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Chapter 1

ENTERING THE MAZE: STUDYING THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM

1. *Harmonies and Synopses*

The traditional Nativity Play is a familiar part of Christmas—little girls dressed as angels with tinsel halos, shepherds with head-dresses made from tea-towels, kings with glittering crowns made of foil, the Virgin Mary dressed in blue holding a doll, and Joseph, in his dressing gown, looking on. What all such plays have in common is that they are *harmonies* of the biblical accounts of the birth of Jesus. They take some details from Matthew and others from Luke. It is Matthew who stresses the role of Joseph and Luke who concentrates on Mary. It is Matthew who has the magi, Luke the shepherds and angels. Only Matthew has the star in the east; only Luke has the census and the manger. In the Nativity Plays, and for that matter on Christmas cards and advent calendars too, the distinction between Matthew's Gospel and Luke's is an irrelevance. There is one story of the birth of Jesus, and that story is produced by harmonizing the details of each account together.

This is the popular way to read the Gospels. The interest is in the story of Jesus and not in the peculiarities of each of our four canonical Gospels. Most of the Jesus films adopt the same course—they harmonize the events recorded in the Gospels in the attempt to produce a coherent, dramatic narrative. *King of Kings* (1961), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) and *The Miracle Maker* (2000) all, alike, carefully combine events and details from different Gospels in the service of their narrative. To take just one example, *Jesus Christ Superstar* features a scene in which Mary Magdalene, who is characterized as a prostitute, anoints Jesus not long before his death, and Judas complains about the cost. This draws together several elements from all four Gospels, an anonymous woman anointing Jesus in Mark 14 and Matthew 27; an

anonymous 'sinner' woman anointing Jesus in Luke 7; a mention of 'Mary, called Magdalene' just afterwards in Lk. 8.2; Mary of Bethany anointing Jesus in John 12; and Judas complaining about the cost in the same chapter. In watching the simple scene, one would hardly have guessed the extent to which the sources for its several strands are scattered in our canonical Gospels.

This way of reading the Gospels is not simply a recent and popular development. It is the way in which they have been read for most of their history. It proceeds in part from an embarrassment that there should be four Gospels in the Bible and not one. If we are to think of 'gospel truth' and the reliability of Scripture, there might seem to be a problem in the fact that the first four books in the New Testament announce themselves as the Gospels *According to* Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

This was a problem that was keenly felt from the earliest times and the Church Fathers, from the second century onwards, often engaged in the attempt to 'apologize' for the difficulty. One such character was the apologist Tatian, who dealt with the difficulty at the end of the second century by composing a harmony of all four Gospels entitled the *Diatessaron*, in which details from all four Gospels were woven together with painstaking care. This was the first of many down the centuries. Indeed the heyday of such harmonies was probably the nineteenth century, when bookshelves were awash with books that were, essentially, harmonies of the Gospel accounts presented as *The Life of Jesus*. Even Charles Dickens wrote a pious *Life of our Lord*.

But since the late eighteenth century, the harmonies have had a very important rival. For in 1776, a German scholar, Johann Jakob Griesbach, produced the first *Synopsis* of the Gospels.¹ A *Synopsis* is a book in which parallel accounts in the Gospels are placed side by side for the sake of comparison, like this:

<i>Matthew 8.2</i>	<i>Mark 1.40</i>	<i>Luke 5.12</i>
And behold, a leper having approached Jesus worshipped him, saying,	And a leper came to him, beseeching him and bending his knee, saying,	...And behold, a man full of leprosy; and having seen Jesus, he fell before his face, saying,

1. J.J. Griesbach, *Synopsis Evangeliorum Matthaei, Marci et Lucae* (Halle, 1776).

'Lord, if you will, you are able to cleanse me'.	to him, 'If you will, you are able to cleanse me'.	'Lord, if you will, you are able to cleanse me'.
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Now, far from harmonizing the discrepancies, the *Synopsis* actually draws attention to them. One can see at a glance here what is similar in Matthew, Mark and Luke and what is different. Whereas Matthew and Mark talk about 'a leper', Luke refers to 'a man full of leprosy'; whereas in Mark the leper 'beseeches' Jesus, 'bending his knee', in Matthew he 'worshipped him', and so on.

