

Peer Review

Review of: "A Statistical Investigation of the Synoptic Problem"

John Poirier¹

1. Independent researcher

This article represents a careful examination of the distribution of language across Matthew, Mark, and Luke, with a view to understanding what that distribution might say about the interrelations between these gospels. My understanding is that the work has aged for some time, in a good way. The technical language and the terseness of the statistical procedures will be a barrier for some readers and will slow down nearly all readers, but I'm not sure much can be done about that.

There are several places where I believe the author owes us a bit more of an explanation or where the language needs to be changed or clarified.

The author sometimes treats a footnote symbol as a citation in itself, which I find odd. He does this with his first footnote, which annotates the incomplete phrase "readers are directed to." Following the word "to," the author should actually name the work cited in the footnote. The author does the same thing with the first footnote in section 2.

In section 1, the author introduces his procedure with the following words:

[W]e are trying to determine which author wrote first and which was the editor. Two cases are presented, one where author X wrote first and one where author Y wrote first. The words in bold are by author X, and the words in italic are by author Y. Note that it is the words they share in common whose authorship is in question. We can build a vocabulary profile of each author from the words we are sure they wrote, and then see which author's style corresponds with the words of undetermined authorship.

This procedure appears to ignore cases in which a word from X is actually found pleasing to Y in such a way that the word becomes more characteristic of Y, even though it began with X. This much should at least be acknowledged, especially since the author acknowledges on page 17 that this sort of thing

actually happens (“Luke shows a consistent tendency to carry vocabulary encountered in his Markan source forward into his own distinctive material, deploying it again in new contexts”).

In section 5, the author writes:

Four results indicate that the two-gospel agreement categories that include Mark predict the triple-agreement category 222 – 221 and 220 (Mark with Matthew) and 122 and 022 (Mark with Luke). In each, the shared vocabulary is one Mark carries, and its predicting the triple agreement indicates that the word common to all three gospels entered the tradition through Mark.

If I understand the argument correctly, I believe the author is committing the classic blunder of mistaking evidence of Mark’s middle-term status as evidence of Mark’s priority. That is: the results at this point would obtain if Matthew → Mark → Luke, or if Luke → Mark → Matthew.

A little further on, the author writes:

A common sayings source explains the symmetry directly: 201, 102, and 202 all draw on the one source and all carry its diction, so both 102 and 201 predict 202. The bidirectionality is thus the signature of a shared source rather than of one evangelist copying the other. A possible counterargument is shared subject matter: 102 and 202 words may occupy the same pericopes, and topical overlap could in principle lift the prediction without a common source. But the model already subtracts the corpus-wide baseline, so generic topical co-occurrence is absorbed before the test. One might still argue that the sayings genre itself drives the connection — yet even if genre inflated the apparent magnitude of these links, it would not change their *direction*. On the Farrer view, 201 → 202 should dominate, since both categories are Matthean in origin, while 102 → 202 — Lukan redaction predicting Matthean vocabulary — should be weak or absent. The data show the reverse of that asymmetry: near-equal weights in both directions ($\beta = .1576$ for 201 → 202, $\beta = .1484$ for 102 → 202). That symmetry is what a shared source predicts and what the Farrer view does not.

I find this discussion confusing at best, as I cannot make out exactly how the author can speak in terms of the wording of the supposed sayings source. The inferences the author draws appear impossible to me. I may not understand all the author’s reasons for holding to Luke’s knowledge of Q, but I fail to see how the main argument of comparing the closeness of wording can reveal such a thing. Nor should

momentary lapses of that closeness be interpreted along such lines, on pain of removing Luke's very reason for writing his gospel. Perhaps I am missing something.

On page 25, the author writes:

Both the uniquely Matthean and the uniquely Lukan halves of the double tradition predict the material the two gospels share, with comparable weight— the symmetry a common source produces, and not what Luke's reworking of Matthew would yield, which gives no reason for the shared material to match each gospel's independent vocabulary so evenly.

As I pointed out above, the author himself acknowledges that Luke is capable of “tracking” in a certain sense.

None of this should detract from my appreciation for what the author attempts, and I support the publication of this piece.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.