

**A Comparison of the Baptism of  
Jesus Narratives in the Synoptic Gospels:  
Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, and Luke 3:21-22**

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The comparison of gospel pericopae goes back as far as the third century C.E. when Ammonius of Alexandria first put parallel passages from Mark and Luke in the margins of Matthew<sup>1</sup>. However, this was not a popular practice and the traditional order of the gospels was taken for granted until the eighteenth century, when scholars noticed that there was a literary relationship between the first three gospels. The order that early scholars gave to the gospels was that of Matthean priority with Luke using Matthew as a source and with Mark<sup>2</sup>, who wrote last, using both Matthew and Luke as sources. This is what we now refer to as the Greisbach hypothesis. Many modern scholars on the synoptic gospels hold to a model called the two-source theory. This theory states that Mark wrote first, and that Matthew and Luke independently used Mark as a source, as well as a lost sayings gospel referred to as Q<sup>3</sup>. While the two source theory has maintained popularity throughout the last century, the Greisbach hypothesis has recently had a resurgence. This resurgence has made it necessary to re-evaluate the synoptic problem, and to ask again which gospel is the one on which the other two rely. It must first, however, be shown that there is a literary relationship between the first three gospels. This will be accomplished by evaluating a pericope in detail. This paper will evaluate, in depth, the pericope of the Baptism of Jesus in order to establish which gospel is the one on which the other two rely.

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<sup>1</sup> Wikenhauser, Alfred ed. *New Testament Introduction*. Translated by J. Cunningham. Freiburg: Herder Co. GMBH, 1958.

<sup>2</sup> While authorship is a highly controversial topic, it is not discussed in this paper. Therefore, for the purpose of simplification the names Matthew, Mark, and Luke will be used to fill in for whoever the author may actually be.

<sup>3</sup> In a paper dealing with the synoptic problem, one would expect a discussion of Q material. However the purpose of this essay is primarily to deal with the pericope of the baptism of Jesus and since there is no Q material in this pericope, a discussion of Q would be superfluous for our purpose and thus will be left out. For arguments for Q see Kloppenborg, John. *Excavating Q*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd, 2000.

The priority of one gospel over another can be determined by using the standard internal criteria for textual criticism. In textual criticism there is certain assumption called *lectio difficilior probabilior* (the difficult reading is the more probable). Scribes would tend to change the text to be more correct or more palatable and not vice versa. Therefore the more difficult reading is probably the most authentic. In this same way these assumptions can be applied to source criticism. The most difficult reading is probably the original and, therefore, the source, while the reading that smoothes over the problems of the earlier document must have used it as a source.

However, it must be shown that there is indeed a literary relationship between the first three gospels before it can be shown that there is a relationship in this pericope. Approximately eighty percent of Mark is paralleled in Matthew and about sixty-five percent of Mark is paralleled in Luke.<sup>4</sup> In the triple tradition material, when Luke and Matthew agree, they almost always agree with Mark and very rarely against Mark<sup>5</sup>. The number of verbatim or near-verbatim agreements suggests that there must be a literary relationship. However, there is also an argument to be made from the order in which the authors arrange their material. Matthew and Luke usually follow the order of Mark but they very rarely agree against Markan order. This is not just a matter of chance; this can only be because of a direct literary dependence between the gospels.

More specifically, one can assume that there is a literary relationship between the first three gospels by dealing with the pericope of the baptism of Jesus. Of the 194 words in this pericope 63 words are in triple agreement, or 32%. The Matthean version contains 98 words of which 32 words are shared with Mark (33%) and 64 words are original to Matthew (63%). The Lukan version contains 43 words, of which 27 words agree with Mark (63%) and 14 words are original to Luke (28%). Only 17 words of 53 (32%) in Mark are not paralleled in the other gospels. Thus 68% of Mark appears in the other two gospels. There are only two words that Matthew and Luke agree upon against Mark. Therefore, it can be concluded that a definite literary relationship exists. Furthermore it appears that the Markan material is the material common to all three. However, the agreements and disagreements in this pericope must first be analyzed before judgment can be made.

