

After my post yesterday about the “priority of Mark” (the view almost universally held among scholars that Mark was the first Gospel written and that Matthew and Luke used it for many of their own stories) I received a number of queries from readers about the “Q” source. So I better address that as well.

Matthew and Luke obviously share a number of stories with Mark, but they also share with each other a number of passages not found in Mark. Most of these passages (all but two of them) involve sayings of Jesus — for example, the Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer. Since they didn’t get these passages from Mark, where did they get them? Since the 19th century scholars have argued that Matthew did not get them from Luke or Luke from Matthew (for reasons I’ll suggest below); that probably means they got them from some other source, a document that no longer survives.

This came to be known as the “Sayings Source.” The scholars who developed this view were principally German, and the word in German for “source” is “Quelle.” And so, for short, scholars call this hypothetical lost document Q.

Some scholars have called into question this hypothetical document Q — especially my friend and colleague at Duke, Mark Goodacre, who is on the blog. But its existence is still held by the great majority of scholars as the most likely explanation for the accounts, mainly sayings, of Matthew and Luke not in Mark (as you might imagine, there are numerous other ways to explain these agreements: maybe Mark was first, then Matthew copied Mark, and then Luke copied both Matthew and Mark; or maybe Matthew was first and then Mark condensed Matthew and then Luke copied Matthew; maybe ... you could go on for a very long time).

The scholars who work deeply in this area get WAY down into the weeds, and I’m not going to go there. Instead I’ll explain simply why most scholars don’t think either Matthew or Luke was copying the other and discuss a few more interesting features of the lost Q source. Here is what I say about it in my discussion of the Synoptic Problem in my textbook on the New Testament:

Once Mark is established as prior to Matthew and Luke, the Q hypothesis naturally suggests itself. Matthew and Luke have stories not found in Mark, and in these stories they sometimes agree word for word. Whence do these stories come?

It is unlikely that ...

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