

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM:

A BRIEF OVERVIEW INTO THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM

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INTRODUCTION

THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM EXPLAINED

The “Synoptic Problem” was first introduced by a biblical scholar in Germany, J.J. Griesbach, who chose the word synoptic (or synopsis), which means “seeing together,” and was used to describe the three evangelists Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Synoptic Problem then attempted to show the common literary uses between the three books.¹ The term “Synoptic Problem” in particular refers to the discussion and relationship to the interdependence of the Synoptic Gospels, or how they relate to each other in style, form, and literature, often seen through textual criticism. Determining the dependence or interdependence of each Gospel then attempts to conclude, which Gospel was written first, and subsequently, which Gospel then used the other as a primary source, and if not, what source was then used to compile the Gospel in question.

Except for John, the Gospels share a great deal of similarities in their text, have many parallel passages, and have similar arrangements of those passages. To account for those similarities, scholars have sought a solution to the Synoptic Problem since determining one’s proposed solution would ultimately “influence one’s exegesis, redaction criticism, and form criticism of the Gospels as well as affect the quest for the historical Jesus, [and view of] early church history.”² Where some evangelicals today might question any overall importance to the Synoptic Problem, or its solutions, the

¹ D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 77.

² Stephen C. Carlson, “The Synoptic Problem Home Page”, 2003 14-November, <http://www.mindspring.com/~scarlson/synopt/> (accessed September 17, 2009).

painstaking research that goes into finding a solution is nothing less than research at the very core of what Christians believe. “Who is the real Jesus? And what did He actually say and do?”³ Mark Goodacre in his book, *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem*, recognized that “it is a commonly held view that study of the Synoptic Problem is complex, irrelevant, and boring.”⁴ Even so, Goodacre still views the study as relevant and important to the “broader issues of New Testament [study] and [to the understanding of] Christian origins” itself.⁵ As our society becomes more and more pluralistic, agreeing to almost anything with no objective absolutes, the solutions to the Synoptic Problem become more and more relevant. Research and interest in the Synoptic Problem has progressed slowly at times in recent history, but continuing this important study will bring continued movement towards a consensual solution, and in the process bring Christians closer in understanding the life and ministry of Jesus.

OVERVIEW OF THE COMMON SOLUTIONS

Historically, two basic solutions to the Synoptic Problem have surfaced. First, popular from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, theories known as the “Dependence theories” had begun to arise in scholarly circles. In their most basic form, Dependence theories generally claim that each Synoptic Gospel was written independently of the other two Synoptic Gospels, but dependent on either, one, a single original Gospel, sometimes named Ur-Gospel, two, relatively fixed “oral sources,” or three, a dependence on “gradually developed written fragments,” all of which have now

³ Robert L. Thomas, *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2002), 12.

⁴ Mark Goodacre, *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), 105.

⁵ *Ibid*, 187.

been well researched.⁶ Most of the Dependence theories have since ceased to be argued for except perhaps the “oral sources” theory.⁷ Rist, in *On the Independence of Matthew and Mark*, argues, for example, that “both Matthew and Mark are heirs of a common [oral] tradition,” independent of each other, on the basis of a “large number of parallel passages.”⁸ While the “oral sources” view was most popular in the nineteenth century, scholars, such as Rist, still support their arguments today, though, for many good reasons, they are not commonly held as the most practical solution to the Synoptic Problem.

The second solution to the Synoptic Problem, and most commonly accepted among scholars today, is called the *Interdependence* theories (or hypothesis), which focus, at least partly, on source criticism. Source criticism asks, “What written sources, if any, did the evangelists use in compiling their Gospels” and then investigates these sources to see how they were used in completing the synoptic Gospels.⁹ Most scholars recognize within the Interdependence argument several commonly held theories or solutions, which are still argued for today. Among the many solutions, there are at least four to five prevailing schools of thought, each of which has several well-known “hybrids” or spin-offs originating from their basic parent theory of literary interdependence. These hybrids often share a common name with the interdependence hybrid theory it supports, but for the most part these theories are part of a main school of thought with some variant to make it unique. These variants include theories such as the Independent Hypothesis, the Traditional or Augustinian Hypothesis, the Griesbach or

⁶ Carson and Moo, 89-90.

