

# The Synoptic Gospels

## Matthew, Mark, and Luke

*Alan Taylor Farnes*

Most readers of the New Testament begin with the book of Matthew. After completing it, they tend to proceed to Mark, the next Gospel in canonical order. But upon encountering Mark, they may be surprised to discover that it shares a high degree of material with Matthew. For example, Mark 1:2 begins the story of John the Baptist, but this story was already covered in Matthew 3:13–17. Continuing, they discover that Luke also shares a high degree of material with both Mark and Matthew. Why this repetition? Why does the New Testament begin with three Gospels that essentially tell the same story about Jesus?

Careful readers, however, will notice that Mark tells the story of John the Baptist slightly differently than Matthew does and that Luke has yet more differences. At Jesus's baptism in Mark 1:10, for example, the Gospel of Mark speaks of "the Spirit like a dove descending upon him," whereas Matthew's account reads "the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him" (Matthew 3:16). Luke is different still: "the Holy [Spirit]<sup>1</sup> descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him" (Luke 3:22). Here we have three different Gospels with three slightly different renderings of an event at Jesus's baptism.

These are small and seemingly inconsequential changes, but we must nonetheless ask why they were made. Since most scholars believe that Mark was the first Gospel to be written, it is commonly held that both Matthew and Luke employed Mark as a source in their respective Gospels.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are referred to as the "Synoptic" Gospels (the word *synoptic* comes from a Greek word meaning "to see together" or "from the same point of view"). While the Gospel of John shares a small amount

of material with the Synoptic Gospels (such as Jesus's baptism, implied at John 1:28–34), it differs enough from the Synoptics to be in a class of its own (see chapter 18 herein).<sup>3</sup> In this study I will discuss the individual nature of the Synoptic Gospels and provide an overview of their respective authors, the potential dates of their composition, and their intended audiences. I will also discuss the “Synoptic problem,” or the attempt to determine which of the Synoptic Gospels was written first and the exact nature of dependence among the Synoptics as far as this can be determined.

## Dating and Authorship of the Synoptic Gospels

Scholars disagree about when these books were written. Whether the Synoptic Gospels were written before or after AD 70 (when the Jerusalem temple was destroyed by the Romans) during the siege of Jerusalem (see chapter 14 herein) is a matter of interpretation. As will be discussed in detail below, some commentators claim that the Synoptics show definite signs of knowing that the temple was destroyed, while other scholars respond that this awareness is due to Jesus's ability to prophesy of future events. Other chronological clues are less determinative for the dating question. For Latter-day Saints, who accept Jesus's prophetic ability, any claimed awareness of the temple's destruction or the presence of later events in the Gospels does not necessarily prove they were written after the fact. Thus, while scholarly endeavors to date the Synoptic Gospels have merit, they are largely based on assumptions that Latter-day Saints do not always share. Of course, such speculation has little theological bearing on the Gospels.

The question of Gospel authorship is similarly complex, with many variables and assumptions at issue in any given argument. For instance, some scholars argue that Matthew, one of Jesus's original twelve apostles as inferred from Matthew 9:9, wrote the Gospel of Matthew, while others claim it was written by a later figure and that the ascription to Matthew was made by later Christians who could not have known the author's identity. While such authorship issues have dominated in academia, for Latter-day Saints they need not have a dominating role in theological discussions of the Gospels. Here the words of I. Howard Marshall are helpful: “If the Gospel rests on sound tradition faithfully recorded, the name of its author is of secondary importance.”<sup>4</sup>

Some might retort that the Gospels must have been written by the original apostles so that their words can be trusted because they were eyewitnesses. But, only two of the four Gospels claim to have been written by eyewitnesses (Matthew and John). The other two, Mark and Luke, make no claim to apostolic authority; furthermore, Luke explicitly states that he was not an eyewitness of Christ's ministry (Luke 1:2). Thus, the Gospels need not have been written by eyewitnesses to be trustworthy and reliable. Consider an analogy from the Book of Mormon: Latter-day Saints believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God. But who “wrote” the vast majority of the Book of Mormon? Mormon and Moroni served as editors, redactors, and authors but lived hundreds of years after most of the events that they chronicled. Yet Mormon and Moroni used eyewitness records as sources for compiling the

Book of Mormon. Latter-day Saints do not question the veracity, reliability, or trustworthiness of the Book of Mormon, even though it was compiled some four hundred years after most of the events took place, largely because Latter-day Saints accept that Mormon and Moroni used eyewitness testimony as sources while compiling the record and did so with the aid of the Holy Ghost. Consequently, Mormon's and Moroni's editorial processes may not have been dissimilar to some of those employed by non-eyewitness writers of the New Testament Gospels as they sought to compile narratives that would convince their readers that Jesus was the Christ and the Son of God.

