Today we transition from a consideration of the genre of narrative gospels to some basic observations about similarities and differences among the four canonical gospels, which are likely both the oldest gospels and the ones of greatest interest to most of us.

It takes only a moment of observation to conclude that these four gospels, even though they are all biographical narratives, align themselves in two groups. The first three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, exhibit characteristics that bind them closely. But that same set of characteristics marks them starkly different from the fourth gospel, John. I’ll give you an overview of some of the differences that distinguish these gospels.

Immediately noticeable is the difference in the form of Jesus’ words. While in the Synoptics we find Jesus’ sayings presented as short snippets juxtaposed to form a sequence of (typically) distinct units, in John we find Jesus giving extended discourses extending into multiple paragraphs. So the form of Jesus’ words in John is different than in the Synoptics.

Also noticeable is a different location for Jesus’ work. Whereas in the Synoptics Jesus spends most of his time in the Galilee, coming to Jerusalem only in the days leading up to his passion in John the story centers around at least three visits Jesus makes to Jerusalem over a two year period.

When we dig down beneath these surface level differences, however, we find a distinction also in the image of Jesus. In the Synoptics he is an enigmatic figure who deliberately hides his identity, focusing his preaching on the kingdom of God. In the Fourth Gospel, on the other hand, Jesus is highly self-revealing, openly identifying himself as the son of God in a much more elevated sense than in the Synoptics.

Also different in John is the primary theme of Jesus’ message, which in the Synoptics concerns the Kingdom of God that stands in contrast to the present age. In John, Jesus speaks of the Kingdom only three times, while the theme with corresponding prominence is eternal life, an idea that appears just a handful of times in the Synoptics.

Correlatively, the fundamental contrast built into Jesus’ message is no longer between the present and the future, as it is in the Synoptics, but between heaven and earth. And it is part of what defines who he is: he is the one sent from heaven, while his opponents are of earth.

Lastly, the nomenclature or terminology Jesus uses to distinguish himself and his followers from others is also distinctive. Whereas in the Synoptics, Jesus speaks in general terms of “the righteous,” on the one hand, and “the wicked” on the other, in the Fourth Gospel he speaks of himself as the “light” and his followers as “children of light,” while referring to those who reject his message as “belonging to” or “loving the darkness.”

In the final few weeks of the semester we’ll explore the Fourth Gospel and both notice and come to understand its distinctive form and message. For now, however, we’ll focus on Matthew, Mark and Luke, which must be considered as a set.

The main feature that aligns the first three gospels more closely to each other than to John is their presentation of Jesus’ words as formulated in “short snippets” rather than lengthy discourses. Even more strikingly, as you know, they are often nearly word-for-word identical in Matthew, Mark and Luke. E.g. each of these gospels relates a dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees, a religious renewal group in the first century, over Jesus’ disciples’ picking of grain on the sabbath, a form of work considered to be prohibited by the Torah.

We’ll start with Mark’s introduction to this dispute, in his second chapter: “One sabbath he was going through the grain fields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads
of grain. And the Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath.”

Now let’s bring alongside Matthew’s introduction to his version of this story: “At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath.”

The similarities between these reports are striking. Even though Matthew postpones stating that this dispute was on the sabbath, he agrees that this dispute took place while Jesus was walking through the grain fields. Moreover, his description of what the disciples were doing is virtually identical to Mark’s. And then both Matthew and Mark introduce the Pharisees’ objection to the disciples action with the word “Look.” Even though Matthew has them making a statement, in place of the question in Mark, he agrees with Mark that the Pharisees’ words are addressed to Jesus and concern the illicit behavior of the disciples.

When we bring Luke’s version of this dispute alongside, we notice that while his report of the Pharisees’ words is framed as a question, as in Mark, they are not addressed to Jesus, but to the disciples. Moreover, they lack the interjection “look” found in Matt and Mark.

At the same time, Luke begins his story by setting this dispute on a Sabbath day, even as Mark begins with that note, even though Matthew supplies it later. Moreover, while Luke agrees with both Matthew and Mark in speaking of Jesus passing through the grain fields, he agrees more explicitly with Mark in the words “he was going,” as opposed to Matthew’s “Jesus went.”