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<sup>4</sup>Neiryneck, Frans, "The Synoptic Problem." *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Raymond E, Brown, et al., eds. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1990. pg 588.

<sup>5</sup> To be sure that terminology is clear triple tradition material are those pericopae shared by all three synoptic gospels.

To be sure that all types of agreement are clear, examples are needed of triple agreement as well as of places where only Mark and Luke agree, where only Mark and Matthew agree, and where only Matthew and Luke agree. Triple agreement is where all three of the synoptic gospels agree verbatim or *ad sensum*. One such example is where all three have that the spirit came down “as a dove”.<sup>6</sup> Matthew uses the adverb ὡσεί, while Mark and Luke simply use ὡς. However, this material is, none the less, an example of triple agreement *ad sensum*. Another example is the voice saying that Jesus is “my son, the beloved,” and also that the voice delights in Jesus. Matthew has the voice speaking in the third person, while Luke and Mark use the second person. However, the saying “my son the beloved”<sup>7</sup> is common in all three gospels. Agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark only are very rare in this pericope, as it only happens twice. The first instance is the choice of the verb ἀνοίγω (to open) in place of Mark’s use of the verb σχίζω (to split). The final one in this pericope is where Matthew and Luke describe the spirit’s descent as “upon” Jesus, using the preposition ἐπι (upon) instead of the preposition εἰς (into), which Mark uses.

Also important for determining the priority of one gospel over another are those places where Mark and Luke agree against Matthew, those places where Mark and Matthew agree against Luke, material original to Luke, and material original to Matthew. This is where one can observe how Matthew and Luke changed Mark’s gospel. Luke and Mark agree against Matthew in having the voice from heaven speak to Jesus in the second person instead of in the third person. Matthew and Mark agree against Luke in mentioning that Jesus came from Galilee. They also agree in mentioning that the spirit descended on Jesus immediately after he came out from the water.<sup>8</sup> Material original to Matthew includes the addition of the conversation between Jesus and John, as well as Matthew writing that the spirit was not just any spirit but “the Spirit of God.”<sup>9</sup> Original Lukan material includes the addition of Jesus praying before the spirit came down, and also Luke’s description of the spirit being “the Holy Spirit.”<sup>10</sup> These agreements show that there is indeed a literary dependence between these

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<sup>6</sup> ὡς περιστεράν

<sup>7</sup> ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός

<sup>8</sup> Again this is another place where Matthew and Mark use different forms of the verb and a different preposition however they do agree *ad sensum*.

<sup>9</sup> [τὸ] πνεῦμα [τουῦ] Θεοῦ

<sup>10</sup> τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον

three texts and it is in these agreements and disagreements that the key to the prior gospel lies.

The first significant disagreement in this pericope is the addition of the conversation between John and Jesus, which only appears in Matthew. Mark, after saying in 1:4 that John was, “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,”<sup>11</sup> writes, only five verses later, that “Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John.”<sup>12</sup> Matthew states in 3:11 that John’s baptism is “for repentance.”<sup>13</sup> It would have been problematic for the Matthean community<sup>14</sup> to move directly into the baptism narrative, yet this is not problematic for Mark. Matthew gets around this by inserting, in verses 14 and 15, a conversation in which John is not willing to baptize Jesus. However, Jesus commands John, “permit it at this present time, for in this way it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness.”<sup>15</sup> Thus Matthew justifies how Jesus could have been baptized by John, whose baptism was “for repentance.”<sup>16</sup> The Markan reading seems to say that Jesus was baptized for the forgiveness of sins. If Mark wrote first, Matthew must have interpreted Mark as saying that Jesus had sin and thus would have changed it. The reading of the gospel *according to Mark* is the more difficult reading in this instance; on the basis of *lectio difficilior*, this change supports the conclusion that Mark wrote first.