⁷ Carson and Moo, 89-90.

⁸ John M. Rist, *On the Independence of Matthew and Mark* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 66.

⁹ Carson and Moo, 85.

Two-Gospel Hypothesis, the Farrer Hypothesis, and the Two-Source Hypothesis (which also includes the Four-Source and Markan Priority theories).

Most of these Interdependence theories (less perhaps the Traditional or Augustinian Hypothesis) have only been argued over the last 100 to 150 years, and for the most part, no complete and total consensus has been accepted among scholars. As Black notes in *Why Four Gospels*, “the fact that the vast amount of research done on the Synoptic Problem over the past two hundred years has utterly failed to bring about a satisfying consensus” goes to show how divided at least some scholars are in their quest for a consensual conclusion to the problem. The exception to the scholarly consensus perhaps would be based between these two historical approaches, that of the Dependence theories, (theories that claim the Gospels were basically written independently of each other and dependent on something else), and the Interdependence theory itself. Among the Interdependence theories, scholars most readily accept the Two-Source Hypothesis today and many unique theories from within the basic premise of the Two-Source Hypothesis, most notable perhaps Markan Priority (also known as Mark plus Q).

Taking an honest approach to the Synoptic Problem would, and does, require an extensive examination of the exhaustive work scholars have produced over many centuries. A solution to this age-old problem changes as the centuries progress and new theories are presented and refuted. Did (or does) a “Q” source exist when “it is notorious that Q cannot be convincingly reconstructed?”¹⁰ Can oral tradition really explain the differences between the synoptics instead of a literary relationship as Luke’s Prologue might indicate (Luke 1:1-4)? With such an enormous amount of the Markan text

¹⁰ A. M. Farrer, “On Dispensing With Q,” *Mark Goodacre*, Mark Goodacre, March 5, 2002, <http://www.markgoodacre.org/Q/farrer.htm> (accessed September 15, 2009), 2.

appearing in the other synoptics, could Mark have really depended on both Matthew and Luke with or without a Q source being available to John Mark? There are a myriad of questions the Synoptic Problem brings to light, and the possible answers to these questions, are an “attempt to solve historical puzzles.”¹¹ These quandaries include authorship, dating of the Gospels, their intended audience, and their stated purpose in writing their particular Gospel (something specifically included only by Luke in his Prologue). It should not be a surprise then, when Christians look at the Synoptic Problem, that a consensus has not been reached, but even so, progress has still been made to harmonize the Synoptic Gospels. Farmer, in his now classic book, *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis*, wisely concludes, “The Synoptic Problem is difficult but not necessarily insoluble. Matthew, Mark, and Luke were almost certainly written in some chronological order, [however the difficulty of] determining which was written first, second, or third still persists.”¹²

The Independent theory gives way to the Two-Gospel Hypothesis, which in turn, as of late, has given way to the Two-Source Hypothesis, and even more specifically, Markan Priority. Given the scholarly evidence presented to date, the most common conclusion, albeit far from a consensus, is the Two-Source Hypothesis. Goodacre, in *The Synoptic Problem, a Way Through the Maze*, contends that “the vast majority of New Testament scholars accept the Two-Source Theory,” but “it is still controversial.”¹³

¹¹ Mark Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem, A Way Through the Maze*, 2nd Edition (New York, NY: T&T Clark International, 2001), 27.

¹² William R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis*, 2nd Edition (London: Macmillan Company, 1976), 199.

¹³ Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem, A Way Through the Maze*, 24.

FOUR PROMINENT INTERDEPENDENT THEORIES, PLUS ONE

When taking a look at the most common solutions argued for today, it would be well to note that in choosing a solution to the Synoptic Problem, Christians are searching for an “ideal solution that is able to explain the origin and nature of the synoptics,” while still maintaining the literary accuracy of the Gospel message.¹⁴ Any such solutions therefore, oral or literary, still must be able to withstand a plausibility test with regards to the internal evidence of the text. As mentioned above, the most commonly accepted theories today come from within the realm of the Interdependence theories, but one such theory is still worthy of discussion today among the *Dependence theories*, and is that of the Independence Theory.