On the other hand, notice that while Luke agrees with Matthew and Mark in the statement about the disciples plucking heads of grain as they went, only he and Matthew explicitly say they ate the grain.

There are other similarities and differences across these parallel passages that we’ll notice in a moment, but I think we’ve seen enough to conclude that there is substantial agreement even if there are some noticeable differences. This sort of complex relationships, with a strong core of agreement, is characteristic of comparisons among these three gospels. And, by the way, we should note that this story finds no parallel in the gospel of John.

This pattern of Matthew, Mark and Luke sharing a passage with overarching agreements is known as “the triple tradition.” I.e. it is a tradition of Jesus’ words or actions present in three occasionally different, but clearly allied forms. However, the triple tradition is not the only pattern of agreements in the first three gospels. There are, as you know, occasions when only two of the gospels share a passage. Sometimes it is a matter of Matthew or Luke sharing a passage with Mark, as is the case with a story of Jesus healing a demon-possessed individual, which is found only in Mark 1 and Luke 4. Again, the large degree of overlap visible from the words in red indicates that there is some sort of common bond between Mark and Luke at this point. But instances of Mark sharing a passage with Matthew that is not in Luke, or sharing one with Matthew that is absent from Luke are fairly rare.

Far more frequent are the times Matthew and Luke share a passage that Mark doesn’t have, as in this admonition not to worry because God, who cares for the birds, will certainly take care of every need. Again, the preponderance of identical words shows that Matthew and Luke are allied in these words that they share. And the occasions of Matthew and Luke sharing material that Mark doesn’t contain are frequent – far more frequent than Mark sharing material with just Matthew or just Luke. This sort of pericope shared by only Matt and Luke is referred to as “the double tradition.”
Of course, there are also cases in which one gospel has something not found in either of the others. This is far more often the case with Matthew and Luke than with Mark. That is, rather frequently Matthew contains a pericope not found in Mark or Luke, and nearly as frequently Luke will contain a pericope not found in Matthew and Luke. But it is quite rare to find Mark using a pericope not found in one of the other two gospels (it happens a scant handful of times).

It is the ability to set passages in these first three gospels side-by-side so as to survey their similarities and differences that prompts calling them the synoptic gospels. Syn- is a prefix meaning “with” or “together” that we use in a number of words, such as “synthesis.” Optic, as you will recognize, has to do with sight. These are gospels that can be “seen together.”

As you know, there is a special tool for studying these gospels, unremarkably known as a Synopsis, the product of a scholar named Griesbach, whom we’ll encounter again a little later. It is him you should blame – rather than me – that you had to buy a copy.

As you have already seen, a synopsis not only places parallel synoptic passages side-by-side, but also aligns verbal parallels, enabling one to notice where the passages concur and diverge, making it an excellent tool for drawing conclusions about interrelationships.

And since we’ll be using this tool in studying the Synoptics, some instruction on how to use it is in order. You might want to mark this text in your own synopsis as we look at it, or at least take notes on the facsimile of this I asked you to download, so that you can review this process on your own, because you’ll be using it from here on out. Whenever you see an assignment in the Synopsis, you should mark and consider the assigned parallels before coming to class, because I’ll give those passages special attention in lecture.

The first observation to make when you study a passage is where Mark finds agreement in Matthew and Luke. It is useful to use a blue marker for this and underscore with a solid line every agreement in words and order in the triple tradition. Thus here I will underline in blue the phrase “through the grain fields,” shared by all three. In addition, Mark and Luke share the preceding phrase, “going through,” as well as mention of “the Sabbath” before that. You’ll notice that Matthew also mentions the Sabbath, but places it in a different position, for which reason I will mark it with a dotted blue line. Anytime you find a parallel to Mark that differs in position or formulation, use a dotted blue line to note that, because differences will become as important as similarities.

A similar situation occurs a few lines later, where all three have the phrase “heads of grain,” but only Matthew and Mark precede that with “began to pluck,” whereas Luke has the simple verb “plucked,” for which a dashed blue line is appropriate. We’ll see the utility of noting such differences as we make headway in the course.