The next significant change to the Markan text is Luke’s omission of John’s name from his version of the Baptism of Jesus. The fact that the lesser (John) baptized the greater (Jesus) would have probably been problematic for the Lukan community, similar to the Matthean community. However, Luke dealt with it in a very different way than Matthew. Luke states in 3:3, that John’s baptism was, “a baptism of repentance for the

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<sup>11</sup> κηρύσσω βάντισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν All quotes from the New Testament are my translations from Aland, Kurt, et al., ed. *The Greek New Testament*, 4<sup>th</sup> rev ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994.

<sup>12</sup> ἦλθεν Ἰησοῦς ἀπὸ Ναζαρέτ τῆς Γαλιλαίας καὶ καὶ εβαπίσθη εἰς τὸν Ἰορδάνην ὑπὸ Ἰωάννου

<sup>13</sup> εἰς μετάνοιαν

<sup>14</sup> Mentioning community runs into the area of redaction criticism. This essay does not allow for a lengthy explanation of, or a discussion about redaction criticism. However, mentioning the community is important to provide a reason for the changes to the source. It is assumed that the reader has a certain understanding of redaction criticism. For a concise discussion of redaction criticism see Perrin, Norman. *What is Redaction Criticism*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969.

<sup>15</sup> Ἄφες ἄπρι, οὕτως γὰρ πρέπον ἐστὶν ἡμῖν πληρῶσαι πᾶσαν δικαιοσύνην

<sup>16</sup> It becomes even more apparent that Mark’s text was problematic for the early church when one looks at how later writers justified this narrative for their community. For example in *The Gospel of the Hebrews* when the Mother of Jesus says they should go be baptized Jesus replies, “How have I sinned? So why should I go and get baptized by him?” Fragment quoted by Jerome, *Against the Pelagians 3*, in Robert Miller et al., ed. *The Complete Gospels*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994. pg 431.

forgiveness of sins.”<sup>17</sup> Much like Matthew, Luke does not move directly into saying that Jesus was baptized by John but, instead of adding a long narrative to explain how Jesus could have been baptized by John, Luke simply takes John out of his narrative. In Luke’s gospel, John is arrested immediately before the baptism narrative in 3:19-20, which leads to the conclusion that John did not baptize Jesus in Luke.

It could, however, be argued that opening the story with an aorist passive infinitive, βαπτισθῆναι, and then using an aorist participle, βαπτισθέντος, to describe the baptism of Jesus, refers back to a time before the arrest. However, Luke begins his gospel (in 1:3) by stating that his purpose is to write “in consecutive order” (καθεξῆς). Καθεξῆς is a word that only appears twice in Luke and three times in Acts. It always refers to one thing following another in an order of sequence. In Luke 8:1 Καθεξῆς is used to denote something coming directly afterward. In Acts 3:24 it is used to describe the successors of Samuel, and in Acts 11:4 Καθεξῆς is used to explain how Peter explained his vision, which is in a successive order. Finally in Acts 18:23 Καθεξῆς is used to describe Paul’s journey in Galatia to say that Paul did journeyed successively from one order to another. In all these contexts it is always used to show describe one event following another in consecutive order or in succession. To make the argument that Luke was referring back to an earlier moment before John’s arrest, one must explain why he intentionally moved the arrest of John before the baptism, when the other two evangelists put it much later in their gospels. One must also explain why Luke would write that his gospel was to be in consecutive order and then later on mixed up the order. Both of these issues are problematic for that stance. It is more logical that Luke deliberately omitted John from the baptism narrative.

Based simply on an analysis of the Lukan narrative, it is not possible to know who baptized Jesus, or “all the people.” The strongest case is that, according to Luke, John was arrested prior to the baptism narrative and someone else baptized Jesus. However, if one is convinced that John baptizes Jesus in Luke, it can still be concluded that Luke was uncomfortable mentioning John’s name after writing that John’s baptism was for repentance. Therefore, Luke made it intentionally ambiguous to smooth over issues which developed later and which an earlier writer would have been oblivious to. Here again Mark is the more difficult reading.

