

Summarizing the Sessions

This summary, published in January 2000 by the Franciscans and St. Anthony Messenger Press, reinforces the general themes covered in the previous study sessions. Use it as a final handout for the sessions, after participants have completed their own studies. (Distributing it earlier might inhibit the discovery and analysis participants will experience as they begin studying the Origins of the Church.)

Original Site:

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Document date = January 2000

Exploring the Synoptic Gospels: Mark and His Careful Readers

by Steve Mueller

Most of us carry in our heads a curiously mixed-up version of the Gospels. Because we have been variously exposed to four different Gospels, we run them together. But as careful Scripture readers always discover, the Gospels are often difficult or even impossible to harmonize. Each Gospel shapes a unique portrait of who Jesus is and what his life, death and resurrection meant for his followers. Scholars have long recognized that three of the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—have a remarkable similarity in both wording and structure. They can easily be put into parallel columns and viewed together at one glance. This has led scholars to call them *synoptic* (from the Greek word for “seeing together or at the same time”).

Solving the Synoptic Problem

Putting the Synoptic Gospels in parallel columns readily illustrates their interdependence. The Synoptic problem is explaining their interrelationships, in particular which came first and so was the inspiration and source for the others. In the history of biblical scholarship, many ingenious solutions have been proposed, but only a few hypotheses have been widely accepted.

From the time of St. Augustine (d. 430) to the 18th century, the accepted view was that the four Gospels were written in the order in which they appear in our Bibles—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—and that each depended on its predecessors. In the 18th century, scholars eliminated John from Synoptic consideration, retained the priority of Matthew and identified the order of composition as Matthew-Luke-Mark.

In the middle of the 19th century, a two-source solution gained prominence. It argued for the priority of Mark as the original Gospel and identified as the second source a collection of about 230 verses of Jesus’ sayings not found in Mark but used by both

Matthew and Luke. Scholars dubbed this source “Q,” from the German word for source, *Quelle*. This two-source solution has been expanded in the 20th century to recognize that both Matthew and Luke had other sources unique to their communities. These materials show up in their distinct infancy narratives, their sayings of Jesus and their resurrection materials. Almost all biblical scholars today accept this expanded two-source theory as the basis for their analysis of the Synoptic Gospels.

Mark—Why Write a Gospel?

How would you respond if someone asked you to tell them the Christian message? Most of us would probably tick off a list of doctrinal formulas. How many of us would tell the life story of Jesus? Mark’s great invention was to take the life of Jesus and shape it into a presentation of the Good News of our salvation. Mark’s narrative Gospel fixed the general pattern of Jesus’ life in the Gospels: baptism, ministry in Galilee, journey to Jerusalem to suffer, die and rise to new life. It also anchored the numerous free-floating sayings of Jesus more closely to specific situations in Jesus’ life.

Why would Mark shape a Gospel in the form of a life of Jesus? Most people would answer that this would preserve the memory of Jesus. While there is certainly some truth to this, preserving memories can be done in many other ways. One could string together sayings, as “Q” and the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas do, or present a theological form of the Gospel, as Paul tends to do.

The masterstroke of Mark’s Gospel life is its structure. To make Jesus’ life into a “Gospel life,” nothing is more important than the ending. Mark’s Gospel ends with the resurrection of Jesus, not with his death. Had the Gospel ended with his death, there would have been no good news to proclaim, but only a rehash of the well-known bad news that everybody dies. Mark’s Gospel proclaims that death ends only the earthly life of Jesus, but not his relationship with God. The good news is that what happens to Jesus will also happen to us—if we dare to follow his way of relationship and service that leads through death to new life.

Matthew and Luke—Why Revise a Gospel?

Once the Gospel was proclaimed as a narrative life of Jesus, others recognized its essential power and appeal. Jesus’ life became the pattern for his followers, his story became their story and his destiny became their hope. The Gospel story could not be reinvented, but its riches could be brought to light in new ways. Like a tool that could be adapted to new tasks, Mark’s Gospel story was used by other evangelists for their own purposes.

The need for a revised version of Mark’s Gospel occurs for the same reasons most books are revised. The word revise means “to see anew.” Revisions occur when the original book is read in a new situation that demands new solutions to problems, or when a later author has new material that needs to be added. Both Matthew and Luke are guided

by these fundamental motives as they edit Mark's Gospel to reshape it for the problems challenging their communities.

Mark's Gospel was written in a time of trial when following Jesus' way meant taking up the cross and maybe even death. It was "the beginning of the good news" (Mark 1:1) for a mixed community of Jewish and Gentile Christians who thought it was the end. Mark shaped his life of Jesus like an extended parable that probes the issue of Jesus' identity. Over and over his readers are forced to readjust their comfortable expectations in the light of surprising and challenging information about who Jesus really was.

