

THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM:  
ITS HISTORICAL ROOTS, MODERN FRUITS,  
AND THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ORTHODOX SOLUTION

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**Introduction to the Synoptic Problem**

The first three canonical Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are often categorized together due to the relative ease with which their contents can be placed in sectional parallel relationships to one another such that overlap and differences become readily apparent.<sup>1</sup> The similarities and divergences are often in the same sections (e.g., the ministry of John the Baptist, the baptism and temptation of Jesus; Jesus' greater Galilean ministry; his journey and ministry through Samaria, Perea, and rural Judea; and Christ's Passion week, death, and resurrection).<sup>2</sup> The Johannine Gospel is excluded from this category due to the author's inclusion of so much unique material.<sup>3</sup>

The term used to describe these features, *synoptic* ("same view"), was put into use by Johann Jakob Griesbach in the late eighteenth century, and refers to his placing of the Gospels into columns to show their relationships.<sup>4</sup> Thus, a Gospel *synopsis* should be kept distinct from a

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<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of this paper and ease of nomenclature, the traditional Gospel titles (i.e., their traditional authors) will be used when referring to the respective writings.

<sup>2</sup>Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 1230.

<sup>3</sup>This is not to imply that Johannine material is completely distinct - indeed much of our knowledge of Gospel event chronology comes from harmonizing John's material with its parallels in the synoptics (see David Alan Black, *Why Four Gospels?* [Grand Rapids, Kregel, 2001], 85-87). But the amount of similar material is so much greater between Matthew, Mark, and Luke that it bears categorization.

<sup>4</sup>David Alan Black and David R. Beck, eds. *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 11.

Gospel *harmony* which combines related Gospel material into a single composite narrative.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the synopsis itself is considered to be a tool of biblical criticism intended to highlight similarities and dissimilarities, whereas the harmony may be a conflation of various elements into a continuous narrative that actually suppresses the repetitions (or “doublets”) or seemingly conflicting accounts among the Gospels.<sup>6</sup> It is the issue of similarities and dissimilarities among the Synoptic Gospels that creates the “problem.”<sup>7</sup>

Although the Gospels give little to no internal evidence of interdependence,<sup>8</sup> what a synoptic comparison reveals to many is that the three Gospels were dependent on one another to some degree, or at least shared some common source (e.g., literary or oral tradition). About 90% of Mark’s material is found in Matthew, and about 50% is found in Luke, with about 250 verses paralleled in both Matthew and Luke but not in Mark.<sup>9</sup> Given that Mark’s Gospel is only 661 verses long this means that only about 38 verses are unique to Mark.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>The first Gospel harmony, St. Augustine’s *On the Harmony of the Evangelists*, was itself written in order to answer critics who saw Gospel divergences as a target for attack on the Christian faith. See David Laird Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 12.

<sup>6</sup>Dale Ellenburg, “Is Harmonization Honest?” in Steven L. Cox and Kendell H. Easley, eds. *Harmony of the Gospels* (B&H Publishing Group, 2007), 3.

<sup>7</sup>Whether or not these elements even constitute a “problem” is itself at issue. Eta Linnemann believes that it is a contrivance that has been foisted onto the Synoptic Gospels from the outside. See Eta Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* tr. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 39.

<sup>8</sup>Luke’s prologue being a possible exception. This will be discussed below.

<sup>9</sup>Grant R. Osborne and Matthew C. Williams, “The Case for the Markan Priority View of Gospel Origins” in Robert L. Thomas, ed. *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 24.

<sup>10</sup>These figures are approximate based on various calculations. The graphic includes “Q” and other alleged sources which will be explained below when various solutions are considered.

While this may not seem to be a very pressing issue considering the many fronts upon which Christianity must fight in order to maintain its integrity, the origin issue of the synoptic Gospels has far-reaching effects. Robert L. Thomas notes that, “In large part, the answers to who Jesus really was depend upon how one approaches the first three Gospels . . . which in turn depends on how the three books came into being.”<sup>11</sup> Thomas goes on to list over two dozen questions ranging from the role of the Holy Spirit in inspiration to one’s loyalty to the Word of God that all hang, to one degree or another, on how one believes the Synoptic Gospels were composed.<sup>12</sup> The answers offered to these and other questions may affect one’s understanding of the nature of the Gospels themselves.