THE INDEPENDENCE THEORY

The Independence theory, somewhat removed from the Synoptic Problem discussions of the twenty-first century, is said to be generally ignored and “receives scant attention in evangelical and other literature” as a plausible solution today.¹⁵ Even with that said, there are many modern scholars who still argue for an “inspired” approach to the synoptics, such as the aforementioned Rist in his thesis entitled *The Independence of Matthew and Mark* (1978), Berkhof who stated in *New Testament Introduction* (1915) that “none of the theories proved satisfactory” or Linnemann with *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* who says “historical-critical ideologies seriously undermine the authority of God’s Word,” among several other noteworthy works.¹⁶ In their general observations against any synoptic solution, Independence theory scholars would note that internal

¹⁴ Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem, A Way Through the Maze*, 164.

¹⁵ Thomas, 226.

¹⁶ Ibid, 244.

evidence to the Synoptic Problem is extremely “complex and confusing” and some have taken to “oversimplified generalizations” to construct theories, which conclude with no plausible solution.¹⁷

The Independence theory, in a general description, is the antithesis of all other solutions to the Synoptic Problem, and those who argue for the Independence theory might argue that there is indeed no Synoptic Problem at all. This view was the dominant view of the early church through the Reformation until emerging philosophies of the Enlightenment period took over, and it “dominated orthodox Christianity.”¹⁸ This view asserts, partially from information based on Luke’s Prologue, all four Gospels are independent apostolic accounts, based on eyewitness evidence, written independently of the other. In Luke’s Prologue (Luke 1:1-4) he plainly states his source to be “eyewitnesses and servants of the word” (v 2, NASB) and therefore seems to “most heavily [depend] on oral reports.”¹⁹ Luke “investigated everything from the beginning” (v 3) and presented his findings in chronological order. A much different account than what Christians see in Mark’s Gospel, which does not support “any type of literary dependence among the canonical Gospels, but [rather] points to their independence.”²⁰

This view then asserts that all four Gospels were, in essence, created equally, and none has precedence over the other and none of the four used the other as its primary

¹⁷ Robert C. Newman, “The Synoptic Problem: A Proposal For Handling Both Internal & External Evidence,” *Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute*, 2002 17-January, <http://www.newmanlib.ibri.org/RRs/RR002/02synop.htm> (accessed 2009 24-September).

¹⁸ Thomas, 235.

¹⁹ Paul W. Felix, "Literary Dependence on Luke's Prologue," *The Master's Seminary Journal*, Spring 1997: 61.

²⁰ Ibid.

source, also making the dating of the Gospels less important.²¹ Although dating is less important, the early church still emphatically viewed Matthew as being written first, John last, with Luke and Mark in the middle. As Farnell goes on to explain in both “Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels” and also in “The Synoptic Gospels in the Ancient Church: The Testimony to the Priority of Matthew's Gospel,” “modern historical criticism has systematically ignored the early church fathers”²² and attempts to form “western” theories based not on divine inspiration and inerrancy of the Gospels.²³ This negative “western” view traverses a great divide between the early church and modern times to explain some of the shortcomings of our “modern understandings.”²⁴

These misunderstandings go back to how pre-canonical books were communicated during the life and ministry of Jesus, drawing on large blocks of oral and memorized passages, something almost unheard of in modern times, and the common use of “plagiarism” (a concept, which did not exist then as we understand it today), where words were freely given and used. The views of Farnell are no doubt questioned by opponents to the Independence view, who would call on a “de-emphasis of Luke 1:1-4,” and others who argue the Independence theory exhibits a “lack of evidence” but the Independence theory is to be at minimum “commended for maintaining a high view of

²¹ F. David Farnell, “The Case for Interdependence View of Gospel Origins,” *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2002), 258.

²² F. David Farnell, “The Synoptic Gospels in the Ancient Church: The Testimony to the Priority of Matthew's Gospel,” *The Master's Seminary Journal* (The Master's Seminary), no. 53-86 (Spring 1999): 53.

