

From Bart Ehrman

“Similarities and Differences: The Synoptic Problem”

<https://ehrmanblog.org/similarities-differences-synoptic-problem/>

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The term Synoptic Problem is a technical term for a specific issue, namely why Matthew, Mark, and Luke have so many similarities – in which stories they tell, the sequence in which they tell them, and the words with which they tell them (verbatim, word-for-word agreements in places!) – and yet also have so many differences. If there were not extensive similarities, there would be no “problem.” But how does one explain these similarities (and these differences)? The answer that has been around for a very long time indeed is that the similarities are there because these books utilize some of the same sources (they, or two of them, are copying) and the differences are there because the authors have altered the sources they have used.

I sometimes have difficulty convincing my students that if two documents have word-for-word agreements (whether a newspaper article, an ancient narrative, or a plagiarized term paper), then someone is copying someone. And so I do a little experiment with them. I did it this last week. I walk into class and start fussing around in front of the room (of 240 students). I put down my bag; I take out my books; I take off my coat; I put my books back in the bag; I fiddle with the powerpoint; I walk around; I put my coat back on – I do things. Students are puzzled. And then I tell them each to take out a piece of paper and a pen and to write down everything they’ve seen me do since I came into the room.

I then collect four papers, at random, and tell everyone that we are going to do a synoptic comparison. And I read, one by one, each paper, asking everyone else if anyone has a *single sentence* that is just like one of the four. The four are always completely different. And no one – ever, in my 30 years of teaching – has a sentence (or even four or five words in sequence) the same as any of the four.

Then I ask them what they would think if I picked up four papers from the class, and two of them had an entire paragraph, word for word the same. What would they think then? And of course they say “Someone was cheating.” Yes, of course! Someone was copying someone else. But then I ask, what if I didn’t do this exercise today, but I waited forty, fifty, or sixty years, and I didn’t ask you, but I asked four people each of whom knew someone who had a cousin whose wife was next door neighbors with someone whose brother once knew someone in the class to write what happened that day – and they had entire sentences that were exactly alike, word for word?

Inevitably someone cries out from the back row: It's a miracle!!!

Yup, it's a miracle. Or someone's copying someone. Or both. But if someone's copying someone, it's important to know who's copying whom, and once that problem is solved, and if it turns out that one of the Gospels was a source for the other two, then you can see how the other two changed that one, and by doing so, you can figure out what was of utmost importance to them in their retelling of the stories.