

ESSAY
BA course year 2 no. 5
"THE SYNOPTICS I."

Why do critical scholars mostly reject the testimony of tradition that Matthew wrote the first written Gospel "in the Hebrew language"? Do you consider that there is more to be said for this tradition than is usually granted? Or would you accept in general the "critical orthodoxy", i.e. the Two Document Hypothesis?

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1. Preface

Please notice that the whole essay is based on German literature (mainly on books and notes from the universities of Freiburg, Heidelberg and Mannheim). So it might happen that I use abbreviations, which are only used in German theology (e.g. (Q) for "Quelle"), or I had problems with the translation into English, then I used the German original word in brackets "()". In most cases I've tried to translate it into English.

2. The synoptic question

Comparing the four Gospels we will notice one fact directly. While the fourth Gospel, John's Gospel, is completely unusual with its own description, the first three Gospels are similar in a remarkable way. It will be enough to focus on the structure for example. John's Gospel goes its own way, in comparison the first three Gospels present their message in nearly the same order:

- Starting with John the Baptist
- continuing with the baptism of Jesus
- and the temptations in the desert
- to Jesus' appearance in public. This is nearly exclusive situated in Galilee.
- After that the description of the pasha,
- the crucifixion
- and finally the resurrection.

You can lay the three Gospels side by side and read them parallel. This is, which was done, the first three Gospels have been written down in parallel columns, to compare the three texts in a synopsis. Matthew and Luke contain many of the same stories as Mark, in the same order that they occur, and at times use the same phrases, quotations and verses, word for word. Matthew paraphrases almost 90% of Mark, Luke about half.

Because of the parallel texts the three Gospels are called synoptic Gospels (the Greek word *synoptikos* means "to see together").

The fact that these three gospels were so similar in so many ways is called "The Synoptic Problem". There must be some explanation to account for this literary dependence!

3. The Early Church

a. Bishop Papias and the Hebrew written Gospel

About 130 AD Papias was bishop of Hierapolis in SE Asia Minor, just a few miles NE of Colossae & Laodicea. Papias was the first person to assign written material about Jesus to

one of the men whose names are attached to our gospels, and he offers both “Matthew” and “Mark”. He is responsible for establishing traditions that

- Matthew was written first; and
- Mark records the testimony of Peter.

He wrote about the gospels:

“[John?] the elder also used to say this: Mark had been the interpreter (or translator) for Peter. And he wrote down as much as (Peter) told of the sayings & deeds of Christ --- accurately, but not in order. For he was not a hearer or follower of the Lord but, as I said, of Peter, who adapted his teaching as needed and did not arrange the sayings of the Lord in an orderly manner. And so, Mark made no mistake in writing some things down as he recalled them. For he had a single concern: to omit nothing of what he heard & to introduce no false statement.”

After this detailed emphasis on Mark's care in preserving Peter's testimony unaltered, Papias' comment on the composition of Matthew is surprisingly brief and vague:

“So, then, Matthew compiled the sayings (logia) of the Lord in the Hebrew language. But everyone interpreted (or translated) them as he could.”

Papias' testimony expressly excludes Mark from those who interpreted this "Hebrew" text of Matthew by portraying him as the interpreter who transcribed the oral teaching of Peter.

Therefore, Papias does not provide a basis for the views of Augustine & later western Christians who think that Mark edited Matthew. Nor does Papias give any information about the relative sequence of the canonical Greek versions of Matthew & Mark.

Papias' work is among the many texts known to ancient Christians that are now lost. But from the mid-2nd to the mid-4th century AD it was used by church leaders from Palestine to Gaul. Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 180 AD) & Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 320 AD) cite Papias, although Eusebius expressed these reservations about the caliber of Papias' intellect:

“I guess he got these ideas from a misinterpretation of the apostolic accounts. For he did not understand what they said mystically & in figurative language. For he obviously was a man of very little intelligence, as one can tell judging from his sayings. Nevertheless, it was due to him that so many churchmen after him adopted a similar opinion, basing their position on the fact that he was a man of the earliest era. “

Papias mentioned hearing a John. Irenaeus, who countered gnostic speculations by claiming an unbroken chain of tradition from the apostles to the bishops, took this to mean that this bishop (Papias) was personally familiar with one of the most prominent apostles (John, son of Zebedee):

And Papias, who was John's auditor & Polycarp's companion, a man of the earliest era, also attests these things in writing the fourth of his books. For there are five books composed by him.

