

Feeding the 5,000 • Summary of the Data

Chart 1

Matthew	Mark	Luke	John	
157	237	164	181	total words
81	101	91	95	different lexical forms
15	20	28	48	unique words not in the parallel pericope of any of the other 3 Gospels

Note that John contains roughly twice as many unique words as do the Synoptics. This does not prove a literary relationship between the Synoptics, but it certainly shows why Matthew, Mark, and Luke are grouped together as “Synoptics” in contrast to John.

Words (lexical forms) common to all four accounts (11 + 6)

ἀγοραζω, ἀνηρ, ἄρτος, δυο, κλασμα, λαμβανω, μαθητης, πεντακισχιλιοι, πεντε, πολυς, τοπος (+ these “common words”: αὐτος, δε, εἶπον, ἐν, ἐχω, ἵνα)

Words (lexical forms) common to the Synoptics (13 + 1)

αἶρω, ἀναβλεπω, ἀπολυω, διδωμι, ἐρημος, εὐλογεω, ἴδιος, ἰχθυς, κοφινος, κωμη, πολυς, προσερχομαι, χορταζω (+ the “common word” ὑμεις)

Words (lexical forms) common to John and two of the Synoptics (6 + 6)

ἀκολουθεω, ἀπερχομαι, Ἰησους, χορτος, ὅσος, ὡδε (+ these “common words”: γαρ, ἵνα, μη, λεγω, ὅτι, προς)

This list of common forms is based on lexical forms that occur in the parallel pericopes; they are not always the same inflection in the text. The figure for words common to all four Gospels is slightly higher than sometimes given (e.g., Fee says that there are only 8). Again, notice that John is the “flyer” with only about half as many shared forms (6); the Synoptics share twice as many (13). (The “common words” are the function words: conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns, as well as very common verbs, etc. The presence of these words is probably unavoidable, but is not particularly significant in any comparison.)

Statistics based on the color-coded synopsis

(posted on the web at <<http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/documents/feed5t.pdf>>)

Chart 2

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Exact words* w/ at least one other Gospel	99	90	64	12
<i>Extended passage, ident. words & order</i>	74	75	38	0
Same words (lexical form) w/ slight change†	12	10	13	7
Synonymous word/phrase used	13	18	24	9

*"Exact words" = same lexical form and same inflection.

†"Slight change" = same lexical form but different inflection (e.g., different case or tense)

Chart 3

Agreement in wording between any two of the Gospels

(%) of words in this Gospel >
that are substantially the same as
those in this Gospel \

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Matthew	–	87 (45%)	57 (36%)	16 (9%)
Mark	87 (55%)	–	51 (33%)	12 (7%)
Luke	57 (36%)	51 (26%)	–	12 (7%)
John	16 (10%)	12 (6%)	12 (7%)	–

Note: Mark 6:30–31 and Luke 9:10a are *not* included in these figures since they consist of a transitional statement that is not included in Matthew or John. The percentages are thus based on a total word count of 195 for Mark (instead of 237) and 156 for Luke (instead of 164). Percent = [number of words substantially the same] ÷ [number of words in the Gospel listed in the top row].

The most significant data of all those summarized above appears in chart 2: Extended passage, ident. words & order. This notes not only a substantial difference between the Synoptics and John, but also points out the very close affinity between Mark and Matthew in this pericope. Note the common text, identical in word and inflection (the versification follows Matthew):

13 ... ἐν πλοίῳ εἰς ἔρημον τόπον κατ' ἰδίαν· ... οἱ ὄχλοι ἠκολούθησαν αὐτῷ πεζῇ ἀπὸ τῶν πόλεων. 14 Καὶ ἐξελθὼν εἶδεν πολὺν ὄχλον καὶ ἐσπλαγχνίσθη ἐπ' αὐτοῖς ... 15 ... οἱ μαθηταὶ ... ἔρημός ἐστιν ὁ τόπος καὶ ... ὥρα ἤδη ... ἀπόλυσον ... ἵνα ἀπελθόντες εἰς τὰς κώμας ἀγοράσωσιν ἑαυτοῖς ... 16 ὁ δὲ ... εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· ... δότε αὐτοῖς ὑμεῖς φαγεῖν. 17 ... λέγουσιν ... πέντε ... καὶ δύο ἰχθύας. 18 ... 19 ... λαβὼν τοὺς πέντε ἄρτους καὶ τοὺς δύο ἰχθύας, ἀναβλέψας εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν εὐλόγησεν καὶ ... τοῖς μαθηταῖς ... 20 καὶ ἔφαγον πάντες καὶ ἐχορτάσθησαν, καὶ ἦσαν ... 21 οἱ ... ἦσαν ἄνδρες ... πεντακισχίλιοι...

Although there are other identical words and phrases in this same pericope when Luke is compared, the most extensive and significant is the sixteen-word phrase underlined above which is identical in all three Synoptic accounts. That such an extensive statement is literarily identical in not attributable to corresponding testimony of three eyewitnesses. (The probability of three identical 16-word sequences is very remote.) It would seem that the most likely explanation is that there was, indeed, a common literary source.

Rodney J. Decker, Th.D., 1/99