
THE DELIMITATION OF PERICOPES
A CASE STUDY IN MATTHEW

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Problem

In Gospel studies the term "pericope" has been generally defined as a "unit," but there is no uniformity in the application of the term in either studies of the Gospels, or in harmonies, synopses, and Gospel parallels ("comparators"). The present study was undertaken to determine what factors influence editors of comparators in determining the beginnings and endings of pericopes.

Methods

A list was compiled of the major comparators of the twentieth century. The text references (e.g., Matt 1:1-17; 1:18-25, etc.) for the pericopes which contained passages from Matthew were entered by each comparator into a computer. The references were collated, sorted in canonical order, and a cross-tabulation was generated to indicate which pericopes were found in each comparator. Each pericope was then analyzed to determine the reasons for its beginning and ending. The reasons were taken from narrative indicators within the text of Matthew, from evidence taken from the structure of the comparators containing each pericope, and from evidence that might be found in data external to the composition of the comparator (possible audience, ecclesiastical orientation, et al.).

Results

The beginnings and endings of pericopes most often occurred because of changes in narrative elements or other indicators within the text. A number of the Matthean pericopes in the comparators were determined by the editor's understanding of the relationship of the Gospel material (Synoptic Problem, parallels, etc.). Relatively few beginnings and end-points were determined by influences exterior to the harmony, synopsis, or Gospel parallel. A structured list of the types of beginnings and endings to pericopes was then developed.

Conclusions

There is no uniformity in the determination of pericopes in Gospel comparators. A pericope is what the author or editor determines it to be. This lack of standardization also applies to commentaries and studies on the Gospels.