²³ Farnell admits and addresses Augustine as one of the “early church fathers”, who did not exactly agree that the synoptic Gospels held no literary dependency, and where Augustine was probably one of the first who proposed a “Two-Gospel” like solution.

²⁴ Farnell, “The Case for Interdependence View of Gospel Origins,” 279.

scripture.”²⁵ With as many passages as the synoptics have in common it might be difficult for the modern reader to conclude that there is no literary dependence between the three synoptic Gospels. Even so, one should still carefully note how the early church fathers dealt with the Synoptic Problem and see some relevance in its continued scholarly discussion today.

THE TRADITIONAL OR AUGUSTINIAN HYPOTHESIS

By the time of the fourth century, the first attempt to harmonize or “determine a specific literary relationship between the Gospels” arrived, and came from Augustine.²⁶ Augustine, being one of the “early church fathers” was probably one of the first to develop a theory on the Synoptic Problem that was based on a literary dependence, or a theory that suggested the evangelists, in some form or another, used the actual writings of the other synoptic authors to write their own account. In doing so, Augustine proposed one of the first Interdependent theories as a solution to the Synoptic Problem that prevailed as the dominant view until about the nineteenth century.

Augustine’s solution basically asserts, in agreement with the early church, that Matthew was the first Gospel written. Once Matthew was published and distributed, Mark was then written, as a second Gospel account, in which Mark borrowed or depended on Matthew, as its main literary source, and then Luke was written next, using both Matthew and Mark, as its primary literary source. Augustine does this through seemingly complex “alternating agreement patterns between Matthew-Mark and Luke-

²⁵ John H. Niemela, “Two-Gospel Response,” *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2002), 335.

²⁶ Newman.

Mark”, focusing on their “content [or] parallel passages.”²⁷ Ironically, after Augustine completed an extensive review of his alternating agreement patterns within the three Gospel accounts, he then changed his mind as to the order of the third Gospel, stating Luke was written second, then followed by Mark.²⁸ This in turn basically paved the way for the modern Two-Gospel solution championed by Griesbach and Farmer, discussed below.

The Augustinian Hypothesis solution has not gained favor among most modern scholars with two notable exceptions, B.C. Butler who wrote *The Originality of St. Matthew: A Critique of the Two-Document Hypothesis* (1951), and John Wenham in *Redating Matthew, Mark & Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem* (1992). Unlike the most accepted solutions today, Wenham agrees with Augustine and contends “The [early church] fathers are almost unanimous in asserting that Matthew the tax-collector was the author, writing first, for Hebrews in the Hebrew language.”²⁹ Even Farnell who disagrees with Augustine’s claim to literary dependence recognizes Augustine’s assumption that “all four Gospels were uniformly true and without admixture of the slightest degree of error.”³⁰ Although scholars do not generally agree with an Augustinian order of Matthew, Mark, and then Luke, Augustine’s theory does not immediately conflict with any internal evidence, but does present challenges when

²⁷ John H. Niemela, “The Case for the Two-Gospel View of Gospel Origins,” *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2002), 144.

²⁸ Thomas, 145.

²⁹ John Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark & Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1992), 116.

³⁰ Thomas, 316.

examining it against the “best external evidence,” namely Clement.³¹ As such, great care must be taken when seeing this as a viable and plausible solution when comparing it to the Two-Source Hypothesis.

THE GRIESBACH OR TWO-GOSPEL HYPOTHESIS

Among the five theories discussed, the Two-Gospel Hypothesis is one of the two leading schools of thought (though still in the minority) for a practical solution to the Synoptic Problem, and the main challenger to the most accepted view, the Two-Source Hypothesis. This view, championed by J.J. Griesbach in his “*Treatise*” (1789) and later “revived by William Farmer in his book *The Synoptic Problem* (1964)”, continues to claim, as Augustine did, that Matthew was written first (sometimes referred to as Matthean Priority).³² Luke was then written after Matthew, and uses Matthew as its literary source, and then Mark was written using both Matthew and Luke. The book of Mark here is sometimes referred to by Griesbach and Farmer proponents as a literary combination of both Matthew and Luke, or as Black would argue in *Why Four Gospels*, could even be the result of an oral dictation, or series of lectures, using Matthew and Luke, as read aloud by Peter.³³

Where Peter is generally regarded as the possible source behind Mark, Paul is usually associated with the writings behind Luke. Since Paul would have “undoubtedly used Matthew’s Gospel” in his own teachings, Luke would certainly have been familiar with Matthew’s writing as well.³⁴ As such, Luke saw fit to use four hundred verses from

³¹ William R. Farmer, “The Case for the Two-Gospel Hypothesis,” *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem*, ed. David Alan Black and David R. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 122.

³² Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem, A Way Through the Maze*, 22.

³³ Black, 80-85.

³⁴ Niemela, 188.

Matthew, which matched “his own order and content,” showing that Luke, probably through Paul, used Matthew extensively while writing his Gospel account.³⁵ Luke most likely used additional sources other than Matthew, indicated by several areas where Matthew and Luke do not share common content, but it would be difficult for one to argue that Luke knew nothing of Matthew’s Gospel. In a similar respect, Mark seems to follow an “order and content of Matthew, or that of Luke, or that of both”³⁶ indicating John Mark was aware of both Matthew and Luke.

Farmer starts with the premise that “The similarity between Matthew, Mark and Luke is such as to justify the assertion that they stand in some kind of literary relationship to one another” and then moves through a step by step process to finally come to his conclusion for “Matthean Priority” in stating that Matthew “was utilized by Luke [with] Mark [using] both Matthew and Luke, and frequently blending their respective texts,” and thus the ordering for Luke before Mark.³⁷ Farmer goes on to state that since “91% of Mark is reproduced in Matthew and Luke, the literary relationship between the Gospels could be one involving direct copying,” a practice, already noted above, which was commonly accepted among literature of the time period in question.³⁸

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Thomas, 188.

³⁷ Farmer’s 16 step process, produced in part from the original text of William R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis*, 2nd Edition (London: Macmillan Company, 1976), reproduced by Trowbridge in, William R. Farmer, “Farmer’s Argument For Matthean Priority,” *New Testament History*, Geoff Trowbridge, 1964, <http://www.maplenet.net/%7Etrowbridge/farmer.htm> (accessed 2009 24-September), and published in David Alan Black and David R. Beck, *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem*, ed. David Alan Black and David R. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 102-135.

³⁸ William R. Farmer, “Farmer’s Argument For Matthean Priority,” (accessed 2009 24-September).

Although the Two-Gospel Hypothesis remains a minority solution, it enjoys a large contingent of modern scholars who still argue vigorously for its relevancy today. The Two-Gospel approach is “simple as well as compatible with the highest view of Scripture,” and is therefore worthy of serious consideration among the solutions to the Synoptic Problem.³⁹

THE FARRER HYPOTHESIS

The Farrer Hypothesis gets its name from Austin Farrer, who in 1955 wrote an article entitled *On Dispensing with Q*, which claimed, not all, but much of the Two-Source Hypothesis mentioned below, with the exclusion of the Q material. Although founded by Farrer, he only wrote the one article outlining his theory and most of the additional scholarly work was completed by one of Farrer’s students, Michael Goulder, along with other scholars who express concerns over the Q material. Goulder makes the observation in *Is Q a Juggernaut?*, that there are still many scholars and Ph.D. students “labouring... over whether Q ever existed” and he exhorts those immersed in the study to recognize that, although Q has stood for approximately 150 years, “is not an unchallenged hypothesis.”⁴⁰

As with the Two-Source Hypothesis (or Markan Priority) discussed below, the Farrer Hypothesis contends that Mark was the original Gospel account, often accepted as Markan Priority for those who argue for the Two-Source theory, and thus used by both Matthew and Luke in writing their Gospel accounts. The Farrer Hypothesis states that Matthew was then dependent on Mark as a source and Luke then used both Mark and

³⁹ Carson and Moo, 103.

⁴⁰ Michael D. Goulder, “Is Q a Juggernaut?”, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1996, <http://www.markgoodacre.org/Q/goulder.htm> (accessed September 12, 2009).

