources, not a rule that longer is earlier, and it says nothing about whether the event happened.
6. Answer A, reason A. The label reports how the view stands among specialists today: Carson and Moo say it has not won many modern advocates, and Brown notes that it still has respectable ones. It is not the site's verdict that the view is false.
7. Answer B, reason A. A claim about sources can be checked against the wording and order of the texts. How widely a view is held is not proof, and Luke's opening verses (1:1-3) speak of many earlier accounts without naming any. The other two options are matters of belief and practice, which communities decide for themselves.

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