## The Synoptic Gospels as Individual Testimonies

Latter-day Saints often conflate the three Synoptic Gospels in an attempt to tell the life of Jesus as one simple story. Indeed, most Latter-day Saint biblical reenactments, such as Christmas nativity plays, are by necessity harmonizations of the Synoptics since only in Matthew's Gospel, for example, do we find the wise men (Matthew 2:1–12) and only in Luke's Gospel do we learn about the shepherds (Luke 2:8–18). Yet in nativity plays the wise men and the shepherds usually appear side by side—a conflation of events not supported by the record. However much we may want a single Gospel that encapsulates Jesus's life and teachings into one simple narrative, we do not have one. Instead we have four Gospels that describe Jesus's life in different ways and, importantly, with different purposes in mind. Attempting to flatten the Gospels into one can do a disservice to the narrators' individual testimonies, perspectives, and purposes.<sup>5</sup>

While there are reasons that one could probably read the Synoptics as a harmony (such as seeing one coherent story of Jesus and obtaining an overall perspective on who he was), the impossibility of creating an accurate harmony—one that does not contain obvious contradictions or favor one Gospel account over another—suggests that this method of study has less merit than approaching the Gospels as individual accounts. Only after we understand what each Gospel says on its own can we responsibly attempt to place the pieces together to form a more coherent whole. When we do so, however, we must be aware of and honest about the differences and contradictions among the Synoptic accounts.

## Gospel of Mark

If the aim is to understand what the Gospel of Mark has to say about Jesus—who he was, what he was like, what he taught, and so on—the reader should read Mark for Mark's sake, that is, without reference to the other Gospels. If the aim is to gain a more complete picture of what the entire New Testament has to say about Jesus, the reader could forgo reading Mark altogether since much of it is repeated in other Gospels. Reading Mark for Mark's sake provides insight into what this earliest Gospel writer thought about Jesus (most New Testament scholars accept that Mark's Gospel was written first, at least before Matthew and Luke).<sup>6</sup> As twenty-first-century Christians, we take for granted these books called “Gospels” that tell the story of Jesus's life and preserve his teachings. However, before the author of

Mark began composing his work, there were no such accounts that we know of. Mark's attempt to gather and record the disparate accounts of Jesus's ministry into one Gospel was an innovation that quickly caught on, yet the book is sometimes ignored or even disparaged because it is the shortest Gospel and, as noted earlier, contains only 7 percent unique material. But that fact is a testament to the book's genius: only 7 percent of it is unique precisely because Matthew and Luke thought highly enough of Mark's Gospel to borrow 93 percent of its material.

It is important to remember that the New Testament exists in manuscripts that are not original copies but rather much later handwritten copies that were preserved by early Christians. While the Gospels were probably written in the generation after Jesus, the earliest extant fragments date to more than a century after his death and resurrection. For example, the earliest extant text of the Gospel of Mark is preserved in a manuscript from about the middle of the third century AD.<sup>7</sup> While this manuscript is a collection of the other New Testament Gospels and Acts as well, it is most likely that the Gospel of Mark first circulated as a single Gospel.<sup>8</sup>

While most scholars accept that Mark wrote the Gospel bearing his name, the question of the authorship deserves more analysis. For example, who was Mark and whence the title "Gospel of Mark"? A person in the New Testament identified as John Mark is described as the son of Mary, whose house served as a meeting place for Christ's disciples: "[Peter] came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying" (Acts 12:12). Later in this same chapter we are told that John Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas on a missionary journey (12:25; 13:5). John Mark soon left his companions and returned to Jerusalem (13:13). That something like abandonment or desertion occurred here is underscored by the text.<sup>9</sup> In Acts 15 John Mark is the subject of a sharp debate between Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas wanted John Mark to accompany them on the next leg of their mission, but Paul "thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them" (15:38).<sup>10</sup> We also find the name Mark elsewhere in the New Testament. In Colossians 4:10 Paul identifies someone named Mark as the cousin of Barnabas, and in 2 Timothy 4:11 Paul says Mark is profitable for the ministry. Further, in Philemon 1:24 Mark is listed as a "fellowlabourer" of Paul, and in 1 Peter 5:13 the author calls a person named Mark his "son."<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, a second-century bishop of Hierapolis named Papias mentions someone named Mark in connection with this Gospel: "Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he [Peter] remembered, not, indeed, in order, of the things said or done by the Lord. For he [Mark] had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter."<sup>12</sup>