Matthew to pen his Gospel.⁴¹ The great difference in the Two-Source or Markan Priority theories and the Farrer theory is then the existence of the Q source (or sayings) material and a slight variation in the independent use of Luke and Matthew to adjust for the evangelists not using a noted Q source.

Farrers' theory has become one of the leading contenders in Great Britain against the Two-Source Hypothesis, and is still argued for today.⁴² In addition to Goulder, several present day scholars keep sections of the Farrer Hypothesis moving forward academically such as Mark Goodacre who has written several, more recent arguments, explaining the intricacies of the Q material like "A Monopoly on Marcan Priority? Fallacies at the Heart of Q" (2000) and *The Case Against Q: Studies in Marcan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (2002).⁴³

Goodacre makes several strong arguments against the existence or use of Q, seen as a collection of Jesus' sayings. Q is a source some assert the evangelists used as a source for writing their Gospels, most of which are still valid arguments in the solutions presented today. Goodacre notes among many of his findings that, "while the Priority of Mark has stood the test of time, Q looks less secure", and concludes his detailed research stating "Q's essential premise, Matthew's and Luke's independent use of Mark, is based in large part on arguments which at first hearing sound plausible but which on closer

⁴¹ Ibid, 21.

⁴² Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem, A Way Through the Maze*, 22.

⁴³ Goodacre does not specifically argue for the Farrer Hypothesis but more specifically for Marcan Priority without the use of the Q material. This is a slight variation in the Farrer Hypothesis in how it deals with Luke's use of Matthew. Mark Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem, A Way Through the Maze*, 22.

inspection turn out to be flawed.”⁴⁴ In “Fallacies at the Heart of Q”, Goodacre details five faults or fallacies in the Q material while essentially maintaining that one can still be in agreement with the Markan Priority while not having to completely buy into the existence of Q material. In doing so, Goodacre shows the Farrer Hypothesis to be a very acceptable theory into the origins of the Gospels, while at the same time essentially agreeing with most modern scholarly conclusions for Markan Priority.

THE TWO-SOURCE HYPOTHESIS / MARKAN PRIORITY⁴⁵

The Two-Source Hypothesis, Four-Source Hypothesis (also sometimes known as the Two/Four Document View), and Markan Priority Hypothesis have been the prevailing scholarly solutions to the Synoptic Problem since Karl Lachmann and C. G. Wilke proposed the theories in the early seventeenth century, and was further advanced with B. H. Streeter’s publication *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* in 1924. While there are slight variations in the three mentioned above, they all have a similar genesis and all share the same basic thesis. As we have seen, not all scholars even agree that the three theories just mentioned are synoptic themselves but they do share the two basic “sources” for their solution.

Similar, but coming well prior to the Farrer Hypothesis mentioned above, the Two-Source Hypothesis is so named because of its use of two basic sources to explain

⁴⁴ Mark Goodacre, "A Monopoly on Marcan Priority? Fallacies at the Heart of Q," Mark Goodacre, November 2000, <http://www.markgoodacre.org/Q/monopoly.htm> (accessed September 30, 2009).

⁴⁵ The Two-Source Hypothesis and Markan Priority are not two names for the same theory but many overwhelming similarities exist in the general observations for both theories as noted in Mark Goodacre, "A Monopoly on Marcan Priority? Fallacies at the Heart of Q," Mark Goodacre, November 2000, <http://www.markgoodacre.org/Q/monopoly.htm> (accessed September 30, 2009). Where Markan Priority is the scholarly consensus, it is actually a theory within the realm of the Two-Source Hypothesis.

the origins of the Synoptic Gospels. The first literary source for the solution, held by the Farrer Hypothesis, is the *priority of Mark*, and second source, nonextant and not held by Farrer, the *existence of Q*. This view holds that Mark was the first Gospel written with Matthew and Luke, independently of each other, were then dependent on Mark and also both on the Q material, thought to have been “composed in Antioch approximately A.D. 50.”⁴⁶ This dependency on Mark is used where there is “agreement between Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and they are dependent on Q in all those passages where there is agreement between just Matthew and Luke.”⁴⁷ Streeter in *Four Gospels* then took source criticism a step farther and claimed that Matthew and Luke were both dependent on Mark and Q plus Matthew was also dependent on his own nonextant sayings source “M” (written in Jerusalem approximately A.D. 60) and Luke was dependent on his own nonextant sayings source “L” (written in Caesarea approximately A.D. 60).⁴⁸ The “M” material being those passages that are unique to the book of Matthew and the “L” material being those passages unique to the book of Luke.⁴⁹ Few scholars today will argue for the existence of M and L but Streeter “with appropriate revisions, [still] garners the majority of scholars.”⁵⁰

