

The Synoptic Problem

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Introduction

Rarely does a topic in New Testament studies affect so many aspects of critical scholarship as the aptly named "synoptic problem." An intriguing compositional quandary, *the synoptic problem is grounded in the proposition that a literary interdependence exists among the first three books of the New Testament canon: the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, also called the "synoptic" gospels.* Coined by Johann Jakob Griesbach in the first edition of his *Greek New Testament* (1774), the term "synopsis" refers to placing gospel texts in parallel columns for ease of analysis (Griesbach, 1776; see also Kümmel 1972: 74f.). On the one hand, *that a literary relationship exists is today seldom questioned.* Indeed, striking content and linguistic parallels among the synoptic gospels have been observed since antiquity. On the other hand, explaining precisely *how* the relationship is configured continues to pique scholarly imagination and, in so doing, requires the mapping, analysis, and evaluation of a massive constellation of data. For any particular *solution* to the synoptic problem, evidence is usually offered in support of two central issues: first, determining the earliest gospel and, second, identifying the various directions of literary dependence, both of which, taken together, should give solid coherence to the labyrinthine set of agreements and disagreements in the three gospels' content, style, and arrangement. Because scholarly contributions to the synoptic problem continue to accrue at a breathtaking rate, this essay necessarily highlights ideas and areas enjoying currency within the broad spectrum of literature on this subject. To organize the ever-increasing amount of research, this essay treats the synoptic problem in four parts: (1) a survey of its historical roots; (2) the broad contours including the problem with examples; (3) three prevailing solutions to the synoptic problem including the evidence for and against them; and (4) the major issues and directions in recent study.

Historical Roots of the Synoptic Problem¹

In the early second century, Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis, promulgated a compositional theory, held for centuries, namely, that Matthew, Mark, and Luke were composed independently. Unfortunately, only fragments of his writings are preserved in Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History* (ca. 263–ca. 339 CE), in which he claims the author of Mark wrote down all the remembrances of Peter accurately and fully, but not in order, because Peter "randomized" his teachings as the occasion demanded (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.14–15). The Petrine "improvisational" ordering implies that not only does Mark lack a definite completeness (Dungan 1999: 19ff.) but also, more significantly, Papias' version of Mark may not be our canonical Mark but rather an earlier, or later, version. Why? Because, from his extant fragments, we know Papias knew the gospels of Mark and Matthew; we also know the Markan arrangement of contents roughly parallels that of Matthew; hence, if the remembrances were recorded out of order in Mark as Papias says, it appears logical he may have had access to a different version of Mark. In the case of Matthew, Papias claims the author wrote down *the logia* of Jesus in the *Εβραϊοὶ διαλέκτῳ*, "in the Hebrew language" (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.16). Open to question is whether *Εβραϊοὶ διαλέκτῳ* means Matthean material was originally composed in Hebrew or whether the gospel was written in a Hebraic "manner of expression." A majority of scholars privilege the latter, that is, a Torah-like compositional style. Papias identifies no details of Markan or Matthean order, and none of his extant fragments mentions Luke at all.

Papias' influence notwithstanding, the historical roots of the synoptic problem as it is known today may be traced to other early Christian texts. In order to reconcile content disparities, Christian theologians began to harmonize the gospel texts. In the mid-second century, Tatian, Justin Martyr's student, crafted a Syriac four-gospel harmonization, the *Diatessaron*, which merged Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John into one seamless text, used widely in Christian worship. Harmonization produced a coherent view of Jesus' life and message; nevertheless, the search to resolve discrepancies was under way. In the third century, Origen of Alexandria, a brilliant systematic theologian, resolved apparent gospel discrepancies by proposing they must be understood on two levels, literally and spiritually (Origen, *Commentary on John* [*Commentarii in evangelium Joannis*]; see Dungan 1999: 78ff.). If a story's literal meaning baffled, its spiritual meaning did not. In short, even though the evangelists sometimes depicted Jesus' motivations differently, each wrote spiritual truth. In the fourth century, as intent as Origen to explain differences, Eusebius of Caesarea supplied an ingenious method of studying parallel gospel accounts. Recasting the earlier work of Ammonius of Alexandria (ca. 220 CE), Eusebius first coded all gospel pericopes with a number and then constructed ten tables of gospel parallels by listing their numerical codes in adjacent columns: one table for parallels in all four gospels, three tables for parallels in three gospels, five tables for parallels in two gospels, and one table for pericopes particular to each gospel. Thus, parallel accounts could be studied while the gospels themselves remained intact. As a testament to their enduring quality, Eusebius' numerical codes and ten tables are still published in the Nestle–Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* in the twenty-seventh edition on pages 84*ff.