Is it possible that all these mentions of Mark and John Mark concern the same person? Joel Marcus, a renowned scholar of the Gospel of Mark, argues that is the case.<sup>13</sup> While this is a distinct possibility, we must keep in mind that John and Mark were, respectively, some of the most popular Hebrew and Roman names, so it would not be surprising to find multiple people named John or Mark in the New Testament.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, many believe that

the John Mark mentioned in the New Testament is the same person who wrote the Gospel of Mark.<sup>15</sup> Joel Marcus goes on to assert the likelihood that this same Mark was indeed the author because any later person attempting to ascribe the Gospel falsely to someone would probably have chosen a famous apostle from the New Testament rather than an obscure person who appears therein only a couple of times.<sup>16</sup>

The most significant signposts that scholars use to date the Gospel of Mark are its mention of the impending destruction of the temple (13:1–2), “the abomination of desolation” (13:14), and the flight to the mountains (13:14). Those who belonged to the Jerusalem church did indeed flee to Pella or elsewhere, the temple was indeed destroyed, and there was some kind of abomination. Mark may have been writing after these events associated with the Jewish War (AD 66–73) occurred (that is, post-AD 70), or perhaps he wrote just before them with a sense of foreboding about what was to come. Of course, if Jesus prophesied of these events, then the events of AD 70 no longer serve as *the* defining point for dating the Gospel. One argument that Mark composed his Gospel before AD 70 is that it “does not reflect the kind of detail expected when one looks back on that event.”<sup>17</sup>

Another signpost used to date the Gospel of Mark is found in Mark 15:21, where Simon of Cyrene carries Jesus’s cross. Simon is introduced to the reader as “the father of Alexander and Rufus.” Many claim that Simon’s children are mentioned because Alexander and Rufus were known to the hearers of Mark’s Gospel.<sup>18</sup> While these signposts show that Mark was written within one or two generations of Jesus’s ministry, they are not as helpful for pinpointing an exact year or small span of time during which Mark wrote.

Concerning the intended audience of the Gospel of Mark, Gaye Strathearn and Frank Judd demonstrate that “internal evidence strongly suggests that the Gospel of Mark was written for a gentile, or non-Jewish, audience.”<sup>19</sup> They show that Mark routinely interprets Aramaic phrases that Matthew leaves untranslated. For example, in Mark 5:41 Jesus says to Jairus’s daughter “Talitha cumi,” which is then translated as “Damsel, I say unto thee, arise.” Likewise, in 7:34 Jesus says, “Ephphatha,” which Mark translates as “Be opened.” Lastly, on the cross Jesus cries, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” and Mark translates the statement for his readers (15:34). Strathearn and Judd conclude that “if Mark’s audience were Jewish and spoke Aramaic, there would be no need for such explanations.”<sup>20</sup> Here we see that Mark intended to write to a non-Jewish audience and so provided explanations of Aramaic phrases.

## Gospel of Matthew

Matthew seems to have been the second Gospel written and has a different presentation and focus than Mark’s Gospel. Surviving early Christian sources suggest that Matthew and John were the most popular of the four Gospels based on how much they were quoted and copied.<sup>21</sup> Strathearn and Judd note that Matthew’s account was probably referenced in 2 Peter and James, and early Christians such as Ignatius and a second-century handbook called the *Didache* also quoted Matthew.<sup>22</sup>

Because Matthew's primary purpose was to convince his readers that Jesus was the promised Messiah of the Old Testament, an intended Jewish audience seems most likely. According to Strathearn and Judd, "Internal evidence from the Gospel itself seems to confirm that the intended audience was Jewish. Unlike Mark, Matthew does not explain Jewish concepts for his audience."<sup>23</sup> Matthew quotes extensively from the Old Testament to show how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. He also presents Jesus as a new Moses figure—a new lawgiver. Just as Moses gave the law to Israel in the book of Exodus, Jesus fulfilled the law and gave a higher law to his people. Matthew incorporates scripture from the Old Testament so well that Davies and Allison remark that "our author was, there can be no doubt, some sort of scholar."<sup>24</sup> Framing the Sermon on the Mount to mirror Moses's story at Sinai, Matthew says that Jesus "went up into a mountain" (*anebē eis to oros*) to give his sermon (Matthew 5:1), which matches the Septuagint version of Exodus 19:3, where Moses goes up into a mountain (the exact same Greek phrase is used) before receiving the Ten Commandments. Notably, whereas Moses finds God atop the mountain, in Matthew's account Jesus goes up into the mountain to find himself at the top of it, thus becoming both the law originator and the law deliverer, thereby surpassing Moses in divine authority.