As the Two-Source theory is closely examined, the analysis begins with arguments for the priority of Mark using triple tradition, a series of cumulative arguments to show Mark as superior, and then moves on to the existence and likelihood of Matthew

⁴⁶ Scot McKnight, “A Generation Who Knew Not Streeter: The Case for Markan Priority,” *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem*, ed. David Alan Black and David R. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 78.

⁴⁷ Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem, A Way Through the Maze*, 20.

⁴⁸ McKnight, 78-79.

⁴⁹ Carson and Moo, 94.

⁵⁰ McKnight, 79.

and Luke knowing and using the Q material. These arguments show an overwhelming support for a literary dependence among the three synoptic Gospels. The painstaking process of word for word comparison has gone on for centuries (for example, such as a comparison of Matthew 16:16, Mark 8:29, and Luke 9:20), and has made it difficult to disprove that the evangelists had no literary dependency of some kind; something, which all theories reviewed here, except the Independence Hypothesis have in common. In Streeter's argument, Matthew has been shown to reproduce 91% of Mark and Luke 55% of Mark "much of which is identical wording."⁵¹ Next, Matthew and Luke's wording rarely agrees with each other in comparison to Mark, and last, Matthew and Luke generally agree with the order of Mark.⁵²

Among the most noted and recent work in arguing for the priority of Mark and the existence of Q, Robert Stein in, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels: Origin and Interpretation* (2001), walks through a larger three step analysis of the Two-Source Hypothesis.⁵³ Stein first examines, step by step, the literary dependence between the synoptics; their agreements in wording and order, and also tackles the complexity of Luke's Prologue. In his argument for the priority of Mark, Stein looks at the length of Mark (only 661 verses compared to over 1,000 verses each Matthew and Luke⁵⁴), his poorer writing skills than those of Matthew and Luke, the lack of agreements in Matthew-Luke against Mark, and the more primitive theological style of Mark compared to the other synoptics.

⁵¹ Grant R. Osborne and Matthew C. William, "The Case for the Markan Priority View of Gospel Origins: The Two-/Four-Source View," *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2002), 36.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Robert H. Stein, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels: Origin and Interpretation*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001).

⁵⁴ Ibid, 29.

In the examination for the existence of Q, Stein looks at whether Luke actually knew Matthew and theorizes whether Q was actually a written or an oral source. The source and origin of the Q material today seems to be as contested as the Synoptic Problem itself, and debate even goes on as to how the material became known as Q.⁵⁵ The fact that there are “approximately 250 verses” found to be common to both Matthew and Luke, which are not found in Mark, suggests Matthew and Luke must have used a secondary source known to both authors.⁵⁶ Although scholars like Goodacre have presented solid evidence against the existence of Q, Q still remains the most widely accepted explanation for the Matthew-Luke material which is not common to Mark, helping to make the Two-Source Hypothesis the dominant solution for the Synoptic Problem.

CONCLUSION

WHAT WAS LEFT OUT OF THE DISCUSSION

The Synoptic Problem has been examined at this point, if not directly by name, for more than 1,500 years, going back to the great theologian of North Africa, Augustine of Hippo. Although the scholarly advances to the Synoptic Problem over the history of its study has moved slow at times, volumes have been written detailing the finer points of the Synoptic Problem. Arguments comparing parallel passages, word for word Greek studies, examinations of minor agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark, doublets in Matthew and Luke, dating and placement of the Q material, exacting ways in

⁵⁵ As noted in D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 98, Q was possibly taken from the first letter of the German word Quelle see John J. Schmitt, “In Search of the Origin of the Siglum Q” *JBL* 100 (1981): 609-611.