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<sup>17</sup> βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν

Only a few words later an agreement occurs between Matthew and Luke only. After Jesus is baptized, all three accounts agree that somehow the heavens opened. However, it is their choice of diction that is different. Matthew and Luke, while disagreeing in number, agree in the use of the word ἀνοίγω (to open) against Mark's use of the word σχίζω. Mark's verb σχίζω is less common and is awkward in this circumstance. The verb σχίζω only appears nine times in the New Testament, and only in the Gospels and Acts<sup>18</sup>. The word means to split, tear or divide. In the gospels it is usually used to describe a physical split such as the split of the veil in the temple.<sup>19</sup> In the book of Acts it is used to describe the act of religious division, such as that between the Sadducees and the Pharisees.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the verb ἀνοίγω is used seventy-six times in the New Testament, and is simply the common word to describe opening. The verb ἀνοίγω is much more common to describe the opening of the sky in the New Testament. John uses ἀνοίγω in this way in 1:51, which contains the phrase, "you will see the heaven having opened."<sup>21</sup> Even more vivid is an example from the LXX in Ezekiel 1:1, "and the heavens opened, and I saw visions of God."<sup>22</sup> This demonstrates that the verb ἀνοίγω was known to the authors, through the LXX, as the common word for storm theophany.<sup>23</sup> There are, however, no examples in the New Testament of the verb σχίζω being used referring to the opening of the sky. Luke and Matthew simply changed a word that is awkward to a word that is common for this context.

Moving on, there is an example where none of the three gospels agree. Mark's gospel only states that τὸ πνεῦμα (the spirit) descended on Jesus. Matthew writes that spirit was the "spirit of God,"<sup>24</sup> while Luke uses the term "the Holy Spirit."<sup>25</sup> Luke never uses the phrase "spirit of God," but instead he uses the phrase "Holy Spirit" thirteen times. Matthew uses the expression "spirit of God" only twice, while he uses the phrase "Holy Spirit" five times. It seems that these phrases may just be stylistic to the authors. However, the problem is not necessarily in the frequency these expressions are used, but how the word πνεῦμα alone is used in each gospel. Mark uses the word πνεῦμα to describe any kind of spirit, holy or

<sup>18</sup>In such a short study it is not possible to analyze in depth every time the word is used but if the reader wishes to the references are Matt 27:51; Mark 1:10, 15:38; Luke 5:36, 23:45; John 19:24, 21:11; Acts 14:4, 23:7.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 27:51 and Mark 15:38

<sup>20</sup> Acts 23:7

<sup>21</sup> ὄψεσθε τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνεῳγῶτα

<sup>22</sup> καὶ ἠνοιχθησαν οἱ οὐρανοὶ, καὶ εἶδον ὀράσεις θεοῦ. Alfred Rahlfs, ed. *Septuaginta*, 5th ed. Stuttgart: Privilegierte württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1935.

<sup>23</sup> For another example, from what we now call the Deuterocanon, see 3 Maccabees 6:18.

<sup>24</sup> [τὸ] πνεῦμα [τοῦ] Θεοῦ

<sup>25</sup> τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον

unclean. Matthew and Luke often clarify by describing unclean spirits as δαιμόνιον (demon or evil spirit). This case is special in that it begins the ministry of Jesus and is the blessing of God onto his son. Therefore, Matthew and Luke cannot allow any ambiguity in who this spirit is; thus they qualify the word. On the other hand, using the word πνεῦμα to describe the Spirit of God was not problematic for the Markan community. This could be simply because the Markan community did not find the word πνεῦμα as problematic, as did the Christian communities of Matthew and Luke. On the basis of *lectio difficilior* Mark would have to have been prior for Matthew and Luke to change it.