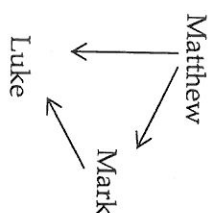


Figure 15.1

The Influence of Augustine

In the fifth century, in what must be considered a masterstroke of textual and theological harmonization, Augustine wrote *On the Consensus of the Evangelists* (*De Consensu Evangelistarum*). Building on the work of earlier exegetes, Augustine drafted an immensely influential document that reconciled the literal and spiritual truth of the gospels. In particular, Augustine's understanding of compositional order matched their canonical sequence: Matthew first, then Mark, then Luke, and finally John (*De Consensu*, 1.3–4). Figure 15.1 shows the direction of compositional dependence in what is now known as the Augustinian hypothesis. Indeed, compositional order according to canonical sequence informed scholars for centuries to come.

To recapitulate, early harmonizations and exegetical methods clearly served a theology of unified spiritual Truth, thereby ably explaining discrepancies in the synoptic gospels' content, arrangement, and style.

The Influence of Historical Criticism

Emerging in the Enlightenment, particularly in German universities, historical criticism marked a dramatic shift in focus from the prevailing theologically unified interpretations of the gospels toward "free investigation" of them via scientific, historical analysis (Kümmel 1970: 62–3). Johann Salomo Semler, for example, an early historical critic who published an influential work in 1771–5, has been quoted thusly (Kümmel 1970: 63):

Holy Scripture and the Word of God are clearly to be distinguished, for we know the difference. ... Let us suppose, for instance, that the whole story of the woman taken in adultery in John 8 were lacking, as it is lacking in many ancient copies and translations of large parts of the Church: a piece of so-called Holy Scripture would then be lacking, but the Word of God would be lacking in nothing whatever, for it is and remains unchangeable, despite all these accidental and continuous changes in a document whose copyists, it must be admitted, enjoyed no divine aid ... Every intelligent person, if he is fortunate enough to take his own mental powers seriously, is free – yes, it is his very duty – to pass judgment on these matters without any fear of men ... The only proof that

completely satisfies an upright reader is the inner conviction brought about by the truth that confront him in this Holy Scripture ... the witness of the Holy Spirit in the soul of the reader.

An epistemological fissure, as it were, in the unity of historical and theological interpretation began to appear and indeed expand. As an umbrella term, "historical criticism" covers not only the scientific analysis of ancient manuscripts (text criticism transmission history, but also the evangelists' received oral tradition (See Chapter "Form Criticism" in this volume), their editorial activity (redaction criticism), and written sources, if any (source criticism). The problem of sources, then, especially regarded to the synoptic problem, touches each of these scientific methods.

In 1774–6, Johann Jakob Griesbach (1745–1812), a German scholar at University of Jena, published a synopsis of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and (*Synopsis Evangeliorum Matthaei Marci et Lucae*) in which he placed the texts in adjacent columns, placing parallel accounts side by side while keeping the order of gospel generally in tact. Contemporary use of the term "synopsis" and "synoptic fact," derives from Griesbach's work. In 1789, Griesbach published his theory of positional interdependence in *A Demonstration that the Whole of the Gospel of Mark Extracted from the Commentaries of Matthew and Luke (Commentatio qua Marci Evangelium e Matthaei et Lucae commentariis decerpitum esse monstratur)*. Shown in Figure the Griesbach hypothesis postulates that Matthew was written first, then Luke finally Mark, whose author copied from Matthew and Luke when they agreed copied one or the other when they disagreed. The Griesbach hypothesis remained largely unchallenged until the next century.

In the early to middle nineteenth century, synoptic gospel research by such German critics as Christian Gottlob Wilke and Christian Hermann Weise introduced and opened the proposal of Markan priority, that is, that Mark is the earliest gospel; Heinrich Julius Holtzmann, building on their work, argued most convincingly for only Markan priority but also a hypothetical second source to account for the "blems" (over 230 parallel verses found in Matthew and Luke but not Mark), formula what would become known as the Two-Document hypothesis (see below). By now, Matthewan and Markan priority had been proposed for the synoptic gospels, at began intensive research in Germany and elsewhere for a solution to the synoptic problem.