Again, all three agree in the phrase “his disciples,” as well as the clause “the Pharisees said,” although only Matthew and Mark share the following prepositional phrase, “to him” and the interjection, “Look!” On the other hand, only Mark and Luke formulate the Pharisees objection as a question: “why are…?”

The three also share the clause, “doing what is not lawful on the sabbath.” However, you’ll notice that in the midst of this Matthew and Luke use the infinitive phrase “to do.” Each time you find verbal agreement between Matthew and Luke against Mark, mark it with a solid red line. Of course, we’ll also find instances in which Matthew and Luke have a parallel not in Mark, but with differences, as is the case with Matthew’s “and to eat,” parallel to Luke’s “and ate.” Use a dashed red line in such cases. We’ll talk about the significance of the occasional agreements between Matthew and Luke later. The point now is that a synopsis is a useful tool
for drawing conclusions about the way the evangelists composed their gospels, one we’ll use repeatedly.

Needless to say, recognizing that the Synoptics have parallel wording is not the same as accounting for why they do so. What explains the similarities and differences between parallel passages in these gospels?

One possibility is that all three Evangelists drew on affiliated oral traditions of Jesus’ words – i.e. recollections of Jesus’ words that were passed down mouth-to-mouth and received by each Evangelist in a slightly different form. That scenario would likely produce parallel passages that vary slightly, but have the same theme and substance, thus explaining the relationship between these three gospels.

A major problem for that hypothesis is the Gospel of John, since its sayings and stories are formulated radically different from the Synoptics. And it’s not simply that its passages don’t align with those in the Synoptics; i.e. it’s not just that John has different material than the Synoptics. Sometimes it shares pericopes with them in similar form, such as in a story about Jesus healing a paralyzed man, which in Mark reads, “he said to the paralytic – “I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them.” At this point you will want to follow along with this document, showing parallels not only between the Synoptics, but also with John.

Similar wording, not surprisingly, characterizes the Synoptics, although there are a few places that Matthew and Luke agree against Mark. In fact, Matthew’s and Luke’s use of “bed” for Mark’s “mat” is a good example of substituting a common word for a rare one, and is doubly significant since the two use different forms of a Greek word for bed, making it unlikely one of them copied the other and more likely it was a spontaneous choice by each.

On the whole, however, the agreements and disagreements here reflect common patterns in the Synoptics that we’ll talk more about. For now let’s notice the agreements of John with Mark, even in the word “mat.” Notice, also, that John agrees with Luke in beginning its second verse with “immediately,” although it should be noted that the two gospels use different Greek words for this adverb.

More significant, however, are the differences in wording between John and the Synoptics. The agreements in wording are not as extensive as between the Synoptics. And the numerous differences between John and the Synoptics is even more striking when we observe some features of the differences among the Synoptics in this pericope.

E.g. while Luke’s “immediately” has no parallel at this point in Matthew or Mark, notice that Mark uses “immediately” slightly later, at which point Luke does not have it. One might reasonably posit that one Evangelist, working from the other, simply shifted the position of this adverb. Of course, one could equally suggest that John makes the same maneuver, since he, like Luke, places “immediately” first. However, one other comparison between Mark and Luke confirms that the relationship between them is expressly literary.

Notice that Matthew, Mark and Luke agree that Jesus’ instruction to the man was “stand up, take your mat/bed and go to your home.” And corresponding to that, Matthew and Luke report that, after being healed, the man “went to his home.” Mark, on the other hand, has the cumbersome and less specific statement that the man “went out before all of them.” And yet, this phrase is not without parallel in either of the other Synoptics. Notice that just prior to this point in the story, Luke reads, “he stood up before them,” a phrase that (obviously) corresponds to Mark’s subsequent “before all of them.” And notice that this parallel stands just after Luke’s parallel to Mark’s adverb “immediately.”
Whichever gospel we judge dependent on the other as a source, it is difficult to evade the conclusion that we have to do with literary dependence here rather than reliance on the same oral tradition. And that is strengthened by the fact that both Matthew and Luke provide a more fitting conclusion than Mark’s awkward “went out before all of them.”