In order to fully convince Jewish Christians that Jesus is the Messiah, Matthew includes ten "formula quotations"<sup>25</sup> that follow a pattern similar to the one found in Matthew 1:22–23: "Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, . . ." These formula quotations were intended to show that Jesus was the Messiah prophesied of in the Old Testament. While Mark has quotations like this from the Old Testament (see, for example, Mark 1:2–3), they are not nearly so numerous.

There are two main theories concerning who wrote the Gospel of Matthew: (1) Matthew, Jesus's apostle, as indicated in Matthew 9:9, and (2) a later person, with the ascription to Matthew added sometime later. There is no need to be wedded unnecessarily to traditional theories of authorship concerning the Gospels, because whoever wrote them used eyewitness testimony as sources for compiling their narratives. While Latter-day Saints generally hold to traditional authorship in the Church, such a position concerning Matthew poses a few challenges based on the evidence at hand. For example, if Matthew was written by the apostle Matthew, why would such an eyewitness have relied so heavily on another source, namely Mark, who was not an eyewitness? On the other hand, if Matthew was called at some later point in Christ's ministry (Matthew 9:9), this might account for why he could have relied on Mark, especially if the source behind Mark was Peter.<sup>26</sup>

As has been shown, dating the Synoptic Gospels is often educated guesswork, and this is especially true for Matthew and Luke. Scholars readily admit that dating Matthew is largely dependent on Mark's date and is therefore a relative date. Since Matthew uses Mark as a source, scholars guess that it may have taken Mark's Gospel about a decade to circulate and become popular enough for Matthew to use it as a source. Since most date Mark sometime from AD 65 to AD 74, Matthew is therefore dated sometime after that. According to Davies and Allison, "Matthew was almost certainly written between AD 70 and AD 100, in all probability between AD 80 and 95."<sup>27</sup> Another reason for their dating is that, as mentioned

above, Matthew was known to Ignatius and the Didache and therefore could not have been written later than AD 100.<sup>28</sup>

Strathearn and Judd summarize well the overall themes and goals of the Gospel of Matthew: “Matthew, therefore, highlights the truth that God is with his people. Jesus’s coming to earth was the fulfillment of a plan that had been in place from the very beginning. Israel may have rejected their God, but he had not rejected his people, even though the Gentiles would have a place in his kingdom. Instead of coming as a judge, which he will do at the end of time, God first sent his Son to teach and heal his people, both physically and spiritually.”<sup>29</sup>

## Gospel of Luke

Luke’s Gospel, while borrowing heavily from Mark, is quite different from Mark as well as from Matthew. First, Luke is the only evangelist to explicitly state his goals, intentions, and motivations for penning his Gospel.

Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed. (Luke 1:1–4)

This passage has many important elements, and we are fortunate that Luke opens up and invites us behind the curtain to see him at work. Luke tells us first that “many” have already attempted to write such Gospels. Here he is undoubtedly referencing Mark and could also be referring to Matthew. It is also possible that Luke is referring to other Gospels or sources not presently in the New Testament canon (see discussion below). Marshall asserts that Luke’s purpose was to “give an historical account which would form the basis for a sound Christian faith on the part of those who had already been instructed, perhaps imperfectly or incompletely, in the story of Jesus.”<sup>30</sup>

Luke says that he is writing “unto” (KJV) or “for” (NRSV) someone whom he refers to as “most excellent Theophilus” (Luke 1:3). Marshall claims that Theophilus was the patron, or financier, of Luke’s project;<sup>31</sup> François Bovon adds that Theophilus was “not an abstraction, but a historical person.”<sup>32</sup> Bovon is responding to the assertion that since *Theophilus* means “friend of God,” Luke is directing his work to any “friend of God” and that Theophilus was not a real person but rather a symbol of each believer in Christ. While Bovon is probably correct that Theophilus was a historical figure and the patron of Luke’s effort, we should allow room for more than one meaning: “Because *Theophilus* means ‘friend of God,’ we can also apply it to ourselves as we read Luke’s writings—we are also friends of God who are being invited to seek the truth about the Savior in Luke’s Gospel.”<sup>33</sup> That Luke could have intended this multivalence is not an unreasonable conjecture. Additionally, while Luke tells us



that he is writing *for* Theophilus, the internal evidence of the text suggests that he is writing *to* “educated Gentiles, Hellenistic Jews, and Christians unsettled by rumors.”<sup>34</sup>

It is worth noting here that Luke wrote a two-volume work: Luke and Acts (see Acts 1:1). These two accounts can be read together as one large work. Luke’s Gospel primarily concerns the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, while the principal purpose of Acts was to show the culmination and spread of Jesus’s good news.