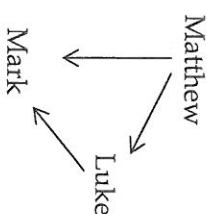


Figure 15.2

Broad Contours of the Synoptic Problem

As implied above, most scholars who agree that Matthew, Mark, and Luke exhibit an overall coherence readily admit they contain notable disparities. With respect to coherence, Table 15.1 shows the relative order of shared material in the three gospels, which clearly begins where Mark begins and ends where Mark ends. Beyond the framework shared with Mark, both Matthew and Luke begin their gospels with an infancy narrative and end them with a set of resurrection appearances. For discussion of the ending appended at a later date to Mark (Mark 16:9–20), which contains resurrection appearances, see Chapter 17, “The Gospel of Mark,” in this volume.

By drilling down through the shared framework to inspect individual pericopes or complexes of pericopes, it is evident the three gospels contain a substantial number of similar or identical verses in pericopes or sets of pericopes, arranged in comparable order and appropriately called the *triple tradition*. Furthermore, it is evident that Matthew and Luke contain some 230 similar or identical verses not found in Mark, and, fittingly they are known as the *double tradition*. While the triple tradition material maintains relatively the same order, the double tradition does not. That is to say, despite several major exceptions (see Neirynck 1990), the sequence of shared material in Matthew, Mark, and Luke is generally maintained throughout,² but the sequence of double tradition material in Matthew rarely follows that in Luke (see Neirynck 1990). As shown in the examples in Table 15.2, although disparities in the triple tradition occur, they are minimal; likewise, parallels in the double tradition indicate a solid literary link. Studying a synopsis, especially its index of parallels, reveals the details of both parallels and disparities in order, content, and style; fine synopses include Sparks, *A Synopsis of the Gospels* (1964) and Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (1982) in English, and Aland, *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum* (1996) and Huck, *Synopsis of the First Three Gospels* (1963) in Greek.

Regarding the contours of the synoptic problem, then, any solution needs to account for both agreements and disagreements in the overall shared framework, individual pericopes or complexes of pericopes, and intra-pericope content. Most investigators of the synoptic problem readily admit that today no solution explains all the data to

Table 15.1 General order of the synoptic gospels

	Matthew	Mark	Luke
Infancy narrative	1:1–2:23		1:5–2:52; 3:23–38
Precursory events	3:1–4:11	1:1–1:3	3:1–22; 4:1–13
Jesus’ days in Galilee	4:12–18:35	1:14–9:50	4:14–9:50
Journey to Jerusalem	19:1–20:34	10:1–52	9:51–19:27
Jesus’ days in Jerusalem	21:1–25:46	11:1–13:37	19:28–21:38
Passion and death	26:1–27:66	14:1–15:47	22:1–23:56
The empty tomb	28:1–8	16:1–8	24:1–12
Resurrection appearances	28:9–20		24:13–52

Table 15.2 Examples of the triple and double traditions

Matthew	Mark	Luke
TRIPLE TRADITION examples (with disparities underlined; cf. Aland 1982: 83, 115)		
9:15b The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.	2:20 The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.	5:35 The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.
13:12 For to him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; <u>but</u> from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away.	4:25 For to him who has will more be given; and from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away.	8:18b ... for to him who has will more be given, and from him who has not, even what <u>he</u> thinks that he has will be taken away

DOUBLE TRADITION examples (with parallels in italics; Aland 1982: 62, 187)

7:12 So <i>whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them</i> ; for this is the law and the prophets.	6:31 And as <i>you wish that men would do to you, do so to them</i>
5:25–6 Make friends quickly with <i>your accuser</i> , while you are going with him to court, <i>lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny.</i>	12:58–9 As you go with <i>your accuser</i> before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, <i>lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. I tell you, you will never get out till you have paid the very last copper.</i>

everyone’s satisfaction; every solution remains imperfect to a degree. While true, this fact supplies the necessary impetus for many to continue searching. J. A. Fitzmyer summarizes the grand shortcoming this way (Fitzmyer 1981: 63):

[The synoptic problem is] a problem that has thus far failed to find a fully satisfying solution. The main reason for this failure is the absence of adequate data for judgment about it. Extrinsic, historically trustworthy data about the composition of these Gospels are totally lacking, and the complexity of the traditions embedded in them, the evangelists’

editorial redaction of them, and their free composition bedevil all attempts to analyze objectively the intrinsic data with critical literary methods.

It is fitting to ask what arguments must be furnished by any viable solution to explain sufficiently the two rudiments mentioned above: the earliest gospel and the direction of literary dependence.

The Problem of Priority: Which Gospel Came First?