However before Markan priority is assumed there is a second example of agreement between Matthew and Luke against Mark that must be analyzed. Matthew and Luke use the preposition ἐπι (upon) as opposed to Mark's use of εἰς (into or upon) to describe the spirit's descending on Jesus. In Classical Greek εἰς means "into"; however, in Koine "on" and "upon" are common meanings for εἰς with the accusative. This is the meaning of εἰς that is intended here. The use of εἰς here was controversial in the early church. This can be demonstrated by the textual variants surrounding this word. The majority of the manuscripts, including א Θ Byz,<sup>26</sup> have the ἐπι in Mark instead of εἰς. These scribes must have understood εἰς as "upon" and then changed it to ἐπι, so as to not allow the interpretation that the spirit came "into" Jesus at his baptism.<sup>27</sup> In this same way Matthew and Luke may have been motivated to change εἰς to ἐπι.

The final significant disagreement in these narratives is in the question of who heard the voice at the end of this pericope. The voice in Mark speaks in the second person, saying "you are my son the beloved, in you I delight".<sup>28</sup> The voice addresses Jesus alone; Mark gives no reason to assume that anyone else, except Jesus, knew that this vision was taking place. The voice from heaven in Luke is also in the second person; in fact,

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<sup>26</sup> For those not familiar with the critical apparatus symbols, א is Codex Sinaiticus, from the mid to late 4<sup>th</sup> century. Θ represents the Koridethi Gospels from somewhere between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century. Byz is the Byzantine text. It is the majority of the manuscripts are of this reading and they are usually very late. These manuscript variations are listed in the critical apparatus from Mark 1:10 in Eberhard Nestle, ed. *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. London: United Bible Societies, 1971.

<sup>27</sup> This may have been due to the Gnostic view that Jesus became the Christ at baptism because that is when the Spirit came into him.

<sup>28</sup> Σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα.

it is in verbatim agreement to the Markan text.<sup>29</sup> However, Luke gives reason to believe that other people were aware of this vision. Luke does not differ from Mark in the saying but in an earlier statement that the dove came down “in bodily form.”<sup>30</sup> This opens the possibility that many people were observing this miracle and that this is a testimony to the divinity of Jesus. For this reason Matthew has the voice speak in the third person. Instead of a voice speaking to Jesus alone the voice is saying to the whole crowd, “This is my son the beloved, in him I delight.”<sup>31</sup> Matthew has the voice speak to everyone present as a testimony to the divinity of Jesus. Here, as before, Mark gives the more difficult reading. Thus based on *lectio difficilior* Mark is the earlier and more authentic reading.

This essay has attempted to analyze the pericope of the baptism of Jesus, in order to determine which of the synoptic gospels is the one in which the other two rely. This analysis has concluded that, based on the principle of *lectio difficilior*, Mark was the source on which Matthew and Luke relied. The majority of Mark appears in Matthew and Luke; they have changed and edited Mark’s text in order to create a gospel which is more palatable for their community. There are only two problematic agreements between Matthew and Luke only, but both are instances where it can be shown that Matthew and Luke made the same changes because they were making a switch to a more common word for the context. When Matthew and Luke add content to the Markan version, these additions are only interjections. After the interjection, the author returns to the Markan story exactly where the interjection started. These phenomena can only be because there is a direct literary relationship between these three texts with Matthew and Luke relying on Mark. This cannot be because of coincidence.

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<sup>29</sup> There is an important variant to what the voice says in Luke. The reading given here is in verbatim agreement with Mark and is supported by P<sup>4</sup> ⳑ A B L W Δ Ψ. However there is a variant reading taken from Psalms 2:7 that has Ἰός μου εἶ σύ, ἐγὼ σήμερον γένηνκα (You are my son today I have begotten you) and it is supported by D, *it*. Although the latter could be argued for on the basis of the non-harmonistic reading, the overwhelming external criteria, including a papyrus fragment from the Third Century C.E., suggest that the first reading is preferred.

<sup>30</sup> σωματικῶ εἶδει

<sup>31</sup> Οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα

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