Summary

- The popular tendency when reading the Gospels is to *harmonize* them.
- The Gospels have been read in this way since the second century.
- The Gospels can be read in *Synopsis*, that is, in such a way that different accounts can be compared and contrasted.

2. *The Synoptics and John*

Viewing the Gospels in *Synopsis* has had two key consequences. The first is the birth of the term 'Synoptic Gospels'. The first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke can be arranged in columns so that they might be 'viewed together' (*syn* = with; *opsis* = look at). The account of the healing of the Leper, quoted above, is not in John. Indeed John features few of the incidents shared by the other three Gospels, and when he does feature a parallel story, such as the Feeding of the Five Thousand (Jn 6), the wording varies so greatly that setting up columns is a very complex matter.

Summary

- Viewing material in *Synopsis* involves Matthew, Mark and Luke but not John. Matthew, Mark and Luke are therefore called '*Synoptic Gospels*'.

3. The Literary Relationship of the Synoptics

The second, related consequence of the appearance of the *Synopsis* is the birth of *the Synoptic Problem* and it is no coincidence that J.J. Griesbach, the scholar who produced the first *Synopsis*, was also the first to provide a critical solution to the Synoptic Problem.² Before considering the solutions, however, let us look at the problem. The Synoptic Problem might be defined as *the study of the similarities and differences of the Synoptic Gospels in an attempt to explain their literary relationship*.

It is a fundamental assumption of the study of the Synoptic Problem that the first three Gospels share some kind of literary relationship. In other words, there is some degree of dependence in some direction at a literary level. Occasionally a dissenting voice will sound, but, on the whole, this is a firm consensus in scholarship, and perhaps the last one in the subject—for after this, as we shall see, opinions begin to diverge. This consensus is based on the fact that there is substantial agreement between Matthew, Mark and Luke on matters of language and order. One sees the agreement in language in the example of the leper (above). Often the agreement is close, as in our next example.³

<i>Matthew 9.9</i>	<i>Mark 2.14</i>	<i>Luke 5.27</i>
And having passed on from there, Jesus saw a man seated in the tax-office, named Matthew, and he says to him, 'Follow me'. And having arisen, he followed him.	And having passed on he saw Levi son of Alphaeus seated in the tax-office, and he says to him, 'Follow me'. And having arisen, he followed him.	And he saw a tax-collector named Levi seated in the tax-office, and he said to him, 'Follow me'. And having left everything and having arisen, he followed him.

2. *Commentatio qua Marci Evangelium totum e Matthaei et Lucae commentariis decerptum esse monstratur* (A demonstration that Mark was written after Matthew and Luke) (Jena, 1789–90), in Bernard Orchard and Thomas R.W. Longstaff (eds.), *J.J. Griesbach: Synoptic and Text-Critical Studies 1776-1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 103–35.

3. The term 'says' in both Matthew and Mark here is known as 'the historic present', a device whereby the evangelists (especially Mark) write about past events in the present tense. I have preferred to keep the translation in the present tense in order that one can see differences between use of tense in the synoptics.

Some have argued that the closeness in agreement between the Synoptics could be due to faithful recording of the committed-to-memory words of Jesus, but significantly, in cases like this, close agreement is not limited to the words of Jesus, and it will not do to argue on this basis that the Gospels are linked only orally. There is agreement in both narrative material and in sayings material.

It is, nevertheless, worth noting just how close some of the agreement in records of speech is among the Gospels—and records not just of Jesus' words. This example comes from the preaching of John the Baptist, this time found only in Matthew and Luke, and so in two columns:

<i>Mt. 3.7-10</i>	<i>Lk. 3.7-9</i>
'Offspring of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Bear fruit therefore worthy of repentance and do not <i>presume</i> to say in yourselves, "We have Abraham as father"; for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Already the axe is laid at the root of the trees; for every tree not producing good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire'.	'Offspring of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Bear fruit therefore worthy of repentance and do not <i>begin</i> to say in yourselves, "We have Abraham as father"; for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Already the axe is laid at the root of the trees; for every tree not producing good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire'.

The wording is virtually identical—only the word for 'presume' (Matthew) and 'begin' (Luke) differs. Nor is this an isolated instance. The reader who picks up the Synopsis will quickly find at random plenty of examples of close agreement between two or three of the synoptic parallel accounts of given instances.