Given their literary interdependence, the logical question is which came first, Matthew, Mark, or Luke? The earliest, having "priority," would then serve as a *source* for one or both of the others. Even though in theory the priority of any of them is possible, current research focuses most heavily on Mark, and, to a lesser extent, Matthew. Markan priority means that Mark serves as a source for either Matthew or Luke or both; conversely, Matthewan priority means that Matthew functions as a source for Mark or Luke or both. How is that determined? What arguments support the claim? For the most part, it is solution-specific: see "Prevailing solutions to the synoptic problem" below. Although it sounds simple, the "priority" concept belies underlying complexity due to the number and import of the exceptions found in any solution. In brief, to answer or account for the exceptions, either non-extant or hypothetical sources have been variously proposed: examples include an ur-Mark (a pre-canonical Mark, sometimes called proto-Mark), a deutero-Mark (a post-canonical Mark), a pre-Matthean translated Aramaic sayings source, the source Q (see Chapter 16, "Q: The Sayings Source," in this volume). A further caveat: in describing the three prevailing solutions, two proposing Markan priority and one Matthewan, it is a challenge to use vocabulary not favoring one solution over another; this essay attempts to avoid as much bias as possible and still convey the synoptic problem's pith.

Direction of Dependence

Determining priority first naturally narrows the number of possible configurations vis-à-vis how the gospels interconnect. More specifically, with respect to the other two, do they use the earliest gospel as a source *independently*, or does one use *both* the earliest and the other? Again the answer is solution-specific. Shown in Figure 15.3, if the earliest gospel is denoted by A and the other two by B and B', five possible solutions or configurations of literary dependence exist. While each is possible, the first three exhibit the most plausibility in light of the strictly linear relationship of the last two.

Prevailing Solutions to the Synoptic Problem

After traversal of a brief history and summary of the synoptic problem, it is fitting to become acquainted with three solutions currently in vogue, namely, the Two-Document

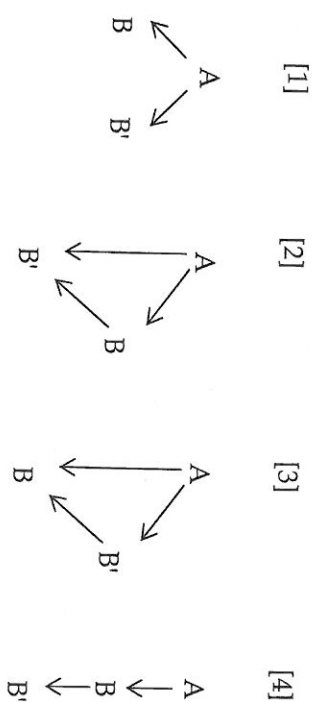


Figure 15.3

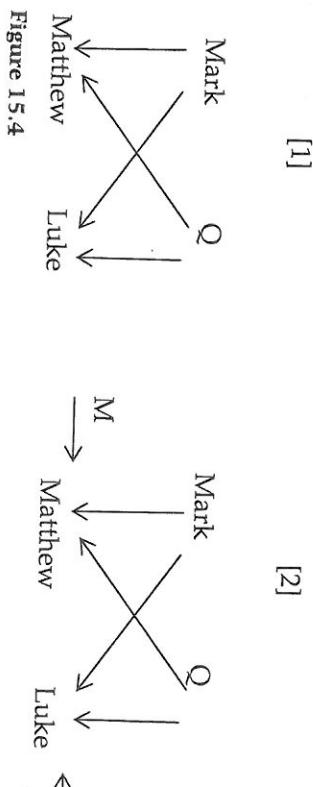


Figure 15.4

hypothesis, the Farrer-Goulder hypothesis, and the Neo-Griesbach hypothesis (sometimes called the Two-Gospel hypothesis).

The Two-Document hypothesis

Historically, as noted, the Two-Document hypothesis, also called the Two-So hypothesis or theory, emerged from biblical analysis in nineteenth-century Germany and is today the most widely accepted solution. In the Two-Document hypothesis, the propositions obtain: first, the priority of Mark, making it a source for Matthew and Luke; second, also a source for Matthew and Luke, a hypothetical "sayings" source, commonly denoted Q, probably derives from *Quelle*, German for "source;" and third, the independent composition of Matthew and Luke (see Chapter 16 in this volume).

