

CLASS EXERCISE: THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM INSTRUCTIONS

I. PURPOSES OF THE EXERCISE:

- A. To help students understand the nature of the synoptic problem and the evidence for proposed solutions to it.
- B. To illustrate the nature of the synoptic materials and of biblical tradition generally as ongoing and fluid and to foster reflection on the significance of this aspect of religious tradition.
- C. To illustrate the process of the redaction of received materials.
- D. To help students learn to pay close attention to the wording of texts.

II. PROCEDURE:

A. Break the class into small groups, distribute the handout, and give each group these instructions (it usually works best to give instructions serially, as each group finishes one, rather than all at once):

1. Read the three columns carefully; then make a list of
 - a. exact verbal agreements among all three gospels;
 - b. exact verbal agreements of Mark and Matthew against Luke;
 - c. exact verbal agreements of Mark and Luke against Matthew;
 - d. exact verbal agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark;
2. Decide which two of the following sets of disagreements are the strongest and which one is weakest:
 - a. Mark and Matthew against Luke
 - b. Mark and Luke against Matthew
 - c. Matthew and Luke against mark.

B. Let each group report on what they have found; allow a little discussion, in which the students try to explain the pattern of similarities and differences; then give an account of the possible solutions.

POINTS FOR EMPHASIS:

1. The number of exact verbal agreements suggests literary dependence rather than independent accounts. Oral tradition undoubtedly stands behind the written accounts, but it would not deliver this degree of exact wording, especially in light of the transition from Aramaic to Greek.
2. This passages illustrates a pattern common throughout the triple tradition (material common to all three synoptic gospels). The

agreements of Mark and Matthew against Luke (B) and Mark and Luke against Matthew (C) are strong, whereas the agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark are either simply *negative or extremely minor.

3. See textbook, pp. 59-60. Most scholars think that the easiest way to explain this is that Matthew and Luke copied from Mark (two-document hypothesis). The two-gospel hypothesis (Luke copied from Matthew, and Mark copied from both) could also explain it. However, it is usually easier to explain why Matthew and Luke would have changed Mark than vice-versa. And most scholars think the minor agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark can be explained by either the tendency of manuscript copyists to accommodate one gospel to another or sheer accident.

4. Point out that this exercise is based solely on the triple tradition—material common to all three synoptic gospels. But there are large blocks of material common to Matthew and Luke that do not appear in Mark. To explain this material, scholars posit a document, which they designated as Q, from which Matthew and Luke each drew. (A handout from a gospel synopsis, showing material common to Matthew and Luke could be helpful at this point.)

5. No solution to the synoptic problem is air-tight. And the textbook, Encounter with the New Testament, plays down the significance of the issue by focusing on a literary reading of the gospels, which ignores the question one author's editing of another. Redaction criticism, in contrast, will use evidence of such editing to help determine one author's purpose. That is (presupposing the two-document hypothesis), it asks why Matthew or Luke have changed Mark in any given instance.

6. Whichever solution one favors, it is clear that the synoptic gospels have come down to use through a process of continual redaction. And what we can see on a literary level probably reflects a similar process at the oral stage. Attention to the synoptic problem thus teaches us that religious tradition is inherently dynamic, undergoing changes as it moves from context to context, precisely in order to maintain its vitality and relevance to human life.

*That is, an agreement only in the lack of a particular element that is in Mark.

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HANDOUT

Based on Burton H. Throckmorton, Jr., Gospel Parallels: A Comparison of the Synoptic Gospels . 5th ed.
(Nashville: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1992), pp. 100-101.

MATTHEW 16:24-28

(24) Then Jesus told his disciples,
“If any want to become my followers, let them
deny themselves and take up their cross and
follow me. (25) For those who want to save their
life will lose it, and
those who lose their life for my sake

will find it. (26) For what will it profit them if
they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?
Or what will they give in return for their life?

(27) For the son of Man is to come with his
angels in the glory of his Father, and

then he will repay everyone for what has been
done.

(28) Truly I tell you, there are some standing here
who will not taste death before they see the Son
of Man coming in his kingdom.”

MARK 8:34-9:1

(34) He called the crowd with his disciples, and
said to them,
“If any want to become my followers, let them
deny themselves and take up their cross and
follow me. (35) For those who want to save their
life will lose it, and
those who lose their life for my sake,
and for the sake of the gospel,

will save it. (36) For what will it profit them to
gain the whole world and forfeit their life? In-
deed, what can they give in return for their life?

(37) Those who are ashamed of me and my words
in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them
the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he

comes in the glory of his Father with the holy
angels.”

And he said to them,

“Truly I tell you, there are some standing here
who will not taste death until they see that the
kingdom of God has come with power.”

LUKE 9:23-27

(23) Then he said to them all,

“If any want to become my followers, let them
deny themselves and take up their cross daily
and follow me. (24) For those who want to save
their life will lose it, and
those who lose their life for my sake

will save it. (25) What does it profit them if they
gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit
themselves?

(26) Those who are ashamed of me and of my
words, of them
the Son of Man will be ashamed when he

comes in his glory and the glory of the Father
and of the holy angels.

(27) But truly I tell you, there are some standing
here who will not taste death before they see the
kingdom of God.”