If we look for similar explanations for the relationship between John and the Synoptics, they are not obvious. In spite of the fact that John uses “immediately” in the same position as Luke, his version of Jesus’ command – “take up your mat and walk” – deviates from its form in the Synoptics, without any apparent explanation why it should do so on literary grounds. And notice that John replicates that phrase in the concluding clause, “and began to walk,” even as Matthew’s and Luke’s concluding clause corresponds to the command they share with Mark earlier, “go to your home.”

Similarly, there is no obvious literary relationship between the reports of the Synoptics that the man stood up and John’s report that “the man was made well.” The relationships between the Synoptics are much more of a literary type than the relationship between the form of this pericope in the Synoptics and that in John.

A similar set of comparisons and contrasts is found if we look at the setting given for this story in the four gospels. In the Synoptics this story is introduced as a special case of the paralytic’s friends bringing him to Jesus to be healed. According to Mark and Luke, his friends had to dig a hole in the roof of the house where Jesus was and lower the paralytic before Jesus; in Matthew they simply presented him to Jesus.

According to John, however, the healing of this paralytic takes place in Jerusalem at a pool known for its healing powers. And contrary to the good fortune of the paralytic in the Synoptics, this man has no friends to assist him, “no one to put me into the pool.”

What’s more, the outcome of this story in the Synoptics is that the crowds who witnessed it are amazed and express their astonishment at what Jesus has done. In John’s gospel, however, this story results in a dispute over Jesus healing this man on the sabbath.

So while the Synoptics and John share a story about Jesus healing a paralytic, both the words and the settings for this story bear a stronger relationship among the Synoptics than between the Synoptics and John, one more likely literary than based on shared oral tradition.

And there are other passages where John has material parallel to the Synoptics, but with notable differences, such as the pericope in the triple tradition where Peter crystallizes the disciples’ confession of Jesus’ identity: “15He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Despite some differences, the form and wording are recognizably the same.

While John lacks a precise parallel, chapter 6 reports a scene in which some disciples found Jesus’ teaching objectionable and left. Jesus turns to the twelve to question their loyalty: “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

While there are clear differences between this scene and the Synoptic pericope, it functions the same way and has the same outcome: Peter, speaking on behalf of the twelve, confesses belief in Jesus’ exalted status. Just as we find differences in the precise title in each of the Synoptics – simply “the Messiah” in Mark, “the Messiah of God” in Luke, and “the Messiah, the son of God” in Matthew – in John Peter confesses Jesus to be “the Holy One of God.” This sort of similarity to Synoptic material, but with a greater difference with the Synoptics than we find between the Synoptic parallels raises questions about how traditions about Jesus were transmitted – a topic to which we’ll turn again later. And the fact that the Synoptics’ versions in
such cases are closer to each other than to John suggests that while similar oral tradition can explain the similarities with John, literary dependence is the more likely explanation for parallels among the Synoptics.

Concluding that literary dependence is involved is not the end of the matter. The question is what sort of literary dependence exists? Who depends upon whom? Obviously, in essence, this question comes down to which gospel was written first. Which gospel author had which gospel or gospels in front of him as a source?

This question, known as the “Synoptic Problem,” is not an exclusively modern problem. Already around 400 C.E., Augustine, bishop of Hippo (in modern Algeria) conducted an exhaustive study of the four gospels, entitled “On the Harmony of the Gospels,” in which he noted the similarities among the first three and drew conclusions. His hypothesis about the order in which the gospels was written was based on church tradition rather than his own conclusions. The high esteem for Matthew in the church (especially the tradition that Matthew had been composed in Aramaic) led him to assume that it must have been written first. He concluded that Mark was dependent on Matthew, since it shares more in common with Matthew than with Luke, and that Luke depended on Mark; in fact, he characterized Mark as having epitomized Matthew. Later, however, he revised this view, having correctly noted that while Mark depended largely on Matthew, at times Mark drew also on Luke. His final understanding of the relationship between Matthew and Luke isn’t clear, although he appears to have assumed, in the end, that Luke followed Matthew, at times supplementing it or modifying it.