Markan priority anchors the Two-Document hypothesis, shown in Figure 15.4. In 1924, British scholar Burnett Hillman Streeter published *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins*, laying out five arguments for Markan priority: (1) Matthew contains at least 90 percent of Mark and Luke over 50 percent in similar or identical language; (2) the tradition material in an average section is seen almost identically in Matthew and Luke

either in both or alternatively: (3) the relative order of Markan material is supported by Matthew and Luke, and where either diverges from Mark, the other agrees with it; (4) the Greek of Mark is more primitive, and thus, appears to be earlier than that of Matthew and Luke; and (5) the distribution of Markan material in Matthew and Luke points to Mark as a single written document used by the authors of Matthew and Luke. Moreover, in addition to Mark and Q, suggests Streeter, material peculiar to each may indicate an earlier tradition. To wit, known as M or Special M, examples of Matthew-only text include the parable of weeds among wheat (Matt. 13:24–30), the unforgiving servant (18:23–35), and workers in the vineyard (20:1–16). Likewise, named L or Special L, examples of Luke-only material include the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37), the prodigal son (15:11–32), and the dishonest steward (16:1–13). Thus, if one considers M and L, or some parts of them, to be documentary sources, Streeter's concept of a "Four-Source" hypothesis also applies, as shown in Figure 15.4[2].

Evidence against the Two-Document hypothesis

The Two-Document hypothesis has an Achilles' heel. If evidence existed that contradicted the independence of Matthew and Luke, then the need for Q would disappear since the double tradition – roughly 230 verses common to Matthew and Luke – could logically be explained by the author of either Matthew or Luke simply copying the other. Numerous minor agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark present such a challenge to the independence of Matthew and Luke. Although no consensus exists as to the precise number, Frans Neirynck (1974) compiled a cumulative list of over 700 minor agreements. The minor agreements are categorized as positive – identical or nearly identical agreements between Matthew and Luke in phrasing, grammar, syntax, or vocabulary – or negative – the identical absence of Markan material. A minor agreement example that is difficult to explain occurs in Mark 14:65, Matthew 26:67–68, and Luke 23:63–5, in the words shouted by those who held Jesus after his arrest. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all attest the imperative "Prophesy" followed in Matthew by "to us, Christ!" but only Matthew and Luke attest the next sentence, an identical sarcastic question, "Who is it that struck you?" If Matthew and Luke wrote independently, how is possible to explain this identical question at the identical location? Sometimes it is suggested the authors of Matthew and Luke copied from a version of Mark other than canonical Mark – either an earlier one (ur-Mark or proto-Mark) or a later one (deutero-Mark). According to these hypotheses, the earlier or later version of Mark was used by Matthew and Luke, not our canonical Mark, contained the question, "Who is it that struck you?" and thus the minor agreement is explained. A second example is the group of minor agreements, two negative and two positive, in Mark 5:27, Matthew 9:20, and Luke 8:44, the story of the woman with the hemorrhage who comes up behind Jesus and touches his garment. Absent from both Matthew and Luke are the Markan clause, "she had heard the things about Jesus" and the phrase, "in the crowd." Present in both Matthew and Luke but not Mark is a prefix on the Greek participle "coming up (to)" to describe the woman's approach to Jesus. More significantly, present in Matthew and Luke but not Mark is the word "finger" to identify what the

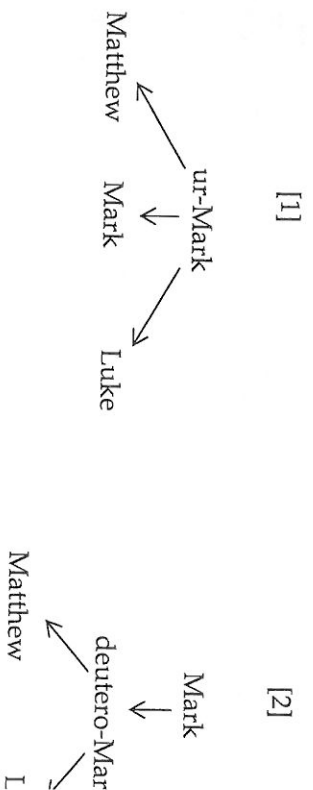


Figure 15.5

woman touches; Mark attests the more generic word "garment." Does this group of negative and two positive minor agreements in such a small segment of text so coincidental but independent editing? Or does it point to a different version of Mark copied by the authors of Matthew and Luke?

The ur-Mark or deutero-Mark concept attractively accounts for the minor agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark (Burkett, 2004; Sanders and Davies 1973). Figure 15.5[1] shows how an earlier version of canonical Mark, ur-Mark, could be a source for not only Matthew and Luke but also canonical Mark. Consider, for instance, saying in Matthew 12:8, Mark 2:28, and Luke 6:5, "the Son of Humanity is of the Sabbath." In Mark, immediately preceding and paired with it is the saying, Sabbath was made for humanity, and not humanity for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27 saying absent from Matthew and Luke. Did Matthew and Luke independently decide to omit it or did they copy from an earlier version of Mark that did not have it? Conveyed in Figure 15.5[2], another possibility suggests the authors of Matthew and Luke copied from a version of Mark later than canonical Mark, namely, deutero-Mark. In same example, the editor of deutero-Mark would have "improved" canonical Mark deleting the saying, "the Sabbath was made for humanity, and not humanity for Sabbath," and thus the authors of Matthew and Luke could not be aware of it; they used (the earlier) canonical Mark. Albert Fuchs, in his five-volume *Spuren Deuteromarkus* (2004, 2007), has devoted extensive study to deutero-Mark to account for the minor agreements of Matthew and Luke against canonical Mark. While at the same time, the ur-Mark or deutero-Mark theory adds a distinct level of complexity to the solution.

