

# The Case for Q

## As Presented in John S. Kloppenborg's *Q: The Earliest Gospel* by Robert Perry

John S. Kloppenborg's *Q: The Earliest Gospel*, a slim introduction by a (perhaps *the*) premier Q scholar, which came out in 2008, contains the best, simplest summary of the case for Q that I've read. If you are interested in Q, you really want to read and understand, and ideally memorize, this three-step case.

Kloppenborg begins by pointing out that "Comparison of the Synoptic Gospels indicates that some sort of *literary* relationship exists among them" (p. 2). Someone is copying someone else. The agreement in wording and even in sequence is too great to be a product of shared oral tradition. This is the problem (the Synoptic Problem) to which Q is part of the solution. But the solution begins not with Q but with Mark.

### 1. Mark as Medial

The word "medial" may sound a bit intimidating, but all it means is that Mark is *in the middle*. Put differently, it means that *Matthew and Luke have no direct relationship with each other*. They haven't seen each other. They don't know about each other. Their only contact is *through Mark*. Mark is in the middle.

As we'll see shortly, Mark can be in the middle in three different ways. But let's first look at *why* Mark is medial. The reasons are simple: Matthew and Luke rarely agree against Mark in wording and never agree against Mark in sequence.

In other words, when all three gospels share a certain saying or story, Matthew and Luke will rarely share *wording* that is different from Mark's and will never agree in placing that passage in a *sequence* that is different from Mark's. In other words, it doesn't look like Matthew and Luke are copying from each other at all. It looks as if they have not seen each other's gospel.

In practice, this can mean three different things:

**Straight line.** The straight line arrangement goes like this: First there was Matthew. Mark then used Matthew. And Luke then used Mark. Or it can go this way: first Luke, then Mark, then Matthew. But either way, Mark is literally in the middle.

**Simple branch.** Here Mark comes first and then Matthew and Luke independently use Mark. Matthew and Luke's only connection with each other is through their source: Mark.

**Conflation:** Here *Matthew and Luke* come first and Mark *conflates* the two. Again, Matthew and Luke don't meet directly; they only meet through Mark.

These three arrangements are all quite different, but they all have one thing in common: Mark is in the middle; Matthew and Luke have no direct relationship with each other.

## 2. Mark as prior

The second part of Kloppenborg's case is that Mark is not only medial, Mark is *prior*. Mark came first. Kloppenborg gives three reasons for this:

**A. Mark's omissions.** If Mark knew Matthew or Luke, why would he have omitted so much material, especially material that was congenial to his own interests? Why omit the Christmas stories, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew) or on the Plain (Luke)? Why omit the resurrection appearances (Mark ends with the women at the tomb saying "nothing to any one" about the risen Jesus)?

**B. Mark's depiction of Jesus' family.** Matthew and Luke view Jesus' family very positively (just think of Mary in the Christmas story). "Yet Mark treats Jesus' family as opposed to him and as unknowing: they attempt to seize him on the belief that he is insane" (p. 11). Thus, "if Mark used either Matthew or Luke or both as sources, his inversion of their positive representations of Jesus' kin is remarkable, and does not correspond to any other known representation of Jesus' family in the early church" (p. 11).

**C. "Matthew and Luke's versions of Mark's stories are improved, both grammatically and in terms of their content"** (p. 11). Matthew and Luke use much-improved Greek and also do not include certain problematic story elements in Mark. For instance, Matthew avoids Mark's statement that Jesus "could not" perform mighty deeds in his own home town. Luke has Jesus die with a prayer ("Into your hands I commend my spirit"), in contrast to Mark's Jesus who dies with a cry of abandonment ("why hast thou forsaken me?"). If Mark knew Matthew, Luke, or both, why replace their better Greek with worse? And why insert those problematic story elements?

The best answer is that Mark came first. He didn't use Matthew or Luke. That means that only one of the three "Mark as medial" arrangements is right: *the simple branch*. Mark, therefore, came first and Matthew and Luke independently used Mark.

## 3. The Other Synoptic Source: Q

Once you acknowledge that Mark is medial and Mark is prior, you *have* to posit Q. The reason is simple: "We are still left to explain other material common to Matthew and Luke. Matthew and Luke share about 4,500 words that they did not get from Mark" (p. 12).

This material (called the "double tradition") shares such a close relationship in Luke and Matthew that it cannot have come from oral tradition. There are two reasons for this:

**A. Shared wording.** More than a third of the shared passages "display between 60 and 98 percent agreement" in their wording (p. 56). Significantly, the shared wording is not only in the actual words used but also in their sequence. "Since Greek, unlike English, allows for sentence parts to come in many different sequences without a loss of meaning, Matthew and Luke's agreement is highly significant: The two agree on vocabulary *and* on verbal sequence" (p. 13).

**B. Shared order.** “Approximately one-third of the pericopae [passages], accounting for almost one-half of the word count, are in the same relative order” (p. 18).

The agreement in the double tradition is simply too strong to posit that it came from common oral tradition. “There are enough points where Matthew and Luke, in reproducing Q, are so strongly in agreement that we must suppose that they were looking at a written document” (p. 56).

“This leaves as the simplest solution a second, simple branch solution, like Mark’s relationship to Matthew and Luke, but applying this model to the double tradition” (p. 15).

## Conclusion

As you can see, the reason for positing Q is extremely simple:

- 1. Mark as medial.** Matthew and Luke were independent of each other. Their only contact was indirect—*through* Mark.
- 2. Mark as prior.** Mark came first. He could not have used Matthew and Luke. Instead, *they* (independently) used *him*.
- 3. Q as the other source.** There is 4,500 words that Matthew and Luke share and did not get from Mark (the double tradition). The agreement in wording and in order in the double tradition is so strong that Matthew and Luke must have been consulting a *written document*.

Kloppenborg summarizes the case this way:

Observations of the patterns of agreements and disagreements in wording and in sequence among the Gospels indicates that Mark occupies a medial position between Matthew and Luke; careful comparison of Mark to Matthew and Mark to Luke suggests that Mark is not only medial, but prior to Matthew and Luke, and served as one of their sources. But if this is the case, then it is necessary to account for the double tradition (or Q) material that Matthew and Luke share, which they did not take from Mark. If Matthew and Luke were not in direct contact with each other for the Markan material, they cannot very well have been in direct contact for the Q material. This leaves only one viable possibility, that the double tradition material comes from another source, parallel to Mark insofar as it was also a source for Matthew and Luke, used independently by each. (p. 20)

What this yields is a very simple picture composed of *two simple branches*. Mark was prior and was used independently by Matthew and Luke. Q was prior and was used independently by Matthew and Luke. That is the Two-Document Hypothesis.