For example, one issue raised by the Synoptic Problem is that of close, but not exact, wording - especially in quotations. Misquotes or non-indicated paraphrases may be very troubling for believers in the verbal, plenary, inspiration of Scripture.<sup>13</sup> While providence may make allowance for the Gospel writer’s personal style in the reporting of events, how could this be extended to the words of Jesus Christ? Why, if the Holy Spirit inspired the Gospel writers, would they not give a completely accurate report? Yet this seems to be what we find when comparing Jesus’ words in a synopsis (e.g., Mt. 24:15-16 cf. Mk. 13:14; Lk. 21:20-21).

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<sup>11</sup>Robert L. Thomas, “Introduction” in Robert L. Thomas, ed. *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 13. These figures are themselves the cause of controversy. Eta Linnemann found that only 22.19% of the words in several parallel passages are completely identical, and that the actual verbal similarities were often demanded by the nature of the report (e.g., quotation of Jesus’ words). See *Is There a Synoptic Problem?*, 14.

<sup>12</sup>Thomas, “Introduction,” 13-16.

<sup>13</sup>A treatment of this phrase from the evangelical perspective may be found in R. C. Sproul, *Explaining Inerrancy: A Commentary* (Oakland: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1980), ch. 3.

Issues arise even with the agreements between the synoptics. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke record Jesus' words in a speech traditionally titled "The Sermon on the Mount" (Mt. 5-7 cf. Lk 6).<sup>14</sup> That the two are a record of the same speech seems clear in that "similarities between the two are too numerous to allow for two different sermons."<sup>15</sup> Yet, Matthew records that the sermon took place on "up on a mountain," while Luke notes that it was a "level place."<sup>16</sup> Further, it seems that Jesus spoke only to his disciples who had come to him in Matthew's account, while in Luke a great number of people were there as well. So even here where significant overlap is apparent, this actually causes problems once the larger historical / geographical context is compared.

Similar issues arise when considering The Sermon on the Mount, the Commissioning of the Twelve, The Parables of Mt. 13 and Mk. 4, The Olivet Discourse, The Divorce Exception Clause, the Dialogue with the Rich Man, various descriptions of The Pharisees, Jesus' Genealogies, the Visit of the Magi, and The Beatitudes.<sup>17</sup> One's answer will depend on several factors such as assumed chronology, geography, word similarity, etc.<sup>18</sup> It may seem as though it

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<sup>14</sup>Mk. 3:13-19 is considered to be parallel by some as well, but this is actually only recording the calling of the Twelve.

<sup>15</sup>Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, *The NIV/NASB Harmony of the Gospels* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2003), 71nC.

<sup>16</sup>ESV, lit. "ε\_ς τ\_ρος," (Mt. 5:1), "τόπου πεδινο" (Lk. 6:17). The Greek text used when citing the New Testament is, unless otherwise noted, from Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Matthew Black et al., *The Greek New Testament*, 4th ed. (Germany: United Bible Societies, 1993), 172.

<sup>17</sup>See Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, eds. *The Jesus Crisis* (Grand Rapids, Kregel: 1998), 18-26.

<sup>18</sup>Daniel Wallace makes a sarcastic jab when he notes that if "it is assumed that verbal differences indicate different events. . . . one would have to say that Jesus was tempted by the devil twice, that the Lord's Supper was offered twice, and that Peter denied the Lord six to nine times!" [Daniel Wallace, *The Synoptic Problem*. (Bible.Org, 2004), 1; <http://bible.org/article/synoptic-problem> (accessed July 30, 2009).] Yet, this approach was followed by serious thinkers such as John Calvin. See Thomas and Farnell,

would not be difficult to answer the above discrepancies. Concerning the sermon example above, it could be that Jesus' message was given on a flat area on top of a mountain to the disciples but in the presence of a crowd that followed them up.<sup>19</sup> Or perhaps the two are really different sermons ("The Sermon on the Mount" and "The Sermon on the Plain").<sup>20</sup> It may be thought that while some, if not much, similarity could be expected from other examples concerned with the same subject and, conversely, some dissimilarity introduced by different authors, but according to some, this is not enough to explain several factors.<sup>21</sup>

The first of these problematic features is agreement in wording. While occasional verbal agreement would not be surprising, especially in a culture of oral tradition, "the remarkable verbal agreement between the Gospels suggests some kind of interdependence."<sup>22</sup> These similarities are made all the more amazing (assuming literary independence) if the original source was in Aramaic.<sup>23</sup> Even if one accepts a mechanical-dictation view of inspiration, there are even similarities in parenthetical material (the most famous being Mt. 24:15 cf. Mk. 13:14).<sup>24</sup> Finally, agreement in event order calls into question the absence of literary dependency. It is clear that at least two of the Gospel writers were not eye-witnesses to the events and speeches

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*The Jesus Crisis*, 66-73 and 289.