Eusebius, however, corrected this impression by pointing out that

- Papias mentions two Johns: one an apostle, the other an elder (presbyter); and
- Papias claimed his traditions were derived from the elders (not apostles).

b. Augustine

In the view of Augustine Marks Gospel is only an abridged version of Matthews Gospel. He believed that Mark wanted to create an abridged version of the detailed Matthew Gospel, like a first insight into the message of Jesus. Augustine came to this conclusion because of the different length of the three Gospels. It's obvious that Matthews Gospel and Lukes Gospel are in each case twice as big as Marks Gospel:

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| Mark | 661 / 660 verses |
| Matthew | 1068 / 1070 verses |
| Luke | 1149 / 1150 verses |

Therefore Marks Gospel hasn't been anything else for Augustine than an extract from the Matthew-text.

Only at the end of the 18th century new ways were found to approach the problem of the three synoptic Gospels and to get nearer to a real solution.

4. Classic Hypothesises to solve the synoptic question

The first worth mentioning approach was made by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. He proceeded on the assumption that there had to be an original Gospel, the so-called "Gospel of the Nazarenes". There have been different translations and extracts from the Aramaic original Gospel. In this way Lessing explained the corresponding contents, but even the differences of the first three Gospels.

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher explained the common parts of the three synoptic Gospels with the same tradition of single deeds and words of Jesus. In his opinion single incidents of Jesus' life got passed on in small collections. This collections have been extended by the evangelists in different ways. That's how Schleiermacher explained the common parts of the first three Gospels. He has given reasons for the differences with the various editings, which this collections received.

This theory is called Fragment-hypothesis because of the Greek word **διήγησις** "diægæsis", which means "story".

Also the Tradition-hypothesis, which begun with Johann Gottfried Herder in 1797 and being extended by J. C. L. Gieseler in 1818, was an attempt to solve the synoptic question. This hypothesis says that the three Gospels have been composed independently, but the three evangelists could base on the same oral tradition. This hypothesis can only be used to explain the differences between the Gospels. It's hard to use it to make the common parts clear.

5. Two-Source-Hypothesis

Accepted by the exegese (German: "Exegese") is a totally different theory, which seems to explain the problems of the three synoptic Gospels very clearly.

This hypothesis is connected with the name Karl Lehmann, a Germanist and classic philologist, who was born on 4th March 1793 in Braunschweig. He died on 13th March 1851. In the middle of the 19th century he solved the synoptic problem with his decisive scripture from 1835 to a great extend.

On his observations Christian Hermann Weiße and Christian Gottlob Wilke based their theories in the year 1838. Independent of each other they proved that Matthew and Luke are related only via Mark and not directly. But this meant that Marks Gospel had to be the oldest and Luke and Matthew based on this text. This makes it understandable that Matthew and Luke correspond in most passages nearly word-for-word with Marks Gospel.

Going beyond Marks Gospel the two large Gospels show a couple of corresponding verses. A lot of reports, which aren't found in Marks Gospel, are presented in an extraordinary correspondence in Marks as well as in Lukes Gospel. If Lukes Gospel should have been composed independently from Matthews Gospel, this phenomenon would need an explanation.

Lachmann, Weiße and Wilke assumed that Matthew and Luke did use an additional source apart from Marks Gospel. This source had to be available for both evangelists in written form. As this parts, which do exist in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark, are above all Jesus' speeches, we have to assume that this additional source did contain speeches, which are missing completely in Marks Gospel. This is why this source of the evangelists Luke and Matthew is called "speech-source" (German: "Redequelle") or "logia-source" (German: "Logienquelle". Generally this source is abbreviated in literature with the letter "Q" for the German word "Quelle", which means source.

This is how the so called "Two-Source-Hypothesis" was found. This hypothesis is known as the most precise and simplest in explaining the synoptic facts.

Some exegetes increased the thesis, which is based in Karl Lachmann, and assumed that the so called “logia-source” (German: “Logienquelle”) die originally exist in Aramaic language and was later translated into Greek. The evangelists Matthew and Luke could have used two different Greek translations of Q. That’s how this exegetes explained the small differences, which do exist between Matthew and Luke in spite of all correspondences.