The thesis that this agreement is due to some kind of literary dependence seems to be quickly confirmed by the matter of order. It is striking that Matthew, Mark and Luke all have substantial similarities in the way in which they structure their gospels. It is not just that they share the broad framework of events, John the Baptist—Baptism—Temptation—Ministry in Galilee—journey to Jerusalem—crucifixion—resurrection. What is noticeable is the extent to which incidents and sayings follow in parallel across two, or sometimes all three Synoptics. Sometimes, these include events that are not in an obvious chronological,

cause-and-effect relationship. The following sequence illustrates the point.⁴

<i>Matthew</i>	<i>Mark</i>	<i>Luke</i>	<i>Event</i>
16.13-20	8.27-30	9.18-21	Peter's Confession
16.21-23	8.31-33	9.22	Prediction of the Passion
16.24-28	8.34-9.1	9.23-27	On Discipleship
17.1-8	9.2-8	9.28-36	Transfiguration
17.9-13	9.9-13		Coming of Elijah
17.14-20	9.14-29	9.37-43a	Healing of an Epileptic
17.22-23	9.30-32	9.43b-45	Second Passion Prediction
17.24-27			Temple Tax
18.1-5	9.33-37	9.46-48	Dispute about Greatness
	9.38-41	9.49-50	Strange Exorcist
18.6-9	9.42-48		On Offences

This example, covering just over a chapter in Matthew and Mark, and a little less than a chapter in Luke, is typical. In incident after incident, two or three of the Synoptics agree on order. There is variation, of course. Luke's account of the Rejection at Nazareth is earlier in his Gospel (4.16-30) than the parallel account in Mark (6.1-6a) or Matthew (13.53-8). Matthew's version of the Healing of the Paralytic comes later on (9.1-8) than does that incident in Mark (2.1-12) or Luke (5.17-26). But the order of accounts, or *pericopae*, always converges again after a while. It is usually held that this state of affairs is simply too great either for coincidence or for an orally remembered record. The explanation has to be, on some level, a literary one.

Some, no doubt, will feel that a firmly fixed oral tradition behind the Gospels could explain these data, claiming perhaps that the obsession with written texts is a modern preoccupation. Here, though, we need to notice that there are hints in all three Synoptic Gospels themselves that the connections between them are of a direct, literary kind. First, both Matthew and Mark agree with each other on the interesting narrator's aside in the apocalyptic discourse, 'Let the reader understand' (Mt. 24.15//Mk 13.14, the same three words in Greek). This points clearly and self-consciously to texts that are read⁵ and to some kind literary relationship between these two Gospels.

4. Where a space is left, this means that the incident is not in parallel here in the Gospel concerned.

5. I do not think, however, that we should rule out the possibility, even

Further, Luke's Gospel begins with a literary preface in which he mentions the 'narratives' of his predecessors, implying he sees his task 'to write' a Gospel as being influenced by and critical of their attempts (Lk. 1.1-4). If there is one thing that seems clear, it is that there is some kind of literary relationship among the Synoptic Gospels.

Summary

- Viewing material in Synopsis has given birth to the *Synoptic Problem*.
- The Synoptic Problem is the study of the similarities and differences of the Synoptic Gospels in an attempt to explain their literary relationship.
- The Synoptics feature some very close agreement in both wording and order.
- The scholarly consensus is that this suggests a literary relationship between them.

4. The History of the Investigation

This literary relationship is what constitutes the Synoptic Problem. As soon as one has noticed the similarities and the differences among the Synoptics, one is naturally eager to find an explanation. Why the varieties in agreement in language and order among them? Could any of the evangelists have known the work of one (or more) of the others? Are they dependent on older, now lost written sources? It is the attempt to answer these questions that has been meat and drink to Synoptic scholars for the last two hundred years or so. Indeed, it could be said that the history of the investigation of the Synoptic Problem is the history of proposed solutions to it.

J.J. Griesbach, as we have already seen, not only produced the first *Synopsis* but also produced the first real solution to the Synoptic

likelihood, that the Gospels were primarily designed to be read aloud to groups of people, in which case the reference here to 'the reader' is a direct address to the one reading aloud to the people, perhaps encouraging him or her to place special stress on this part of the text. The point about these being texts with a *literary* relationship of course remains even if these texts were read aloud. We are still talking about text to text relationship rather than about oral tradition to text relationship.