Like Mark, the Gospel of Luke does not claim any apostolic authority and is written anonymously (Luke’s name does not appear in Acts either). Marshall comments, “The Gospel itself is anonymous and contains no information which would enable us to identify its author.”<sup>35</sup> The author of Luke–Acts, however, is somewhat revealed in Acts 16:10–17, 20:5–15, 21:1–18, 27:1–37, and 28:1–16, where the narration suddenly shifts from third person to first person plural: “And after he had seen the vision, immediately *we* endeavored to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called *us* for to preach the gospel unto them” (16:10; emphasis added). These “*we*-passages,” as they are called, imply that the author of Luke–Acts accompanied Paul on some of his missionary journeys, although this clue is not determinative of Lukan authorship.

A person named Luke is mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament in the letters of Paul. Interestingly, in two of these instances Luke is mentioned along with Mark. In Colossians 4:14 we read, “Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas, greet you,” suggesting that someone named Luke was traveling with Paul. In 2 Timothy 4:11 we read, “Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry.” Lastly, we find Luke in Philemon, where he is again mentioned alongside Mark: “Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers” (Philemon 1:24). This gives us two possibilities for authorship: the Gospel of Luke could have been written by someone named Luke who was a missionary companion of Paul and is the same person mentioned in the Pauline Epistles, or a later person recognized that the anonymous author was a companion of Paul and chose to name him after Luke (or Lucas). The latter scenario is unconvincing. Moreover, there is no strong argument against Luke himself being both the author of the Gospel and a missionary companion of Paul.

As early as AD 200 manuscripts bore the title “Gospel according to Luke.” Early tradition likewise attests that this Gospel was written by someone named Luke. If Papias mentioned Luke, as he did Mark and Matthew, then his comments did not survive. Instead the first extant mention of Luke by an early Christian author is Irenaeus, who discussed all four Gospels around the end of the second century AD. Of Luke he said, “Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the gospel preached by Paul.”<sup>36</sup> Marshall concludes, “In short, the best hypothesis is still that the Gospel was composed by Luke.”<sup>37</sup>

Dating the Gospel of Luke is similar to dating Matthew’s since Luke clearly uses Mark as a source and enough time must have passed since its publication and circulation for Luke to have received and read it. If Luke used Matthew, Luke’s Gospel must also have been written later. Bovon dates Luke–Acts to sometime between AD 80 and 90,<sup>38</sup> Strathearn and Judd agree with Bovon,<sup>39</sup> and Marshall tentatively suggests ca. AD 80.<sup>40</sup>



Luke's Gospel is characterized by vivid parables that show rather than tell. For example, when Jesus is asked "Who is my neighbour?" (Luke 10:29), he relates the classic parable of the good Samaritan. It is in Luke where we find many other memorable and didactic parables such as the prodigal son, the lost sheep, and the lost coin. Of Luke's purpose in writing, Marshall notes, "His task was to provide [his audience] with such an account of the story of Jesus as would enable them to see that the story with which they had already become partially acquainted was a reliable basis for their faith. Thus, his work was probably intended for members of the church."<sup>41</sup>

## The Synoptic Problem

It is commonly accepted in biblical scholarship that Mark was written first and Matthew and Luke used Mark as one of their sources. The question that arises is how to account for material that is shared by Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark. This forms the basis of the so-called Synoptic problem. Over the centuries various solutions have been offered, many rather complicated. Today the majority of scholars find two theories most tenable. The Two Source Theory (or Q Theory)<sup>42</sup> postulates that Matthew and Luke had access to Mark and another source that

is now lost. This lost source has been called "Q," short for the German *Quelle*, meaning "source." It is conjectured that Matthew and Luke both had access to Q and Mark while writing their Gospels. To clarify, Q is a hypothetical document that has never been found and has been reconstructed only by identifying passages shared by Matthew and Luke but absent in Mark. While this postulation addresses most of the big issues of the Synoptic problem, it is not without its shortcomings. A main objection to the Q Hypothesis is that it is merely a hypothesis: the Q document is entirely conjectural, and no document has been found that matches what we would expect Q to look like.

The other proposed solution that has a large scholarly following is the Farrer-Goulder Hypothesis, named after its early proponents. This hypothesis claims that Mark wrote first, then Matthew wrote using Mark as a source, and finally Luke wrote his Gospel using both Mark and Matthew as sources. The current champion of this position is Mark Goodacre.<sup>43</sup> Many younger scholars are attracted to this solution because they see it as the simplest solution, passing Occam's razor. Under this solution there is no need to postulate or reconstruct hypothetical ancient documents; rather, all the sources needed are in the New Testament.