So the Two-Source-Hypothesis can be summed up with the following formula:

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| Mark | = pre-Mark passion-story (German: „vormarkinische Passionsgeschichte“) | + different written resp. oral traditions |
| Matthew | = Mark + Q ₁ | + special source of Matthew (German: “mattäisches Sondergut”) |
| Luke | = Mark + Q ₂ | + special source of Luke (German: “lukanisches Sondergut”) |

6. The “logia-source” (German: “Logienquelle”) Q

a. Analysis of the “logia-source” (German: “Logienquelle”)

This source doesn’t exist anymore. So it can only be revealed because of correspondences of Matthew and Luke.

i. Correspondences

The correspondences of the wording in Matthews and Lukes Gospel are partly very extensive in the stories and passages, which do only exist in this two gospels. That’s why an assumption of a common source does really suggest itself.

But in other party the correspondences are very rare, for example between Mt 10,26-33 and Lk 12,2-9 or even between Mt 25,14-30 and Lk 19,11-27. Such examples did always cause objections against this common source. Or it resulted in modifications of the Two-Source-Hypothesis, as I mentioned before. After all amounts the common vocabulary of all possible text-passages more than 50%. This would be impossible or hard to explain, if the gospels would base only on oral tradition.

ii. Common structure

An important hint on a basic source is not only the wording and the vocabulary. Essential is also that we can find something like a common structure of those pericopes (German: “Perikopen”), which can be found in Matthew and Luke and not in Mark; and this despite the fact that Matthew and Luke did insert this non-Mark-texts in a totally different way into the existing “Mark-frame”.

Matthew for example arranges his additional material in huge speeches. They can be found in the chapters 5-7; 10; 11; 18,10ff.; 23; 24,37ff. and 25. If we would exclude this parts, Marks material would remain on the whole.

On the other hand does Luke show most of the non-Mark-material in Lk 6,20-8,3 and Lk 9,51-18,14, the so-called little and great insertion. He arranges his additional material in tabloid form.

So now we should expect – because of the different ways of arrangement of the common material – not to find a common order in the texts of Matthew and Luke. But it's actually contrary.

Taylor did show that this does also count for a couple of minor units. Even if we don't compare the order of the passages in Matthew and Luke, but the order of the single speeches in Matthew and Luke.

Such correspondences can't be pure chance. They all finally point to a common, written source.

Referring to Rudolf Pesch this collection of speeches, which has its starting point with the appearance of John the Baptist, might have started with one passage, which corresponds with Lk 3,1-6.

ii. Additional hints on the existence of the “logia-source“ (German: „Logienquelle“) Q

Another and maybe the decisive hint on a common, written source of Matthew and Luke is given by the doublets resp. duplicate-traditions.

Duplicate-traditions are texts, which are found in Luke as well as in Matthew, but in both gospels in a totally different form. Finding such a phenomenon we have to assume that each of the evangelists did fall back in this case on different traditions. The same event had been passed on in different ways. On this way it got changed and both evangelist have had their own basic tradition.

On the other hand are doublets texts, which one and the same evangelist did use twice in his gospel-text.

Luke for example does oddly enough write twice about the sending out of the disciples, once in chapter 9, the other time in chapter 10. It's important to notice that the first description is parallel to Mk 6,7-13, but the second is parallel to Mt 10,1-16.

This passage of Matthew touches again alternately Mk 6,7-13 and Lk 10,1-12.

Same doublets are in Matthew, of which one does connect to Mark and the other to with speeches, for example Mt 18,8-9 and Mt 5,29-30 or the pair Mt 19,9 and Mt 5,32.

Additionally we find a couple of words of Jesus in Matthew and Luke each twice, once in a context, which also Mark did mention, a second time in parts of speeches, which only Matthew and Luke have.

Important examples for this:

"anyone who has, will be given more"

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| Mt 13,12; | Mk 4,25; | Lk 8,18 | On the other side: | Mt 25,29; | Lk 19,26 |
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"If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself etc. "

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|--------------|-------------|---------|--------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Mt 16,24-25; | Mk 8,34-35; | Lk 9,23 | On the other side: | Mt 10,38-39; | Lk 14,27; 17,33 |
|--------------|-------------|---------|--------------------|--------------|-----------------|

"For if anyone is ashamed of me and of my words, of him the Son of man will be ashamed when he comes in his own glory... "

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| Mt 16,27; | Mk 8,38; | Lk 9,26 | On the other side: | Mt 10,32-33; | Lk 12,8-9 |
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"The persecution of the disciples for Jesus's sake "