Problem, the solution that bears his name⁶ and which has recently been revived, as we will see in more detail later on. It is not his theory, though, that has dominated the discipline. Rather, the history of the study of the Synoptic Problem is largely identical with the history of the emergence of what came to be the dominant hypothesis, the Two-Source Theory.

a. *The Two-Source Theory*

The Two-Source Theory has two facets: the Priority of Mark and the Q hypothesis. It solves the Synoptic Problem by postulating independent use of Mark's Gospel by both Matthew and Luke, who are also held to have had independent access to a now lost document that scholars call 'Q'. Roughly speaking, Matthew and Luke are dependent on Mark in all those passages 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. It is represented diagrammatically like this:

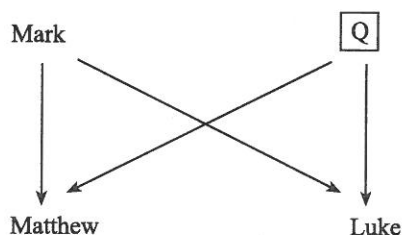


Fig. 1. *The Two-Source Theory*

The two facets of this theory, Markan Priority and Q, both emerged relatively early in the history of the discipline. That is, they were already well established by the beginning of the twentieth century. Although Markan Priority is really the older of the two, advocated already at the end of the eighteenth century, Q was well established by the end of the nineteenth century and often at this stage called 'Logia' (Sayings), in German *Logienquelle* (Sayings Source). Indeed the term

6. See n. 2 above. But to complicate matters, it is now thought that the 'Griesbach Theory' was actually conceived first by Henry Owen, *Observations on the Four Gospels* (London: T. Payne, 1764).

'Q' is thought to have originated as the first letter of the German word *Quelle*, meaning source.⁷

Right down to the present, this has remained the most popular way to solve the Synoptic Problem. It has been finely tuned, has been given many variations, and has been challenged from many quarters, but this basic two-pronged hypothesis has remained fairly effectively intact. In Germany it is still very much what one might call 'critical orthodoxy'. Famously, in the mid 1960s, one biblical critic spoke about abandoning use of the term 'hypothesis' to describe it altogether. 'We can in fact regard it as an assured finding', he said.⁸

Summary

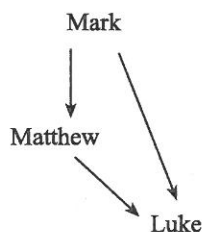
- The *Two-Source Theory* is the most popular way of solving the Synoptic Problem, especially among German scholars
- According to the Two-Source Theory, Matthew and Luke independently used two sources, *Mark* and an hypothetical source called *Q*.

b. *The Farrer Theory*

The Two-Source Theory has had a rougher ride, though, in Great Britain and the United States. In Great Britain a steady challenge has been mounted over the last half century or so from those who, while accepting Markan Priority, are doubtful about Q. For this group, Luke reads not only Mark but also Matthew:

7. Those interested in pursuing the history of the investigation of the problem in more detail might find W.G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (ET; London: SCM Press, 1966), pp. 37-42, a good starting-point. For the pre-history of the Synoptic Problem broadly conceived, see David L. Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition and the Interpretation of the Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

8. Willi Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament: An Approach to its Problems* (ET; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), p. 118.

Fig. 2. *The Farrer Theory*

This movement began with the Oxford scholar Austin Farrer, whose seminal article 'On Dispensing with Q' appeared in 1955.⁹ Farrer claims that if it can be shown to be plausible that Luke knew Matthew as well as Mark, then the Q theory becomes superfluous to requirements—one can 'dispense' with Q. But Farrer only wrote the one article on this topic. Michael Goulder, originally a pupil of Austin Farrer, has become the key advocate for this theory, devoting two books and many articles to arguing the case with vigour.¹⁰ Over the years, the theory has gathered a handful of prominent supporters. In Great Britain it is this thesis that has become the Two-Source Theory's greatest rival.

