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The Synoptic Gospels: Problems & Patterns

The traditional assumption regarding the composition of the Synoptics is that each gospel represents an independent tradition from either an apostle of Jesus or from someone who knew an apostle. But there are passages in the Synoptics that clearly show a literary relationship- they are not just telling the same story, but telling it with the same (or essentially the same) words. Stories/sayings that are similar and in all three gospels are called **the triple tradition**. Below are some examples of stories that fall into this category. In some cases, the similarity is substantial. In other cases, it is debated if the stories are referring to the same event.

Directions: Below are stories in synoptic parallel. For each set of stories,

1. draw a solid line under the passages that are exactly the same in all three versions.
2. draw a dashed line under the passages that only two gospels have in common.
3. draw a dotted line under the passages that are unique to one gospel.
4. Alternatively, you might try different colored pens or highlighters to indicate each type of material.

The Healing of the Leper

MK 1:40-45

A leper came to him (and kneeling down) begged him and said, "If you wish, you can make me clean."
Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, "I do will it. Be made clean."
The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean.
Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once.
Then he said to him, "See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them."
The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter. He spread the report abroad so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He remained outside in deserted places, and people kept coming to him from everywhere.

MT 8:2-4

And then a leper approached, did him homage, and said, "Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean."
He stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I will do it. Be made clean." His leprosy was cleansed immediately.
Then Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one, but go show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them."

LK 5:12-16

Now there was a man full of leprosy in one of the towns where he was; and when he saw Jesus, he fell prostrate, pleaded with him, and said, "Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean."
Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I do will it. Be made clean." And the leprosy left him immediately.
Then he ordered him not to tell anyone, but "Go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them."
The report about him spread all the more, and great crowds assembled to listen to him and to be cured of their ailments, but he would withdraw to deserted places to pray.

The Call of Levi/ Matthew

MK 2:14-17

As he passed by, he saw Levi, son of Alphaeus, sitting at the customs post. He said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.
While he was at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners sat with Jesus and his disciples; for there were many who followed him. Some scribes who were Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors and said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"
Jesus heard this and said to them (that), "Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners."

MT 9:9-13

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the customs post. He said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.
While he was at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat with Jesus and his disciples.
The Pharisees saw this and said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"
He heard this and said, "Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do.
Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' I did not come to call the righteous but sinners."

LK 5:27-32

After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the customs post. He said to him, "Follow me."
And leaving everything behind, he got up and followed him.
Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were at table with them.
The Pharisees and their scribes complained to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"
Jesus said to them in reply, "Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners."

Jesus' True Family

MK 3:31-35

His mother and his brothers arrived. Standing outside they sent word to him and called him. A crowd seated around him told him, "Your mother and your brothers (and your sisters) are outside asking for you."
But he said to them in reply, "Who are my mother and (my) brothers?"
And looking around at those seated in the circle he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. (For) whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

MT 12:46-50

While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers appeared outside, wishing to speak with him.
(Someone told him, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, asking to speak with you.")
But he said in reply to the one who told him, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?"
And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother."

LK 8:19-21

Then his mother and his brothers came to him but were unable to join him because of the crowd. He was told, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside and they wish to see you."
He said to them in reply, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it."

The Rejection at Nazareth

MK 6:1-6

He departed from there and came to his native place, accompanied by his disciples.
When the sabbath came he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What kind of wisdom has been given him? What mighty deeds are wrought by his hands!
Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.
Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house."
So he was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them.
He was amazed at their lack of faith. He went around to the villages in the vicinity teaching.

MT 13:54-58

He came to his native place and taught the people in their synagogue. They were astonished and said, "Where did this man get such wisdom and mighty deeds?
Is he not the carpenter's son? Is not his mother named Mary and his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas?
Are not his sisters all with us? Where did this man get all this?"
And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and in his own house."
And he did not work many mighty deeds there because of their lack of faith.

LK 4:16-30

He came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the sabbath day. He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written:
"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord."
Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him.
He said to them, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."
And all spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They also asked, "Isn't this the son of Joseph?"
He said to them, "Surely you will quote me this proverb, 'Physician, cure yourself,' and say, 'Do here in your native place the things that we heard were done in Capernaum.'"
And he said, "Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place.
Indeed, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the sky was closed for three and a half years and a severe famine spread over the entire land.
It was to none of these that Elijah was sent, but only to a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon.
Again, there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha the prophet; yet not one of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."
When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were all filled with fury.
They rose up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town had been built, to hurl him down headlong.
But he passed through the midst of them and went away.

The Calming of the Sea

MK 4:35-41

On that day, as evening drew on, he said to them, "Let us cross to the other side."
Leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat just as he was. And other boats were with him.
A violent squall came up and waves were breaking over the boat, so that it was already filling up. Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion. They woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"
He woke up, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Quiet! Be still!" The wind ceased and there was great calm.
Then he asked them, "Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?"
They were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?"

MT 8:23-27

He got into a boat and his disciples followed him. Suddenly a violent storm came up on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by waves; but he was asleep.
They came and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!"
He said to them, "Why are you terrified, O you of little faith?"
Then he got up, rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was great calm.
The men were amazed and said, "What sort of man is this, whom even the winds and the sea obey?"