In addition to the minor agreements problem are the so-called "Mark-Q" over an embarrassment to the Two-Document hypothesis that raises questions about independence of Matthew and Luke (Stein 1987). For example, the parable of the mustard seed is found in the triple tradition (Matt. 13:31–2; Mark 4:30–2; Luke 13:19). In Mark, however, it is preceded by and paired with a parable unique to Mark, seed growing secretly (Mark 4:26–9); in Matthew and Luke, it is followed by and paired with the parable of the yeast (Matt. 13:33; Luke 13:20–1). Thus it is suggested the mustard seed parable was paired with the yeast parable in Q, resulting in an over with the mustard seed parable in Mark. Likewise, analysis of the Beelzebul contro-

in Matthew 12:24–32, Mark 3:23–30, and Luke 11:15–22 shows seeming overlaps between Mark and “Q.” Although problematic to the Two-Document hypothesis, “Mark-Q” overlaps do explain certain minor agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark.

Advocates of the Two-Document hypothesis admit the difficulty in accounting for minor agreements between Matthew and Luke but often understand them as coincidences of independent redaction, evidence of textual corruption (Streeter 1930: 306ff.), or instances of overlapping oral tradition (Stein 1987: 113ff.). Challenges of the Two-Document hypothesis quickly point out that the sheer number of minor agreements militates against the Two-Document hypothesis as a viable solution to the synoptic problem.

The Farrer–Goulder hypothesis, or Mark without Q

In 1955, Austin Farrer proposed a solution to the synoptic problem, built on Markan priority but without the need for Q (Farrer 1955). Shown in Figure 15.6, Farrer’s hypothesis is that, if the author of Luke copied from both Mark and Matthew, Q is dispensable. This hypothesis was taken up and furthered by Farrer’s student, Michael Goulder; hence, it is often called the Farrer–Goulder hypothesis.

Questions about Lukan primitivity arise again. If Matthew was written before Luke, how is apparent Lukan primitivity explained, and indeed, primitivity that alternates between Matthew and Luke? In the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:2–12; Luke 6:20–3), for example, there has been almost unanimous agreement that Luke 6:20b (“Blessed are the poor”) is more primitive than Matthew 5:3a (“Blessed are the poor in spirit”). The addition of “in spirit” by Matthew’s author is usually said to dovetail neatly with the Matthean theological agenda. Mark Goodacre, an adherent of the Farrer–Goulder hypothesis, however, replies by arguing that Lukan primitivity in this case is simply presumed by scholars (2001: 133ff.). He offers an equally plausible idea: the removal of “in spirit” by Luke’s author neatly dovetails with the Lukan theological agenda of attending to the poor and destitute. Goodacre argues Lukan secondarily should not be dismissed in light of equally plausible arguments for Matthean primitivity. Problematic for the Farrer–Goulder hypothesis are the dissimilarities in the Matthean and Lukan infancy and resurrection narratives. Both infancy narratives (Matt. 1–2; Luke 1–2) contain certain themes intrinsic to the story, for example, (1) Jesus’ parents are named

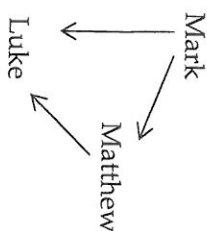


Figure 15.6

Mary and Joseph: (2) Jesus was born in the city of Bethlehem; and (3) the family up living in Nazareth. If Matthew served as a source for Luke, the striking difference must also be explained, for instance, (1) in Matthew, Mary and Joseph appear in Bethlehem already but in Luke, they travel there; (2) in Matthew, an angel speaks to Joseph but in Luke, he speaks to Mary; (3) in Matthew, Gentile Magi come to worship Jesus but in Luke, Jewish shepherds; and (4) in Matthew, the family from Beth flees to Egypt only to end up settling in Nazareth, but in Luke, the family does not to Egypt, rather it returns home to Nazareth. Disparities outweigh similarities; distinctive resurrection appearances in Matthew and Luke as well (Matt. 28:16–20; Luke 24:13–53).