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|--------------|--------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------|
| Mt 24,9. 13; | Mk 13,9. 13; | Lk 21,12. 17. 19 | On the other side: | Mt 10,19-20. 22; | Lk 12,11-12 |
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Then we can notice that Mk 3,23-30 is completely missing in Luke. But in return we can find in Lk 11,17-23 a varying version of Jesus' defence against the reproach of being allied with the demons. Mt 12,25-31 reminds alternately of Mk 3 and Lk 11.¹

Such doublets and double-traditions can be found very often in Matthew and Luke. In Marks Gospel we can find only one single doublet, which is Mk 9,35, a message, which can be found again in Mk 10,43-44.²

These phenomena are a very important hint to the fact that Matthew and Luke must have used another source besides Marks Gospel. It seems to have contained some reports, which have also been mentioned in Marks Gospel. So the evangelist Luke seems to have used sometimes the same report from both, the second source as well as Marks Gospel.

Therefore it's more than only probably that such a second source had to exist in written form for Matthew and Luke in view of the mostly common order and the doublets resp. their mixture in Matthew.

¹ The complete list of doublets is found in Hawkins, 80 ff and De Solages 928ff (Compare.: Paul Feine, Johannes Behm, Werner Georg Kümmel, Einleitung in das Neue Testament (Heidelberg 13. Auflage 1964)

² De Solages, 1069 (Compare.: Paul Feine, Johannes Behm, Werner Georg Kümmel, Einleitung in das Neue Testament (Heidelberg 13. Auflage 1964)

b. Peculiarity and usage of the “logia-source” (German: “Logienquelle”)

But finally we have to notice that this logia-source (German: “Logienquelle”) had to be relatively extensive. It consisted mainly of a speech-collection besides some few stories, as we have seen before.

It seems that this source didn't contain any passion- or resurrection-story. Probably it was only a collection of the words of Jesus. Maybe it served the Jews-mission in Palestine.

c. Time of composition

This source passes on old Palestinian material.

Some exegetes assume that there had to be an early Q-version in Aramaic, which was later on translated and was source for the evangelists Matthew and Luke in this translated form resp. in different translations.

But this assumption is not actually necessary. In Jesus' words, which are passed on in source Q we find even in today's text-composition doubtless Aramaicism (German: “Aramäismen”), which means Greek phrase, which can only be understood from the Aramaic point of view. Additionally we find variants in comparing Lukes and Matthews translation. But this isn't a reason – so Kümmel – that the Greek source Q had been translated originally from the Aramaic (=> Bussby). The transition from the Aramaic to the Greek could have also been done in an oral tradition.³

Referring to Rudolf Pesch source Q is based – as well as his pre-Mark passion-story - on the activities of the original parish of Jerusalem. Therefore it's a document of the early years of the Christian parish. But all this considerations belong finally to the speculations. Source Q itself doesn't exist anymore and can only be reconstructed with a lot of reservation out of today's Gospel-texts.

³ Compare.: Paul Feine, Johannes Behm, Werner Georg Kümmel, Einleitung in das Neue Testament (Heidelberg 13. Auflage 1964)

7. Special sources (German: “Sondergut”) and the “logia-source” (German: “Logienquelle”)

So it's left to say that both evangelists Matthew and Luke had to have other materials besides this source Q. We don't know, where they come from. They are called special sources or German “Sondergut” (Sg).

This special sources are finally that phrases, which do only exist in one of the Gospels and don't have any parallels.

Certainly some of this special sources can base on the source Q. The science assumes that the evangelists Matthew and Luke left some parts of source Q intentionally out. If they had already inserted similar material into their scripture, they might have ignored some of the phrases.

Matthew e.g. could have left out “the parable of the lost drachma”, which we find in Lk 15,8-10, because he had already mentioned “the parable of the lost sheep” (Mt 18,12,-14). In both parables a similar statement is made.

Nevertheless both evangelists also base on traditions, which in each case the other didn't know. This are traditions, which have been passed on specially in the surrounding of the parishes, in which the corresponding evangelist lived.

8. Résumé

In my own point of view the theory of Matthew written first isn't tenable. The above mentioned “Two-Source-Hypothesis” is too convincing. But additional sources like e.g. the special sources “Sondergut” are also necessary, we can't only base on the original Two-Source-Hypothesis. I think the science is still challenged to find out the truth of the synoptic Gospels and their original sources. But without any original documents from that time it's hard to proof such hypothesises. But maybe sometime in the future there'll be such an extraordinary finding like in Qumran and all our theories get changed or get confirmed.

9. Bibliography

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