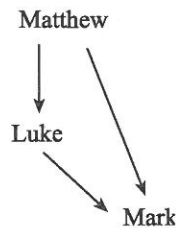
c. *The Griesbach Theory*

In the United States, the main contemporary challenger to the Two-Source Theory is currently the Griesbach Theory, already mentioned, which was revived by William Farmer in his book *The Synoptic Problem* in 1964.¹¹ This theory dispenses with *both* facets of the Two-Source Theory, not only Q but also Markan Priority. Mark therefore comes third and uses both Matthew, written first, and Luke, who read Matthew. It might be represented diagrammatically like this:

9. Austin Farrer, 'On Dispensing With Q', in D.E. Nineham (ed.), *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R.H. Lightfoot* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1955), pp. 55-88 (reproduced on-line at Mark Goodacre [ed.], *The Case Against Q: A Synoptic Problem Web Site*, <http://NTGateway.com/Q>).

10. Michael D. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974) and *Luke: A New Paradigm* (JSNTSup, 20; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989). For further bibliography on the Farrer Theory, see Goodacre, *The Case Against Q* (previous note).

11. W.R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2nd edn, 1976).

Fig. 3. *The Griesbach Theory*

A weighty and vocal minority continue to advocate this hypothesis with energy and application.

Summary

- The two most important rivals to the Two-Source Theory are the *Farrer Theory* and the *Griesbach Theory*.
- *The Farrer Theory* advocates Markan Priority but dispenses with Q by postulating Luke's knowledge of Matthew as well as Mark.
- *The Griesbach Theory* advocates neither Markan Priority nor Q, but postulates Matthean Priority, Luke's use of Matthew and Mark's use of both.

d. *The Contemporary Situation*

It is worth stressing, though, that however vocal the minorities are that present these alternative hypotheses, these do nevertheless remain minority theories. Even in Great Britain and the United States, where the Synoptic Problem is still often openly discussed, the Two-Source Theory is accepted without question by the vast majority of scholars in the discipline. If one were to take off the shelf at random almost any contemporary book on the Gospels, that book is likely to assume the correctness of the Two-Source Theory. It is a matter that is simply taken for granted in much of the scholarship, a mind set that does not often get suspended, even for a moment.

There is actually an interesting phenomenon in contemporary Gospel scholarship, a division between those who have written books and articles directly dealing with the Synoptic Problem and those who have not. Among those who might be called experts on the Synoptic

Problem, there is a variety of opinion—a good proportion believe in the Two-Source Theory but an equally high proportion question at least some aspect of it. On the other hand, among those who write books on the Gospels not dealing directly with the Synoptic Problem, there tends to be a kind of blithe confidence, almost a complacency over the correctness of the Two-Source Theory. It is a interesting state of affairs. It will be exciting to see whether in this new century the dissenting voices will be stilled by the weight of an overwhelming consensus opinion, or whether the doubters' views will steadily impinge on, and gradually transform their opponents' determined stance.

Summary

- The vast majority of New Testament scholars accept the Two-Source Theory.
- Among experts on the Synoptic Problem, the Two-Source Theory is still controversial.

5. Why Study the Synoptic Problem?

The thought that this kind of question will continue to rage on for many years may of course fill some with horror. Surely, after all this time, a final solution ought to have been settled upon? Or, since a solution that satisfies everyone has not been found, it might be said that it is time to surrender the hope of achieving a complete consensus and to devote one's labour to more profitable enterprises. But the Synoptic Problem will not go away. It continues to exert a fascination and an importance like nothing else in biblical studies. One might say that there are, broadly, four reasons—historical, theological, cultural and literary—that make the study of the Synoptic Problem worthwhile.

a. History

One of the main reasons for the continued interest is undoubtedly the matter of historical enquiry. For most New Testament scholars, in spite of the rise of new, sometimes profitable ways of reading texts, historical questions remain important and interesting. How historically accurate are our Gospels? Is one more reliable or authentic than any of the others? Is there any way of locating traditions within the Gospels that

may represent a more dependable strand than others? Questions like this, whether consciously or otherwise, have always been at the heart of study of the Synoptic Problem.

Many have used the Synoptic Problem as a means to help in the quest of the historical Jesus. First one finds the most reliable sources and then one uses them to reconstruct Jesus' life. This has been particularly the case in relation to the Two-Source Theory. In much of the older scholarship, for example, Mark's Gospel was stressed as a valuable, primitive historical source. More recently, in some American scholarship there has been a great stress on Q as the most primitive 'lost gospel', reconstructions of which provide an especially valuable source of information on the historical Jesus.