One weakness of the Farrer-Goulder Hypothesis, however, is that if Luke copied Matthew, he broke up many of Matthew's beautiful sermons like the Sermon on the Mount and replaced them with less elegant ones. What would motivate Luke to do that? Additionally,

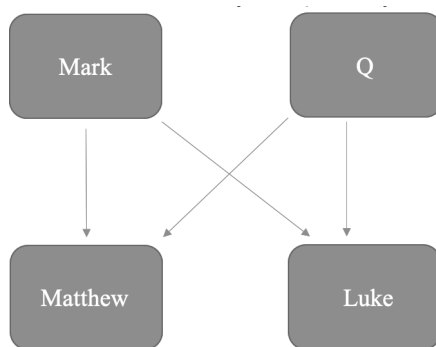


Table 1. Two Source Theory or "Q" Theory.

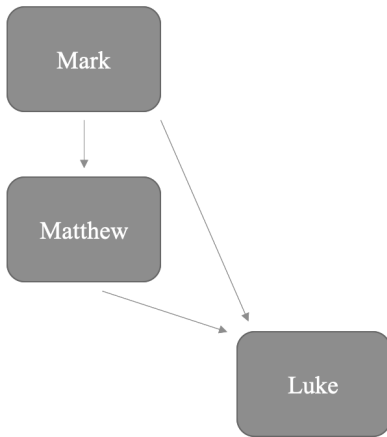


Table 2. The Farrer-Goulder Hypothesis.

proponents of Q argue that Matthew and Luke display “alternating primitivity,” or places where Matthew or Luke seems to have the more primitive account. For the Farrer-Goulder Hypothesis to work, Matthew must predate Luke in order for Luke to use Matthew as a source. But Q theorists argue that it is not clear whether Matthew or Luke was written earlier and that both display alternating primitivity, as evident in the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain. Matthew 5:3 reads “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” but Luke reads only “Blessed be ye poor” (Luke 6:20). Q theorists argue that Luke displays a more primitive account of this saying and that it could not be dependent on Matthew. If Luke were copying directly from Matthew, then Luke would not

have a saying that appears to be more primitive than Matthew’s.<sup>44</sup> Here we see that any solution to the Synoptic problem is fraught with challenges and that scholars will likely never fully agree on a solution.

The solution to the Synoptic problem is, of itself, of no significant theological importance. Whether or not Q existed or Luke knew and used Matthew does not affect one’s testimony of Jesus as Savior. However, what has been done with Q could have an effect on one’s faith negatively. Thomas Wayment observes that “conclusions drawn from [Q] are influencing the faith of thousands and altering the way the New Testament is taught and preached throughout the world.”<sup>45</sup> Q can become dangerous because, as a hypothetical document, it can be reconstructed in many ways to say many things. And if Q did exist, it would have been one of the earliest Christian documents, and what it did or did not contain would be extremely important for the origins of the Christian faith. Wayment continues: “Q has become something unwieldy—a beast with a spirit of its own. Q scholars want to alter our understanding of who Jesus was and present to us a Jesus who did no miracles, did not anticipate His death, did not understand He was the Messiah, and did not leave behind an organized church. The Jesus of Q is essentially a scholar’s Jesus who wandered the countryside and taught using conventional wisdom. He had no power to save Himself, and He had no power to save others. Scholars call this the Jesus of history, whereas we worship the Jesus of faith.”<sup>46</sup>

Because Q can indeed be made to say whatever a given scholar wants it to say, it should be treated cautiously. Yet it remains possible that a lost sayings source could have been a source for Matthew and Luke. Q does not necessarily depict Jesus in a negative light, but it can construe him negatively depending on how it is reconstructed. So Wayment concludes: “We do not object to the possible use of sources by the Evangelists, and we expect that if such sources were available to them in the earliest years of the Church, they would make good use of them. We object, however, to what is being said concerning the items that those early

sources did not contain, and we openly question whether such a document actually existed. The problem lies not necessarily in Q but in what Q has become.”<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

As I hope to have shown, there can be much merit in reading Matthew, Mark, and Luke individually as separate witnesses. Mark, who was likely a companion of Paul, innovatively crafted an account to convince his hearers that Jesus was the Son of God. On the other hand, Matthew likely wrote his account shortly after and used Mark as a source while writing to Jewish people in order to convince them that Jesus was the promised Messiah of the Old Testament. Likewise, Luke also wrote after Mark, using Mark as a source and writing primarily to gentile members of the church to strengthen them in their newfound faith. As we read each Gospel individually, we can gain an appreciation for their individual merits, purposes, and testimonies. It can be tempting at times to group them together as one narrative, but as Strathearn and Judd remind, “students and teachers have much to gain by considering how each Gospel highlights individual aspects of the Savior’s ministry and paints an individual portrait of the Savior.”<sup>48</sup>



**Alan Taylor Farnes** is an independent scholar of New Testament manuscripts whose research primarily focuses on how scribes copied the New Testament text.