After Augustine, no one was much interested in trying to disentangle the connections between the Synoptics, since they were more interested in using the gospels in Christian dogmatics. When interest again arose in the interrelationships among the gospels in the 1700’s, Augustine’s solution found renewed interest.

In 1764 an English clergyman named Henry Owen published a little book on the gospels, with the thesis that Matthew was written first as a polemic to convince Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. Luke was written second, based on Matthew, for use in Paul’s missionary work among Gentiles. Mark’s gospel was composed as a synthesis of Matthew and Luke, so as to bridge the two and focus on what they had in common – a good Hegelian solution, even if it was propounded six years before Hegel’s birth (1770).

Owen’s work was the precursor to the work of Johann Griesbach (inventor of the synopsis) who, even though he never cites Owen’s volume, is known to have possessed it because he lists it in the catalog of his personal library. In any case, when Griesbach published his first major study in 1789, he espoused the same solution expounded by Owen, and became its leading proponent.

However, another solution to the Synoptic problem was already under development in Griesbach’s day and would ultimately become the prevailing hypothesis. In fact, Griesbach briefly noted the 1786 publication of Gottlob Christian Storr, who argued that Mark was the common source of Matthew and Luke. Thus, rather than Matthew being the first gospel composed, as had long been assumed, Mark was now cast in this role. This assertion of “Markan priority,” as it is called, is one of two fundamental components of the prevailing solution. But why did Markan priority come to gain broader acceptance than the traditional perception that Matthew was written first?

While it is true that Mark shares most of its material with Matthew, as Augustine noted, the relationship between Mark and Matthew, as well as between Mark and Luke, is more complicated than that. E.g. there are a number of stylistic infelicities found in Mark that have
been modified by Matthew and Luke in different ways. Most famously – or infamously – Mark repeatedly connects sentences with “and,” which quickly becomes monotonous. This feature isn’t always that obvious in translation, since translator’s are well aware of how tiring “and” can get. E.g. Mark 2:18 reads as follows: “And John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, ‘Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?’” Of course, some of these “and’s” make sense, such as those joining nouns to create a compound subject, as in “John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast.” The “and’s” that stick out, however, are those conjoining clauses, as at the beginning of the sentence, as well as “and people came and said to him.”

To show how this could be done differently, let’s compare Matthew and Luke. Notice that the only “and” in Matthew links a compound subject: “we and the Pharisees.” In Luke “and” appears only in set phrases: “fast and pray,” “eat and drink.” This is representative of the relationship between Mark, on the one side, and Matthew and Luke on the other. Given that the syntax of Matthew and Luke are characteristically more refined in this respect, the question becomes, why would Mark, if he were working off of Matthew or Luke, replace their smooth Greek style with a more choppy one?

This observation goes hand-in-hand with another stylistic feature: namely, Mark is typically more verbose than Matthew and Luke. Notice that Mark begins with a statement that provides background: “And John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting.”

In fact, Mark repeats this information in the objection addressed as a question to Jesus. In both Mark and Luke, those who raise this objection are an anonymous group (“people” or “they”). However, in Luke the information about John’s disciples and those of the Pharisees fasting is confined to the objection. Moreover, in Luke the objection is phrased as a statement rather than a question, matching the statement form of Mark’s introduction. So Luke’s portrayal of this conflict is more compact than Mark’s.

Turning to Matthew, we find that his version also lacks Mark’s background information. Moreover, whereas in Mark and Luke an anonymous group raises the objection, here the disciples of John pose the question. Because John’s disciples voice the question, Matthew’s version provides a streamlined form of the information Mark has not only at the outset, but also repeats in the objection.

As with the issue of multiple “ands” in Mark over against Matthew and Luke, this issue of verbosity is characteristic of Mark’s relationship to Matthew and Luke. While Mark shares virtually all its material with Matthew and/or Luke, its version is consistently more verbose. The logical inference is that Matthew and Luke have not only refined Mark’s style, but have also condensed his language.