It does need to be noticed, though, that there are difficulties with this quest. Its basic assumption, that earliest is best, is open to challenge. A truer word may be spoken by one who long post-dates the events he or she is describing than by one who writes closer to those same events. Further, given the variety of opinion on the Synoptic Problem, one is really walking across a minefield if one relies on one particular theory, whether the Two-Source Theory or another, in reconstructing the life of the historical Jesus. Some recent studies on Jesus thus avoid committing themselves on synoptic theories altogether.

Nevertheless, doing historical study of the New Testament period is not simply a matter of looking at the historical Jesus. There are other historical questions that are interesting. The issue of whether or not Mark preceded Matthew is itself a fascinating question. Let us illustrate this with another example, an example that, incidentally, illustrates nicely the way in which different evangelists produce different information on the same character—all say that the man in this story is rich, Matthew alone says that he is young and Luke alone says that he is a ruler:

<i>Matthew 19.16-17</i>	<i>Mark 10.17-18</i>	<i>Luke 18.18-19</i>
And behold, one having approached him said, 'Teacher, what <i>good</i> shall I do in order that I might have eternal life?' And he said to him, 'Why do	And as he was setting out on the way, one having run and knelt before him asked him, ' <i>Good</i> teacher, what shall I do in order that I might inherit eternal life? And Jesus said to him, 'Why do you	And a certain ruler asked him, ' <i>Good</i> teacher, what having done shall I inherit eternal life?' And Jesus said to him, 'Why do you

<i>you ask me concerning good? One there is who is good'.</i>	<i>call me good? No-one is good except God alone'.</i>	<i>call me good? No-one is good except God alone'.</i>
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What is interesting is the position of the first 'good' in Matthew on the one hand and Mark and Luke on the other. Most believe that Matthew is using Mark here and that he is troubled by the implication of the question 'Why do you call me good?' Matthew therefore rephrases (very slightly) in such a way as to change the question and avoid the difficult implication that Jesus might be admitting to not being wholly 'good'. Here, perhaps, we witness an interesting moment in the development of Christian doctrine, for in the change from the unembarrassed brashness of Mark to the more measured, reverential Matthew, we see perceptions of Jesus' identity subtly changing.¹²

But then if one believes instead in Matthaean Priority, the matter is reversed—Mark (or Luke and then Mark) makes the earlier, reverential Matthew more 'gritty' and realistic. The move from one form of words to another, though perhaps more surprising, remains just as interesting. And there are many such striking differences between the Synoptics. Let us take another illustration:

<i>Matthew 8.25-26</i>	<i>Mark 4.38-39</i>	<i>Luke 8.24-25</i>
And the disciples, having approached him, awoke him saying, 'Lord, save! We are perishing!' * Then, having got up, he rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm'. *And he says to them, 'Why are you afraid, ye of little faith?'	And they awoke him and say to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' And having awoken, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Be silent! Be muzzled!' And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. And he said to them, 'Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?'	And having approached him they awoke him saying, 'Master Master, we are perishing!' And having awoken, he rebuked the wind and the raging of the water. And they ceased, and there was a calm. And he said to them, 'Where is your faith?'

12. For an excellent discussion of these issues, see Peter Head, *Christology and the Synoptic Problem: An Argument for Markan Priority* (SNTSMS, 94; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

One cannot help noticing a contrast here between Mark on the one hand and Matthew and Luke on the other. Mark's Jesus shows no respect for the disciples: 'Have you still no faith?' And the disciples, apparently, show no respect for Jesus: 'Do you not care...?' In both Matthew and Luke there is more reverence. In Matthew they have 'little faith', not none, and in Luke the question is, 'Where is your faith?', as if this is but a temporary lapse. Likewise, in neither Matthew nor Luke do they ask the insulting question, 'Do you not care...?'

Again, then, one finds significant differences revealed as soon as parallel accounts are placed in Synopsis. It is seeing the accounts in parallel that focuses important issues. And one inevitably finds oneself asking interesting historical questions: Why are Matthew and Luke more reverential in their portrait of Jesus? Why does Mark apparently paint the disciples of Jesus in such a negative light?