<sup>19</sup>Thomas and Gundry, *The NIV/NASB Harmony*, 71nC.

<sup>20</sup>John H. Niemelä, "The Case for the Two-Gospel View of Gospel Origins" in Robert L. Thomas, ed. *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 185.

<sup>21</sup>These are some major issues, following Robert H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Baker: 1987). Others will be introduced below.

<sup>22</sup>Wallace, *Synoptic Problem*, 1.

<sup>23</sup>Many scholars believe that Jesus' speeches were delivered in Aramaic. This will be discussed below.

<sup>24</sup>Others include Mt. 9:6 cf. Mk. 2:10; Luke 5:24 or Mt. 27:18 cf. Mk.15:10.

they record, so additional sources would seem to be required to explain their content. Since Luke is said to have admitted his use of other sources in his Gospel prologue, this seems assured. Disagreements in content, wording, and event order are also present, however, and these are difficult to explain given that the writers were clearly capable of astounding agreement. Hence, the synoptic *problem*.

This paper will summarize the history of the Synoptic Problem, beginning with early Church Fathers and proceeding through major movements in philosophy and text critical theories up to the present. Next, a more detailed exposition and evaluation of three popular Synoptic Problem solutions will be given, including the major arguments and evidence marshaled for each view. Several implications of one's view will be discussed. Finally, we will consider a less popular, but potentially important, fourth position which may resolve the literary, historical, and theological data.

### **The History of the Synoptic Problem**

While it has been said that "Clement made the first recorded comments on the relationships among the Synoptic Gospels,"<sup>25</sup> David Dungan begins his history of the Synoptic problem with statements made by the Apostle John and the early Church regarding various Gospels, as well as the Marcionite battle and the canonization process. He does so because "most accounts do not tell the whole story; they begin around 1800 instead of at the beginning. As a result they privilege the most recent form of the Synoptic Problem, treating it as if it were somehow self-evident."<sup>26</sup> While any debate over the Gospel writings may be counted as a "Synoptic Problem," the issue of literary dependency came to the fore with Origen and

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<sup>25</sup>Namely, that the first Gospels were those including genealogies. See Osborne and Williams, 20.

<sup>26</sup>Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*, 2.

Augustine. Dungan refers to Origen's and Augustine's views as "the First and Second forms of the Synoptic Problem, respectively."<sup>27</sup>

### The Historical Roots of the Synoptic Problem

#### *Origen*

Prompted by debates between Gentile philosophers and Jewish rabbis, Origen sought a solidarity of Gospel sources and their proper interpretation. He "delineated, for the first time, the standard component parts of what later scholars call the Synoptic Problem."<sup>28</sup> He followed orthodox tradition in accepting only the undisputed Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), and sought to produce a reliable copy of the originals.<sup>29</sup> When it came to difficulties of repeated material or discrepancies Origen often followed a "literal, harmonizing explanation" that allowed for repeated similar events; however, when problems arose that did not admit to this solution he fell back on allegorical interpretation, because, "The truth of these matters must lie in that which is seen by the mind. If discrepancies between the Gospels are not solved, we must give up our trust in the Gospels as being true."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>29</sup>Probably using text-critical methodology of the Greeks at Alexandria. See Ibid., 73-75.

<sup>30</sup>"Dei thVn periv touvtwn a\*lhvqeian a\*pokeisqai e\*n to\_ς nohto\_ς aqe\_sqai t\_ς periV t\_n eu\*aggelivwn pivstewς w&s ou\*k a\*lhq\_n." Origen, *Commentary on John*; *Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF)* 10; quoted in Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*, 77 and 77nn42-43.

This solution led to Origen's acceptance of non-historical literary compositions by the Gospel writers who wrote to convey spiritual (i.e., symbolic) truths (e.g., Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, the temple cleansings, and the triumphal entry).<sup>31</sup> Rather than see these as different accounts of similar historical facts that differed based on the writer's memory or purpose in writing, Origen saw them as hints that a deeper spiritual message was being conveyed. "The differing visions God bequeathed to each of the Evangelists led to four different Jesuses since God *adjusted the vision* according to the needs of each, and yet all were perfect . . . since they were all visions of *God/Jesus*."<sup>32</sup> Thus, harmonization was unnecessary and could cause one to miss deeper truths. This, then, constitutes the response to the "First Form" of the Synoptic Problem.