In addition to these sorts of stylistic infelicities that are resolved by Matthew and Luke, there are also some striking conceptual infelicities in Mark that are likewise resolved in Matthew and Luke. The classic case, as Ehrman points out, is Mark 10:17-18: “17As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ 18Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.’” Jesus statement, without further ado, might easily be read as a denial that he was good. While Luke retains this form of the conversation (although condensing the initial lines a bit), when we turn to Matthew’s narrative of this incident, we read, “16Then someone came to him and said, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” 17And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good.” Notice that no longer does the inquirer address Jesus as “good teacher,” but asks “what good deed” he must do to gain eternal
life. And correspondingly, Jesus’ response, while still implying that only God is good, no longer deals with the question of his own goodness, but the question of “what is good.” But as Ehrman notes, this makes the subsequent assertion, “there is only one who is good,” an awkward appendage. In Mark and Luke, the statement, “No one is good but God alone” is a natural follow-up to the question, “Why do you call me good?” But in Matthew the assertion “there is only one who is good” has no relation to Jesus question, “Why do you ask me about what is good?”

What all these observations suggest is that Matthew modified the conversation reported in Mark to obviate an infelicity. (By the way, while in this case it might be possible to argue that Matthew was working off of Luke, the remaining evidence I will unfold supports the hypothesis that Matthew and Luke both drew on Mark here.)

Let’s turn to the periopec about Jesus returning to his hometown of Nazareth, only to find that the people refuse to accept him as anything special. Mark reports, “And Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.” The statement “he could do no deed of power” suggests that Jesus was somehow ineffectual, almost as if there were some sort of failure on his part.

When we compare Matthew’s version of this story, we find an interesting modification. First, no longer is Jesus unable to perform miracles, he simply does not. Moreover, Matthew describes this as Jesus’ own decision, based on the people’s failure by directly linking the report that Jesus did not do miracles with “because of their unbelief,” which in Mark is simply the reason for Jesus’ astonishment at his hometown folk.

If we turn to Luke’s parallel, we find that he preserves a version of Jesus’ words about no prophet receiving honor in his hometown, but lacks any version of the report about Jesus’ inability to perform miraculous deeds.

So one of the arguments for Markan priority is the way that Matthew and Luke finesse these sorts of conceptual infelicities in Mark. As with the stylistic infelicities, these suggest that Matthew and Luke attempted to polish Mark’s gospel, smoothing its rough edges.

Another observation that has been apparent in the passages we’ve examined, although I have not pointed it out, is that when there is agreement in the triple tradition, only rarely do you find Matthew and Luke agreeing against Mark; typically it is Matthew and Mark agreeing against Luke, or Luke and Mark against Matthew.

E.g. in the passage we looked at few moments ago, Matthew and Mark both phrase the objection addressed to Jesus as a question, while Luke phrases it as a statement. Moreover, whereas both Matthew and Mark make the contrast to the fasting of John’s disciples and the Pharisees the charge that Jesus’ “disciples do not fast,” Luke formulates the contrast in terms of their “eating and drinking.”

However, there are also a couple of ways Luke agrees with Mark against Matthew. As we’ve already observed, Luke retains Mark’s extended statement in the objection and he keeps it on the lips of an anonymous group, whereas Matthew compresses the words and places them on the lips of John’s disciples.

There is only one apparent agreement between Matthew and Luke: their qualification of “fasting” with the adverb “often.” However, this is apparent only in English since, while both of them supply an adverb expressing frequency, they use two different Greek words. So while the
two authors had the same impulse to qualify the verb “fasting,” their use of different words to do so indicates that they were working independently of each other.

This pattern of agreements – Mark and Matthew against Luke or Mark and Luke against Matthew – is commonplace in the Synoptics and supports the hypothesis of Markan priority. There are refinements to be made to this argument, but I’ll save those for next time.

Another observation in favor of Markan priority has to do with the order of the narrative.

Matt interrupts the story of Jesus’ work for a report about Herod: “1At that time Herod the ruler heard reports about Jesus; 2and he said to his servants, “This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him.”