The Neo-Griesbach hypothesis

The Neo-Griesbach hypothesis, also called the Two-Gospel hypothesis, is a revival of the eighteenth-century proposal by Johann Jakob Griesbach shown in Figure 15.7. Because of an emphasis on the literary relationship between Matthew and Luke, Griesbach’s theory left the Matthew–Luke relationship somewhat open-ended. In the twentieth century, a revival of the Griesbach hypothesis, most notably by W. Farmer in *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis* (1976), addressed this situation. Based on Matthean priority as well as Luke’s dependence on Matthew and Luke’s dependence on Matthew and Luke, the Neo-Griesbach hypothesis requires no Q source since the double tradition is accounted for by Luke’s author copying Matthew. The author of Mark then copied material from Matthew and Luke where they agreed, but copied from one or the other or neither when they disagreed. As a result, Matthew and Luke do not generally agree with each other against Mark.

Evidence against the Neo-Griesbach hypothesis

The Neo-Griesbach hypothesis faces major challenges of a qualitative rather than quantitative nature (Tuckett 1983). Since Mark would be an abridgement of Matthew and Luke, the Neo-Griesbach hypothesis must explain the omission of germane material from Matthew and Luke. Why would the author of Mark omit the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4) or key sayings from the Matthean Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) or Lukan parables such as the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–7) or prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32)? The Markan abridgement also requires a puzzling section of the Matthean sermons. Further, the Neo-Griesbach hypothesis must quietly explain passages in which Luke is considered more primitive than Matthew. Due in part to the starkness of its structure and language, for instance, the Lord’s Prayer in Luke (Luke 11:2–4) is usually considered more primitive than that in Matthew (Matt. 6:9–13). Since the Neo-Griesbach hypothesis requires Matthean primitivity, how does it explain the occurrences of seeming primary material in Luke? Even Griesbach’s time, supporters of his theory questioned these instances of apparent Lukan primitivity.

Major Issues and Directions in Recent Study

Noted at the beginning of this essay, synoptic problem research has recently experienced a surge in the number of publications that offer new theories as well as fresh perspectives on and reassessments of existing ones. As a result, the Two-Document hypothesis, whose supremacy was at one time almost incontrovertible, is now more regularly called into question. Coming out are fresh perspectives on the *Gospel of Thomas* (see below) and the *Marcionite Gospel* (Klinghardt 2008) as they relate to the synoptic problem. Furthermore, forthcoming is a volume of significant essays presented by a group of specialists at the Oxford Conference on the Synoptic Problem in 2008; for a summary of these papers on topics such as the Farrer–Goulder hypothesis, the *Gospel of Thomas*, the Griesbach hypothesis, the minor agreements, synopses, and the Two-Document hypothesis, see Batovici 2009.

Mark Goodacre, a noted synoptic problem scholar, suggests those who actually study or write about the synoptic problem are quite evenly divided on their allegiance to the Two-Document hypothesis, whereas those whose scholarly focus lies elsewhere adopt “a kind of blithe confidence, almost a complacency over the correctness of the Two-Source Theory” (Goodacre 2001: 24).

Solutions other than the Two-Document hypothesis, the Farrer–Goulder hypothesis, and the Neo-Griesbach hypothesis have so far garnered only minor support, but that may not hold for the future. The Boismard hypothesis is fascinating as the most technically complex solution proposed so far. A Multi-Source theory from Delbert Burkett (2004) proposes a two-tiered set of “proto-Mark” sources. Finally, Matthean posteriority is explored by Ronald V. Huggins (1992).

The Boismard hypothesis

The Boismard hypothesis attests to the principle that the greater the number of problems solved, the greater the complexity of the solution (Benoit and Boismard 1972). The Boismard solution, shown in Figure 15.7, proposes a Palestinian proto-gospel (A), a Gentile–Christian revision of it (B), and an early independent document, perhaps from Palestine (C) as well as the Q sayings source, an “interim Matthew” (dependent on A and Q), an “interim Mark” (dependent on A, B, and C), and a “proto-Luke” (dependent on “interim Matthew,” B, C, and Q). Canonical Matthew is thus dependent on “interim Mark” and “interim Matthew.” Canonical Mark is at least dependent on “interim Mark” with perhaps a link to “interim Matthew.” Canonical Luke is dependent on “interim Mark” and “proto-Luke.”

Its complexity notwithstanding, the Boismard solution accounts for all problematic circumstances so far identified. Because it posits at least six hypothetical documents in addition to the Q sayings source, to trace the directions of literary dependence along this array of trajectories means the adoption of support for evidence yet to be discovered.