Neither Matthew's nor Luke's communities confronted such trials. Matthew's main problem was encouraging his mostly Jewish audience to embrace both their Jewish tradition and the mission to the Gentiles that was transforming Christianity into a new kind of community. To do this, he portrayed Jesus as an authoritative teacher who built upon Moses' law but transformed it into the new Christian community of right relationships (righteousness).

Luke's problem was to demonstrate how the new Christian community of his Gentile converts was rooted in the unfamiliar Old Testament traditions and to direct their energy into a worldwide mission following the example of Jesus. To do this, he portrayed Jesus as a compassionate prophet whose witness both in word and in suffering gathered everyone, especially the poor and those on the margins, into a new community of universal table fellowship and service.

Both Matthew and Luke also had new material that they wanted to add to Mark's Gospel. They shared a common collection of Jesus' sayings with which they supplemented Mark in different ways. Matthew uses most of this "Q" material to create five extended discourses that form the backbone of Jesus' teaching in this Gospel. Luke lumps most of this material into a great insertion, chapters 9-19, in which Jesus the teaching prophet sets his face toward Jerusalem, the "killer of prophets" (Luke 13:34). On the way, he reveals the meaning of God's dream for a community of persons related as God wants them to be.

Studying the Synoptics

To study the Synoptic Gospels, scholars have devised a method for the "critical study of the process of editing" called redaction criticism. Redaction is an older word for editing. This method aims to "shed light upon the personal contribution of each evangelist and to uncover the theological tendencies which shaped his editorial work." (See the Pontifical Biblical Commission's *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1993, I.A.1.) Using this method, scholars have been more able to recognize and appreciate the unique literary and theological characteristics of each Gospel.

We can summarize the basic presuppositions that guide redaction criticism in this way. Both Matthew and Luke had and used Mark's structure for their Gospels. They also included material from other sources at their disposal—the shared "Q" and their own sources.

Since Luke and Matthew had Mark's text, we presume that their changes to Mark are conscious and freely made. By reflecting on why these changes were made, we can begin to discern their intentions and discover their particular emphases.

Of course there is no guarantee that we can get back into the mind of Matthew or Luke, but still we can recognize the themes and ideas that each of them stresses when they want to change Mark. As we reflect upon the reasons for their changes, we discover that they are often linked to each evangelist's understanding of who Jesus is and the special needs facing their communities. Mark's Gospel was great for Mark's community, but new times and new challenges demanded new versions of Jesus' story. As you begin to study the Synoptic Gospels more carefully, you should work with a synopsis of the Gospels, which places the text in columns to detect more easily the changes among the individual Gospels. In this format, you can quickly compare the texts of each evangelist. Once you have found the passage you wish to examine, here is what to do.

First, since we assume that Mark is the original source, notice the changes that Matthew and Luke make to Mark. These changes can be grammatical, such as the use of different vocabulary or sentence construction; or thematic, such as the introduction or omission of material that the evangelist thinks is necessary to get his point across. Notice that changes can be by addition, omission, change in location or substitution (sometimes Matthew and Luke think that a version of an incident from their own sources is better than that of Mark).

Second, decide which changes are more significant and which might be just stylistic. Luke is always touching up the rather rough Greek that Mark writes. As careful readers of Mark's text, Luke and Matthew often make changes because what Mark wrote either was not clear to them or was not what they wanted to emphasize about Jesus or discipleship.

Third, in light of the significant changes, ask why Matthew and Luke would want to make these changes to Mark's text. Obviously they could have repeated Mark's text word for word, but since they chose to make changes, they must have had a reason.

Most commonly, the reasons can be traced to each evangelist's portrait of Jesus. Mark stresses that Jesus is a suffering Messiah opening a new way of relating to God. Matthew emphasizes Jesus as an authoritative teacher who presents the new guidelines for life in relation to God. Luke highlights the healing and prophetic activity of Jesus as a witness to the new action of God for salvation. Such changes reinforce their own portraits of Jesus.

Another major reason for making changes was the particular challenge that each community faced. All the evangelists believed that Jesus was the solution to their problems. So the words and deeds of Jesus hold the key that unlocks the solution to the crises facing their communities. Matthew and Luke change Mark because Mark's proclamation of the gospel is no longer the way that their communities need to hear the Good News.

Shaping Our Own Gospel

What Matthew and Luke did to Mark's Gospel is what we are still doing to the Gospels. We take their message to discover the solutions for our problems today. Each of us shapes a Gospel by selecting from all four Gospels the words and deeds of Jesus that we find most important because of our situation, our emphases—what we need Jesus to be an example of—and for following his path to God. The Good News in four versions becomes the Good News in many more. How providential it is that we have four versions rather than merely one! And how interesting it is to trace the uniqueness of each version and recognize the different theologies and community responses to Jesus that are available to us today.

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