Matthew then explains why Herod drew this conclusion: 3For Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, “because John had been telling him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” The outcome of this story is that Herod beheads John, and so now, faced with reports of Jesus, Herod fears that his action might be coming back to haunt him.

If we turn to the Gospel of Mark, we find a similar interruption of the story: “But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.” And, like Matthew, Mark provides background: “For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” Both Matthew and Mark explain Herod’s fears by recounting John’s fate.

More strikingly, both Evangelists place this story after Jesus’ visit to Nazareth, recounted in Matt 13 and Mark 6, while Luke transfers the story of Jesus’ visit to his hometown to the beginning of Jesus work, just after his wilderness temptations. Nevertheless he places in v. 24 a version of the statement about prophets not being accepted in their hometown.

Intervening in Mark between Jesus’ visit to Nazareth and the report of Herod’s fears, is an account of Jesus commissioning his disciples and sending them out. Curiously, even though Luke lacked at this spot in his narrative the story of Jesus’ visit to Nazareth, he does place an account of this commissioning in chapter 9, just before his report of Herod’s inference about Jesus being John the Baptist returned from the dead.

On the other hand, if we look in Matthew 13 for the commissioning of the disciples on the heels of the report about Jesus’ visit to Nazareth, we find it missing. It is located, instead, in Matthew 10, where it is joined with Jesus’ choice of the twelve disciples.

In other words – to spell this out more clearly using this chart I asked you to bring – Mark has this sequence near the middle of his gospel: first, a story about Jesus’ visit to his hometown of Nazareth and his rejection, followed by a story about Jesus commissioning and dispatching his disciples, followed in turn by the report about Herod’s fears, for which Mark provides as an explanation a report of John’s fate.

When we bring alongside this Luke’s sequence at the comparable spot in his narrative, we find that he has parallels to Jesus commissioning and dispatching of his disciples, followed immediately by Herod’s surmise about Jesus’ identity. You’ll notice that he omits the background information about John’s death, but there is a good reason for that: he provided that information in chapter 3, so that it would be redundant here.

We’ve already noted that Luke transfers Jesus’ visit to his hometown to the beginning of his story, so that its absence here is intelligible. Matthew, on the other hand, agrees with Mark in placing Jesus’ visit to Nazareth later. And while he transfers Jesus’ commissioning and dispatch of the disciples to chapt 10, Luke has that story in the same location as Mark: just before the
report of Herod’s inference about Jesus. It is there that Matthew rejoins Mark and Luke, and then has, parallel to Mark alone, the story of John’s fate as an explanation of Herod’s speculation about Jesus.

In what follows that explanation, Mark and Luke, who earlier related the story of the disciples’ commission and dispatch, next have a statement of their return and their report to Jesus about their work.

Because Matthew, on the other hand, placed the commissioning story earlier, he gives instead a statement that John’s disciples, after caring for his body, report John’s death to Jesus. In each case, the variation in order is always away from Mark, whose order remains the common element.

The argument from order is thus a matter of varied agreements in the triple tradition, with Mark’s order always the stable member. Mark’s narrative sets the agenda, thus pointing to it as the earliest gospel, on which the other two relied in composing theirs.

I have presented, then, four of the strongest arguments for Markan priority: stylistic infelicities that are smoothed out in Matthew and Luke; conceptual infelicities that are similarly modified; the typical agreement in wording between Matthew and Luke with Mark, but seldom with each other; and the narrative order of Mark as the stable element.

And yet, while Markan priority is widely accepted as the most likely solution to the Synoptic problem, there are still those who find Griesbach’s conclusion, in agreement with Augustine, that Matthew was composed first, while Luke was composed from it. Mark was a subsequent condensation of the two, drawing together the material common to the first two. This explanation has come to be called “The Two-Gospel Hypothesis,” inasmuch as it posits the pivotal importance of Matthew and Luke, with Mark a synthesis of them.

Next time we’ll consider how the “Two Gospel Hypothesis” responds to the arguments for Markan priority and see if there is any basis for reasserting Markan priority in the face of their observations.