Summary

- Scholars use the Synoptic Problem in an attempt to solve historical puzzles.
- The Two-Source Theory is sometimes used to help in the quest of the historical Jesus.
- The Synoptic Problem asks interesting historical questions about the Gospels and their place in the development of Christianity.

b. Theology

Such questions are not, of course, only of historical interest, for clearly they have important theological dimensions. Indeed synoptic study, by accentuating the differences between the Gospels, can help to sharpen important theological questions. To follow on from the above examples, what does synoptic study tell us about shades of first-century Christology? What does it tell us about the way the disciples, some of whom became the leaders of the Church, were viewed?

The way in which the Synoptic Problem can help to focus theological issues might be illustrated from a famous synoptic comparison. The institution of the Eucharist is found not only in the Synoptics but also in Paul (1 Cor. 11). This is an excerpt:

<i>Matthew</i> 26.27-28	<i>Mark 14.23-24</i>	<i>Luke 22.20</i>	<i>1 Corinthians</i> 11.25
And after he had taken the cup and given thanks, he gave it to them saying, 'Drink from it, all.	And after he had taken the cup and given thanks, he gave it to them and they all drank from it. And he said to them,	And likewise (he took) the cup after supper,	And likewise (he took) the cup after supper,
For this is my blood of the covenant which is shed for many <i>for the forgiveness of sins</i> '.	'This is my blood of the covenant which is shed for many'.	saying, 'This cup is the <i>new</i> covenant in my blood, which is shed for you'.	saying, 'This cup is the <i>new</i> covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink, in my memory'.

There is a complex web of interrelated material here, perhaps largely because we are dealing with a liturgical text, something that has been repeated over and over again, with variations, in different locations, from the thirties onwards. The comparison between the four accounts draws attention to several interesting theological points. Matthew alone has 'for the forgiveness of sins'. Luke and Paul alone have 'new covenant' and Paul alone here has 'in my memory'. It is the analysis of this kind of passage, and the attempt to explain both the similarities and the differences, that gives the study of the Synoptic Problem one of its great attractions.

At the very least, one notices that there is not one unanimous picture of 'the Eucharist' or 'Christology' in early Christianity. The agreements and disagreements draw attention to the fact that there was a dialogue going on in the first century, a dialogue that spawned the controversies of future years, and which, more importantly, can help us to focus some of our own theological questions.

Thus the use of the Synopsis is potentially a powerful tool for aiding proper theological reflection. The harmonizing of texts can be a damaging means of interweaving subtle personal agendas into the rephrasing of disparate elements—and robbing the texts of their vitality. What is exciting about studying texts in Synopsis is the matter of stressing the differences between them, and asking how one might react theologically to them.

Summary

- The Synoptic Problem draws attention to historical questions that in turn give rise to theological questions.
- The Synoptic Problem, by drawing attention to differences between parallel texts, can stimulate theological reflection.

c. Cultural Factors

The difficulty with such perspectives, however, is that they will appear somewhat old-fashioned to the reader interested in contemporary, post-modern ways of reading the Gospels. Recent years have seen the rise, for example, of reader-response criticism, which tends to place stress on the recipient of the text (the contemporary reader) rather than the originator of the text (the author). Does the Synoptic Problem have anything to offer to such readers? Or is it only for those still stuck in the antiquated enterprise of doing historical-critical work on the New Testament?

The answer to this question is that *as traditionally defined*, the Synoptic Problem has very little to offer to those interested in contemporary approaches. In other words, those writing on the Synoptic Problem tend to focus on historical-critical questions. For them the goal is to provide a perfect solution to the problem of who wrote first, who copied from whom, and whether there are any lost documents.

But this need not remain the status quo. Contemporary, culturally relevant study of the Synoptic Problem may take off in other directions, and it is may be that this is where the future of the discipline lies. It is worth noting, for example, that, in spite of the proliferation of narrative-critical, reader-response and literary-critical readings of each of our Gospels, at present there is little that attempts to apply such methods to parallel texts in Synopsis. This is a weakness of the current scene, in which scholars have become so besotted with responding to texts in isolation from one another that they have forgotten that the texts have, and have always been perceived as having, an intimate interrelationship.

