

Gospel Trajectories

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Abstract. I here consider the relative dates of the New Testament Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, in their canonical form. I find that they are linked by developments, here called Trajectories, which imply the sequence Mk > Mt > Lk > Jn.

1. The Divinization Trajectory. Jesus in **Mark** is a man. He first makes contact with God at his Baptism (Mk 1:10, “Straightway . . . he saw the heavens rent asunder, and the Spirit as a dove descending upon him”). His divine power is drained in use (Mk 5:30, “perceiving . . . that the power from him had gone forth”), renewed by prayer (Mk 9:29, “This kind [of demon] can come out by nothing, save by prayer”), and lost at his Crucifixion (Mk 15:34, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”). **Matthew** gives Jesus a divine birth (Mt 1:18, “Mary . . . was found with child of the Holy Spirit”), thus making him godlike from the beginning. **Luke** tops this by giving his cousin John the Baptist also a divine birth (Lk 1:36f, the angel to Mary: “And behold, Elizabeth thy kinswoman . . . hath conceived a son in her old age”), and by having John acknowledge Jesus prenatally (Lk 1:41, “When Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb”). In **John**, Jesus exists from the beginning of the universe (Jn 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word;” 1:14, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us”). Founders are often aggrandized by their followers, and nothing could be more natural than this increasing divinization of Jesus, or the associated reluctance to ascribe to him any human feelings or shortcomings.¹ The implied order is Mk > Mt > Lk > Jn.

2. The Mary Trajectory. Mary is rejected by Jesus in **Mark** (Mk 3:33f, “Who are my mother and brothers?”). In **Matthew**, Mary is favored by God to be Jesus’s mother (Mt 1:20f, the angel to Joseph: “Do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit”). In **Luke** Mary reacts fully and eloquently to the news that she is to be so favored (Lk 1:46f, the Magnificat). Luke adds a childhood narrative of Jesus in the Temple, where Mary speaks to Jesus (Lk 2:41-51). In **John**, for reasons above noted, there is no birth scene, but Mary is part of Jesus’s ministry. She persuades him to perform his first miracle at Cana (Jn 2:3f, Mary to the servants: “Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it”), and at the end is touchingly commended by him, from the very cross, to the care of a disciple (Jn 19:26f, “Jesus . . . saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son. Then saith he to the disciple, Behold, thy mother”). It is emotionally unlikely that the later Jesus tradition increasingly *disdained* Mary. The implied order is Mk > Mt > Lk > Jn.

¹For a long list of instances where Matthew shows greater respect for Jesus in passages parallel to Mark, see the commentary of Willoughby C Allen (3rd Clark 1912) xxxi-xxxiii.

3. The Baptism Trajectory. In **Mark**, Jesus is simply baptized by John (Mk 1:9). In **Matthew**, John protests that Jesus should baptize *him*, and is persuaded to proceed only in order “to fulfil all righteousness” (Mt 3:15). In **Luke**, the baptism is mentioned but not described (Lk 3:21b); as in Mark and Matthew, the verb is the passive “was baptized,” but John is not specified as the *agent* of the verb. In **John**, there is no baptism at all. Jesus’s baptism may have been offensive to the later Evangelists as implying that John was Jesus’s spiritual superior, or that Jesus had sins to be forgiven. The gradual attenuation of the baptism in the Gospel accounts would be compatible with the divinization trajectory noticed above, and with the theological idea that Jesus’s death had power to atone for others’ sins because Jesus was himself sinless. The implied order is Mk > Mt > Lk > Jn.

4. The Jerusalem Trajectory. In all the Gospels, Galilee is Jesus’s home country; his first preaching is done there. Jerusalem figures in the Jesus story in different ways. In **Mark**, Jesus visits many Galilean towns, and goes to Jerusalem only to be crucified. The disciples return to Galilee, and though the ending of Mark is missing in our text, it is predicted (Mk 14:28, 16:7) that Jesus will appear to them there. In **Matthew**, some of Jesus’s preaching is done on his journey to Jerusalem, and three Galilean towns, Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, are cursed as unbelieving (Mt 11:21-24); the risen Jesus first appears in Jerusalem, to the Women at the Tomb (Mt 28:9-10), though there is also a later Galilean appearance, of the kind that was predicted if not displayed in Mark (Mt 28:16f). In **Luke**, Jesus not only appears on the road from Jerusalem, but orders the disciples to *remain* in Jerusalem (Lk 24:15f); there is no Galilee appearance. **John** agrees with Luke in limiting the appearances of Jesus to Jerusalem;² he also has Jesus visit Jerusalem repeatedly, and do much preaching there. The Jerusalem shift in the Jesus story is thus furthest advanced in John.

A Galilee to Jerusalem shift in the history of Christianity is attested in the letters of Paul, who never mentions Galilee, and who visits Jerusalem (not Galilee) to meet with Peter, and incidentally with James (Gal 1:18). It would appear that the Gospels increasingly project that later administrative shift backward into the story of Jesus’s lifetime, and thus the least Jerusalemized Gospel will probably be the earliest Gospel. The implied order is Mk > Mt > Lk > Jn.

Conclusion. More examples might be given, but these show how the winds are blowing. All the winds blow in the same direction. They may be reduced to two trends: (1) increasing respect for Jesus and his family, and reduction in the prominence given to John’s baptism of Jesus; and (2) an administrative shift of the posthumous Jesus movement from Galilee to Jerusalem. It is these trends, one reverential (and thus predictable on general grounds) and the other political (and thus merely circumstantial, but seemingly well attested), that these differences in the Gospels seem to reflect.

The problem here solved is not the Synoptic Problem; it is a lemma on the way to that Problem. Complications there surely are, some due to growth processes in one or more of the texts, but it seems that no solution to that Problem can stand unless it is compatible with a Mk > Mt > Lk > Jn sequence of the final states of the Gospels.

²Save for the inconsistent, and clearly later appended, final chapter, Jn 21.