LK 8:22-25

One day he got into a boat with his disciples and said to them, "Let us cross to the other side of the lake." So they set sail, and while they were sailing he fell asleep. A squall blew over the lake, and they were taking in water and were in danger.
They came and woke him saying, "Master, master, we are perishing!" He awakened, rebuked the wind and the waves, and they subsided and there was a calm.
Then he asked them, "Where is your faith?" But they were filled with awe and amazed and said to one another, "Who then is this, who commands even the winds and the sea, and they obey him?"

The Rich Man

MK 10:17-22

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up, knelt down before him, and asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"
Jesus answered him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.
You know the commandments: 'You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and your mother.'" He replied and said to him, "Teacher, all of these I have observed from my youth."
Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, "You are lacking in one thing. Go, sell what you have, and give to (the) poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."
At that statement his face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions.

MT 19:16-22

Now someone approached him and said, "Teacher, what good must I do to gain eternal life?"
He answered him, "Why do you ask me about the good? There is only One who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments."
He asked him, "Which ones?" And Jesus replied, "'You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother'; and 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"
The young man said to him, "All of these I have observed. What do I still lack?"
Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to (the) poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."
When the young man heard this statement, he went away sad, for he had many possessions.

LK 18:18-23

An official asked him this question, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"
Jesus answered him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.
You know the commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; you shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother.'"
And he replied, "All of these I have observed from my youth."
When Jesus heard this he said to him, "There is still one thing left for you: sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."
But when he heard this he became quite sad, for he was very rich.

The Anointing

MK 14:3-9

When he was in Bethany reclining at table in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of perfumed oil, costly genuine spikenard. She broke the alabaster jar and poured it on his head.
There were some who were indignant. "Why has there been this waste of perfumed oil? It could have been sold for more than three hundred days' wages and the money given to the poor." They were infuriated with her.
Jesus said, "Let her alone. Why do you make trouble for her? She has done a good thing for me. The poor you will always have with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them, but you will not always have me.
She has done what she could. She has anticipated anointing my body for burial.
Amen, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

MT 26:6-13

Now when Jesus was in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper,
a woman came up to him with an alabaster jar of costly perfumed oil, and poured it on his head while he was reclining at table.
When the disciples saw this, they were indignant and said, "Why this waste?
It could have been sold for much, and the money given to the poor."
Since Jesus knew this, he said to them, "Why do you make trouble for the woman? She has done a good thing for me.
The poor you will always have with you; but you will not always have me.
In pouring this perfumed oil upon my body, she did it to prepare me for burial.
Amen, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be spoken of, in memory of her."

LK 7:36-38

A Pharisee invited him to dine with him, and he entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at table.
Now there was a sinful woman in the city who learned that he was at table in the house of the Pharisee. Bringing an alabaster flask of ointment, she stood behind him at his feet weeping and began to bathe his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with the ointment.

Peter's Confession & The First Passion Prediction

MK 8:27-33

Now Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea Philippi. Along the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They said in reply, "John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others one of the prophets." And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter said to him in reply, "You are the Messiah." Then he warned them not to tell anyone about him. He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days. He spoke this openly. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. At this he turned around and, looking at his disciples, rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."

MT 16:13-23

When Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter said in reply, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus said to him in reply, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Then he strictly ordered his disciples to tell no one that he was the Messiah. From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, "God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you." He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."

LK 9:18-22

Once when Jesus was praying in solitude, and the disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" They said in reply, "John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, 'One of the ancient prophets has arisen.'" Then he said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter said in reply, "The Messiah of God." He rebuked them and directed them not to tell this to anyone. He said, "The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised."

The Great Tribulation

MK 13:14-23

"When you see the desolating abomination standing⁴ where he should not (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, (and) a person on a housetop must not go down or enter to get anything out of his house, and a person in a field must not return to get his cloak. Woe to pregnant women and nursing mothers in those days. Pray that this does not happen in winter. For those times will have tribulation such as has not been since the beginning of God's creation until now, nor ever will be. If the Lord had not shortened those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect whom he chose, he did shorten the days. If anyone says to you then, 'Look, here is the Messiah! Look, there he is!' do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will arise and will perform signs and wonders in order to mislead, if that were possible, the elect. Be watchful! I have told it all to you beforehand.

MT 24:15-25

When you see the desolating abomination spoken of through Daniel the prophet standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, a person on the housetop must not go down to get things out of his house, a person in the field must not return to get his cloak. Woe to pregnant women and nursing mothers in those days. Pray that your flight not be in winter or on the sabbath, for at that time there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will be. And if those days had not been shortened, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect they will be shortened. If anyone says to you then, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will arise, and they will perform signs and wonders so great as to deceive, if that were possible, even the elect. Behold, I have told it to you beforehand.

LK 21:20-24

"When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, know that its desolation is at hand. Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains. Let those within the city escape from it, and let those in the countryside not enter the city, for these days are the time of punishment when all the scriptures are fulfilled. Woe to pregnant women and nursing mothers in those days, for a terrible calamity will come upon the earth and a wrathful judgment upon this people. They will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken as captives to all the Gentiles; and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.