## Further Reading

### Mark

Marcus, Joel. *Mark 1–8*. London: Yale University Press, 2000.

———. *Mark 8–16*. London: Yale University Press, 2009.

### Matthew

Davies, W. D., and Dale C. Allison. *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*. 3 vols. Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1988–91.

### Luke

Bovon, François. *Luke 1*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002.

———. *Luke 2*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013.

———. *Luke 3*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012.

### Synoptic problem

Goodacre, Mark. *The Synoptic Problem: A Way Through the Maze*. London: Sheffield, 2001. Freely available online at <https://archive.org/details/synopticproblemw00good>.

## Notes

1. The King James Version here reads “the Holy Ghost,” but the word translated in Luke 3:22 as “ghost” is the same word used in Mark 1:10 for “spirit”—*pneuma*. The KJV translators translated *pneuma* in two different ways: “spirit” and “ghost.” When we keep in mind that Luke’s version could actually read “Holy Spirit,” we

- realize that Luke has added here only one word, not two, to Mark's account. In Greek, Luke has actually added two words—*to hagion*—but the *to* simply means “the” and is unimportant when translated.
2. For a brief overview of the direction of borrowing among the Synoptics, see Mark Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem: A Way Through the Maze* (London: Sheffield, 2001), 16–24. This topic will be discussed at length below.
  3. Robert L. Millet has provided a useful chart showing the percentage of agreement among the four Gospels: Only 7 percent of Mark's material is unique to Mark, meaning Matthew and Luke borrowed 93 percent of Mark's material but left 7 percent untouched. The Gospel of Matthew is 42 percent unique to Matthew while sharing 58 percent of material with other Gospels. The Gospel of Luke contains 59 percent unique material and shares 41 percent with other Gospels. On the other hand, the Gospel of John has 92 percent unique material and shares only 8 percent of material with the other Gospels. Robert L. Millet, “The Testimony of Matthew,” in *Studies in Scripture, Volume Five: The Gospels*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 49.
  4. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter, England: Paternoster, 1978), 33.
  5. See Gaye Strathearn and Frank F. Judd Jr., “The Distinctive Testimonies of the Four Gospels,” *Religious Educator* 8, no. 2 (2007): 59–60, for more perspectives on the disadvantages of reading the New Testament Gospels as a harmony.
  6. For more evidence that Mark was written before Matthew and Luke, see Goodacre, *Synoptic Problem*, 56–83.
  7. Most New Testament manuscripts are dated paleographically, or according to their handwriting style. The earliest surviving text of the Gospel of Mark is preserved in a manuscript called Papyrus 45, or P<sup>45</sup>, dating to around AD 250. Containing some of Matthew, Mark 4–9 and 11–12, and some of Luke, John, and Acts, it is badly damaged throughout.
  8. As the first Gospel written, Mark had no need for a title bearing the author's name since those who used the account knew who authored it. It was only after other Gospels were written and collected into a single volume that the need to distinguish them one from another became important. That the manuscripts do not carry the title “Mark” until the fourth century AD could largely be attributed to the fragmentary nature of our earliest manuscripts, for the places on most of them where titles would be found are damaged and lost. Nonetheless, early Christian writers attest that a Gospel called Mark had been written. Irenaeus, writing in the late second century, mentions all four Gospels by name (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1). So it seems clear that by the end of the second century all four Gospels had been written, were known by the names Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and were in circulation.
  9. The word used to describe John Mark's departure is *apochōreō*. While this word can simply mean “to leave,” it can also mean “to desert.” This word is used only two other times in the New Testament, and both times it describes a negative aspect of leaving. So Acts 13:13 supports the idea that John Mark may have abandoned Paul and Barnabas and left that particular ministry.
  10. This time the author of Acts uses a different Greek word to describe John Mark's departure—*apostanta* (from *aphistēmi*), which should sound familiar since it comes from the same root as the English word *apostasy*. This word gives an even stronger sense that John Mark did not originally leave his companions on good terms—or at least that Paul thought so. And so Acts 15 reports that Paul would not work with John Mark and that Barnabas and John Mark went to preach in Cyprus while Paul chose Silas to accompany him. This is the last we hear of John Mark in Acts. While it is clear there was some bad blood between Paul and John Mark, it is also clear that John Mark, while he may have deserted Paul, did not desert the faith but began another missionary effort with Barnabas.
  11. On the identity of Mark who is referred to as a “son” of Peter, see Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 355: “It appears more likely, however, that the phrase is figurative, pointing to one for whose entrance into the Christian faith Peter was responsible, as seems, for example, also to have been the case of Paul with Timothy. Yet the language of Paul is different, reducing the certainty of such a conclusion.”

12. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15; as found in Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 21–22. Papias’s writings have not survived but are preserved and passed on only through other writers, mainly the fourth-century Christian historian Eusebius of Caesarea.
13. See Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 18.
14. “Mark was one of the commonest names in the Roman Empire, as well-known personages such as the emperor Marcus Aurelius or the general Marcus Antonius (‘Mark Antony’) attest.” Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 17–18; see Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 355.
15. See S. Kent Brown, “The Testimony of Mark,” in *Studies in Scripture, Volume Five: The Gospels*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 61–64; and Strathearn and Judd, “Distinctive Testimonies,” 61.
16. See Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 17–18.
17. Brown, “Testimony of Mark,” 67.
18. See Brown, “Testimony of Mark,” 66.
19. Strathearn and Judd, “Distinctive Testimonies,” 61.
20. Strathearn and Judd, “Distinctive Testimonies,” 61.
21. See Peter M. Head, “Some Recently Published NT Papyri from Oxyrhynchus: An Overview and Preliminary Assessment,” *TynBul* 51, no. 1 (2000): 17.
22. See Strathearn and Judd, “Distinctive Testimonies,” 81–28.
23. Strathearn and Judd, “Distinctive Testimonies,” 65.
24. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1988), 1:144.
25. For a more complete discussion of formula quotations, see Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:573–77.
26. The earliest manuscript bearing the title “According to Matthew” is dated to around AD 200. As with Mark, it is not until we get to the grand majuscules of the fourth century, such as Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, that we finally find the full text of Matthew preserved.
27. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:138.
28. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:130.
29. Strathearn and Judd, “Distinctive Testimonies,” 69.
30. Marshall, *Luke*, 40.
31. Marshall, *Luke*, 39.
32. François Bovon, *Luke 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 9. See also Strathearn and Judd, “Distinctive Testimonies,” 69: “Because the name *Theophilus* was common among both Jews and Gentiles in the Greco-Roman world, most scholars conclude that Theophilus was a real person whom Luke knew personally.”
33. Strathearn and Judd, “Distinctive Testimonies,” 69.
34. Bovon, *Luke 1*, 9.
35. Marshall, *Luke*, 33.
36. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1; as found in Bovon, *Luke 1*, 9.
37. Marshall, *Luke*, 34.
38. Bovon, *Luke 1*, 9.
39. Strathearn and Judd, “Distinctive Testimonies,” 69–70.
40. Marshall, *Luke*, 34–35.
41. Marshall, *Luke*, 35.
42. For more information on the Q Hypothesis, see John S. Kloppenborg Verbin, *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).
43. For more information on the Farrer-Goulder Hypothesis, see Mark Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem: A Way Through the Maze* (London: Sheffield, 2001); Mark Goodacre, *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2002); and Mark Goodacre and Nicholas Perrin, eds., *Questioning Q: A Multidimensional Critique* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

44. Goodacre does have a retort for the problem of alternating primitivity. See Goodacre, *Synoptic Gospels*, 133–40 (he addresses the saying “Blessed are the poor in spirit” directly on pages 136–38). Additionally, in this case Q scholars rely on a theory claiming that a shorter reading is usually the earlier reading. This is an outdated theory that has largely been discarded.
45. Thomas A. Wayment, “A Viewpoint on the Supposedly Lost Gospel Q” *Religious Educator* 5, no. 3 (2004): 106.
46. Wayment, “Lost Gospel Q” 113–14.
47. Wayment, “Lost Gospel Q” 114. Michael Goulder, one of the main champions of the Farrer-Goulder Hypothesis, echoed Wayment’s sentiments that Q can be made to say anything, as is evident in the title of one of Michael D. Goulder’s articles: “Is Q a Juggernaut?,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115, no. 4 (1996): 667–81.
48. Strathearn and Judd, “Distinctive Testimonies,” 77.