Of course, at this stage it is difficult to know what study of the Synoptic Problem that is sympathetic to contemporary methodologies might look like. For those interested in the way that the Bible is used in culture one obvious starting point might be the realization with which we began this chapter, that the popular perception of the Gospels still

involves a tendency towards the harmonizing of different texts. The writing of harmonies of the Gospels did not, after all, die a death as soon as Griesbach produced the first Synopsis. On the contrary, one only needs a passing acquaintance with contemporary representations of 'the Jesus story' to notice that harmonizing is alive and well. In such circumstances, there is a wealth of research waiting to be done on the way in which Jesus films, for example, have combined and conflated synoptic (and Johannine) data, study that will no doubt prove not only to be generated by awareness of the Synoptic Problem, but which may also, in turn, shed fresh light on it.

The application of newer approaches to the Synoptic Problem may be the best hope for its future, particularly if we are to avoid the endless repetition of some mistakes, going round in the same circles, investigating the same texts in the same way. This is a challenge for the new century, and we will return to the question in the Conclusion below.

Summary

- Scholars of the Synoptic Problem rarely engage with new methods of reading the Gospels, like *narrative-criticism*.
- The application of contemporary critical methods to the Synoptic Problem is potentially exciting and challenging.

d. The Literary Puzzle

But if the historical dimension of the Synoptic Problem is what has exercised the minds of scholars for the last two hundred years, it is worth noting that this study is worth doing for its own sake, and needs no other reason than that it is enormously good fun. In other words, the Synoptic Problem is an intriguing phenomenon for study in its own right—and it is a form of study that needs no apology. For in the Synoptic Problem one has, without doubt, one of the most fascinating literary puzzles in world history. There are plenty of examples in literature from all cultures of different accounts of similar events, of complex interweaving of sources and of uncertainties about origin and dependence. Indeed, there are good examples of these phenomena elsewhere in the Bible, as in the overlap in the Old Testament between Kings and Chronicles, or between Isaiah 36–39 and 2 Kings 18–20.

Yet there is nothing to match the Synoptic Problem for the sheer contours, variations, depths and shape of the discipline. Those who think that they have mastered it regularly discover fresh complications. Those who believe that they can explain all the data then come across an argument that appears more plausible than their own.

Summary

- Above all, the Synoptic Problem is interesting in its own right as a fascinating literary enigma.

6. Summary and Conclusion

At the end of each chapter in this book there is a summary in which all the most important elements in the discussion will be underlined. So far, we have discovered the following:

- (a) The popular way to read the Gospels has been to *harmonize* them with one another. However, for the last two hundred years, Gospel harmonies have been rivalled by *Synopses* of the Gospels, in which the Gospels are placed side by side for the purposes of careful comparison.
 - The Synopsis gives birth to the term *Synoptic Gospels*, Matthew, Mark and Luke. This is because there are extensive agreements between Matthew, Mark and Luke, but much less agreement between these Gospels and John.
 - The Synopsis also gives birth to the *Synoptic Problem*, an enterprise that studies the similarities and differences among the Synoptic Gospels in a bid to find an explanation for their interrelationship.
- (b) The dominant solution to the Synoptic Problem is the *Two-Source Theory*, which supposes that Matthew and Luke both used Mark (*the Priority of Mark*), but that they also used an hypothetical source, 'Q'.
 - The two major alternatives are the *Farrer Theory*, which affirms Markan Priority but dispenses with Q, and the *Griesbach Theory*, which rejects both Markan Priority and Q.

(c) Several reasons might be given for engaging in the study of the Synoptic Problem:

- *Historical*: solving the Synoptic Problem helps one to answer historical questions, questions about reliable sources of information on the historical Jesus and questions about the development of early Christianity.
- *Theological*: examining the Synoptic Problem encourages theological reflection about the interaction between the Gospel texts.
- *Contemporary*: although not currently popular, there are ways in which the Synoptic Problem might profitably interact with contemporary approaches to the New Testament, like narrative-criticism.
- *The Literary Puzzle*: the Synoptic Problem is probably the most fascinating literary enigma of all time.

Let us, then, having entered the maze, begin to explore it. Before doing this, though, readers should be warned. They should not be under any illusions. Study of the Synoptic Problem sometimes feels like walking through a maze that is in a constant state of change. Workers are busy constructing new walls even as one is finding the way through. But despite this, entering the maze is more than worthwhile. It is a challenging yet rewarding academic puzzle. And that this most fascinating of literary enigmas should happen to concern accounts of one of the most important historical figures ever to have lived gives the Synoptic Problem, to say the least, an added thrilling dimension.