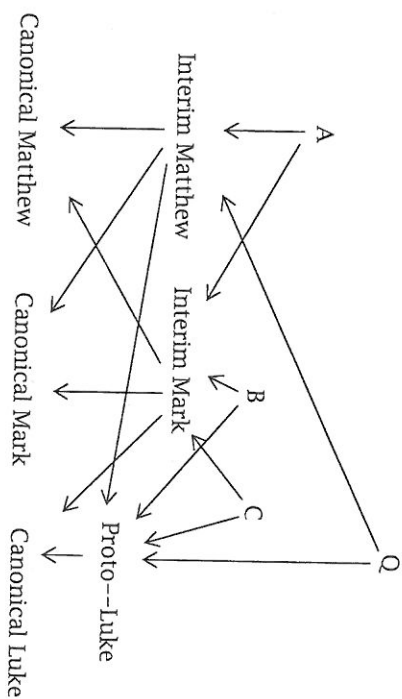


Figure 15.7

A new Multi-Source theory

A new Multi-Source theory argued by Delbert Burkett (2004) derives from a c analysis of key redactional elements in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Arguing that of the synoptic gospels could have been the source for the others, Burkett's hypothesis understands a “proto-Mark” source, edited into “proto-Mark A” and “proto-Mark B” which in turn along with Q served as a source for canonical Matthew and Luke, respectively. Both “proto-Mark A” and “proto-Mark B” served as a source for canonical as well as K, which is simply Markan redaction and material peculiar to Mark. Although complex, due to the rigor of Burkett's arguments, this theory deserves attention exploration.

A Matthean posteriority hypothesis

Ronald V. Huggins (1992) explores the theory of Matthean posteriority built on a figuration of Markan priority, Lukan dependence on Mark, and Matthean dependence on Luke and Mark. Not often addressed, this configuration offers answers to problems. The need for Q or other hypothetical documents is eliminated and the agreements and problems with Lukan dependence on Matthew are explained. Burkett's new Multi-Source theory, Matthean posteriority deserves further attention.

Concluding Observations

No solution to the synoptic problem has yet been accepted as the *opinio communis*. On the one hand, the Two-Document hypothesis, the Farrer–Goulder hypothesis and the Neo-Griesbach hypothesis in their contrasting ways explain almost all the

interdependencies among the synoptic gospels. The Two-Document hypothesis operates effectively at the level of generality but less successfully explains the numerous minor agreements between Matthew and Luke. The Farrer–Goulder hypothesis dispenses with the need for a hypothetical document, Q, but must answer the question of apparent alternating primitivity in Matthew and Luke. The Neo-Griesbach hypothesis does not sufficiently explain the rationale behind the literary license and editorial judgment exercised by the author of Mark, although it solves the synoptic problem at a purely technical level. On the other hand, complex solutions require a multi-tiered framework of hypothetical documents to account for all the evidence. To many who observe current developments in synoptic problem research, a solution seems farther away than ever. The trend toward complexity shows dissatisfaction with the simpler yet imperfect solutions. Skepticism of complex solutions, however, leads to the conclusion there may be no recoverable solution. Until scholars agree that recoverability is impossible or a solution obtains permanent, unquestioned acceptance, fresh approaches and improvements to existing solutions must and will continue to be sought.

Notes

- 1 This section owes much to the synoptic problem history found in Dungan 1999 as well as Kümmel 1972.
- 2 Exceptions occurring within the triple tradition tend to follow a three-part pattern (Stein 1987: 34–7; Sanders and Davies 1989: 88ff.). First, when Matthew's gospel diverges from the parallel sequence, Mark and Luke still agree. In Matthew 4:23, for instance, the summary of Jesus' teaching in Galilee shows up out of relative order when compared to Mark 1:39 and Luke 4:44; or, in Matthew 10:1–4 the selection of the twelve appears out of order when viewed against Mark 3:13–19 and Luke 6:12–16. Second, when Luke's gospel diverges from the parallel sequence, Mark and Matthew still agree. In Luke 4:16–30, for example, the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth is out of relative order when compared to Matthew 13:53–8 and Mark 6:1–6a. Third, as a rule Mark's gospel does not diverge at all.
- 3 Evidence of "Markan priority" is sometimes considered biased toward the solution it supports. Occasionally preferred is the concept that Mark stands in the "middle" between Matthew and Luke. "Middle" Mark suggests a more objective, less biased assessment of the evidence; thus, in the Two-Document hypothesis, the "middle" position of Mark translates to Markan priority, whereas in the Neo-Griesbach hypothesis, the "middle" position of Mark translates to Markan posteriority. See Goodacre 2001: 50ff.

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