⁵⁶ Carson and Moo, 98.

which literary dependencies can exist, countless charts, diagrams, and a desire of some to craft scripture into an as yet tested hypothesis, leaves an overview of the solutions begging the question, what has been left out of the discussion.

Scott McKnight writes in, *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem*, an entire chapter devoted to the case for Markan Priority with the underlying principle of “A Generation Who Knew Not Streeter” accentuating the notion that even a basic overview of the Synoptic Problem is difficult at best.⁵⁷ In this very limited discussion therefore, it should be highly noted that the details in the arguments behind the premises described above have been rightly examined, but left out of this “basic” overview. The amount of scholarly research that has been written over the centuries is to be commended and has no doubt added to our understanding of the origins of the Gospels and more importantly the life and ministry of the historical Jesus.

FINAL ANALYSIS TO THE BASIC OVERVIEW OF THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM

Over the relatively short period of its existence, the Markan Priority solution has become the closest theory to a scholarly consensus from approximately the nineteenth century forward. Up until that time the early church traditionally viewed Matthew as the first Gospel written, and is still the predominant view of the Catholic Church.⁵⁸ In examining the five theories above, Christians can attest to the complexity of the Synoptic Problem. Can one single solution to the Synoptic Problem suffice to answer all the questions as to the origins of the Gospels? Each hypothesis provides a piece, which Christians could take as one possible overall conclusion, but to chose any one hypothesis in total over another, at this point in the scholarly work attributed to the synoptic

⁵⁷ McKnight, 65.

⁵⁸ F. Gigot, *Synoptics*, New Advent, July 1, 1912, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14389b.htm> (accessed October 9, 2009).

problem, would be to overlook weaknesses of one hypothesis or exclude a seemingly correct analysis of another. A proper conclusion might be obtained by examining only the commonly accepted conclusions of each hypothesis, while excluding the weaknesses, to form the basis for an overall solution, but even this approach would be flawed to some extent.

Was there no literary dependence between the synoptic Gospels as the Independence Theory argues; can all the similarities be explained as coming from oral sources? With the number of passages common in all three Gospels, especially when examining the exact content and order, it would seem unlikely that the evangelists would not have had at least some literary collusion between them, which was common in their day. Did the disciples and apostles not read from each other's work and if so, in what order? Most likely they did. Matthew, being a disciple, was an eyewitness to the events of Jesus' life, where Mark's most likely source seems to be Peter himself, and Luke's backing in some form or fashion is seen to come from Paul. Peter, being a disciple himself, most certainly knew Matthew. The likelihood of both Peter and Paul not being familiar with any writing by Matthew, and vice-versa, would seem unlikely as well. If Matthew's Gospel were penned first, as the Two-Gospel Hypothesis would argue, Peter (and thus Mark) would undoubtedly be extremely familiar with such a writing, and most likely Paul (and thus Luke) as well. As it stands today, the strongest argument and evidence put forth to date is for the priority of Mark, or that Mark's Gospel was indeed the first written account, but what then becomes of Q?

Did Q exist at one time as the lost sayings of Jesus? Were these sayings written down or were these oral accounts passed on from eyewitnesses, and if so, how reliable

would they be for a plausible solution today? If Q were of such value that both Matthew and Luke were dependent on its use, why do Christians not have some evidentiary piece of this document today? Can a solution to the Synoptic Problem like the Two-Source Hypothesis (Mark plus Q) prevail with such an important piece of the solution nonexistent? Once all the evidence is examined and the solutions compared, the prevailing theory, the Two-Source / Markan Priority Hypothesis, still seems to be able to answer the most questions and comes to a plausible solution, without conflicting with any internal evidence, while still being able to maintain the inerrancy of the scriptures. It is easy to understand why no consensual solution has been achieved.

The process by which the Gospels came into existence certainly had some dated order, but must still be seen as extremely complex. A process “so complex that no source-critical hypothesis, however detailed, can hope to provide a complete explanation of the situation,”⁵⁹ yet a study that should not be abandoned out of cultural boredom, or its vast complexity, but one open to new ideas and arguments that seek to know the origins of the Gospels.

⁵⁹ Carson and Moo, 101.

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