### ***Augustine***

Augustine's solution was markedly different from Origen's. In answer to the Manichaeans and others who sought to refute Christianity by exposing contradictions in the Gospels, Augustine produced a defense of the Gospels based on explaining and/or harmonizing the texts. Titled, *On the Harmony of the Evangelists*, the work consists of four books. Books Two and Three deal most closely with harmonizing divergent accounts, with Book Three being an actual narrative of the events from the Last Supper to Christ's resurrection.

In viewing Augustine's complex view of Gospel integration, Dungan sees several key ideas: (1) the Gospel authors were eyewitnesses or close to them, (2) the Spirit moved their minds and memories as they wrote, (3) no author lacked historical knowledge, (4) each wrote in a unique way for a purpose, (5) the authors were aware of each other's writings, and either

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 78.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 85. [Emphasis in original.]



supported them to confirm historical facts, or departed from them in order to avoid repetition or to employ their own words, idioms, or figurative language.<sup>33</sup> Augustine's principles of harmonization, then, recognized Spirit-inspired diversity that invited the deeper reflection of the pious but should never shake one's faith in their truth. Further, this inspiration was not a mechanical dictation, so perfection is not to be sought - but rather resolution based on the rule of faith.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, unlike Origen, Augustine did not resort to mystical interpretation to solve Gospel difficulties, but rather concluded that with regard to Gospel divergences that "it will be hard to prove that any question involving real discrepancy arises out of these."<sup>35</sup> Dungan notes that "Augustine's comprehensive and sophisticated analysis ended the debate. . . . [and] became the last word on the subject for more than one thousand years."<sup>36</sup>

### ***The Enlightenment Era***

The Third form of the Synoptic Problem arose over a millennium later. This is the form typically associated with modern scholarship. Since the seventeenth century, scholars have attempted to account for Synoptic parallels and divergences by postulating stages through which the Gospel material evolved before coming into its present form. This endeavor has taken many shapes. "Form Criticism" attempts to identify the influences of oral transmission. "Source" or "Literary Criticism" considers the alleged written documents from which the writers may have

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<sup>33</sup>See Ibid., 135-36.

<sup>34</sup>See Ibid., 135-39.

<sup>35</sup>"*Difficile est ut habeant aliquam repugnantiae quaestionem.*" Augustine, *De Consensus*, 4.10.11 in William R. Farmer, *New Synoptic Studies* (Macon, Mercer University Press, 1983), 47.

<sup>36</sup>Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*, 140.

received their information. “Redaction Criticism” concerns any editors/authors responsible for the final product. The Synoptic Problem often encompasses all of these aspects in its search for a “grand unified theory” of Gospel creation.

An important consideration concerning the rise of this third form is the philosophical developments that took place during the Enlightenment period. Several authors have noted that the methodology that brought about these various Synoptic theories is hardly philosophically neutral. Evangelical scholars taking the Synoptic Problem as their starting point are said to have imbibed false Enlightenment philosophical presuppositions, and any solution they propose may receive the same criticism. Therefore, before moving on to a discussion of the modern Synoptic Problem theories that arose during and after this time period, it would be good to survey some of the more important of these philosophical issues.

### **Excursus: The Philosophical Roots of the Synoptic Problem**

#### **Philosophical Systems**

Philosophical influences on the question of Synoptic order and authorship are often blamed for the errors various writers discern in critical theories. F. David Farnell believes that it was not until the rise of Deism, Rationalism, and Enlightenment philosophies, that theories of synoptic dependency arose.<sup>37</sup> Eta Linnemann writes that the foundation of such theories are founded “in philosophies which made bold to define truth so that God’s Word was excluded as

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<sup>37</sup>F. David Farnell, “The Case for the Independence View of Gospel Origins,” in Robert L. Thomas, ed. *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 235.

the source of truth.”<sup>38</sup> Henry C. Thiessen saw the theory of evolution behind much of Biblical criticism.<sup>39</sup>

Even from these brief examples it is clear that a number of philosophical factors have been considered to be behind current critical trends in thinking. Below are presented summaries of some of the primary philosophical systems that have been cited as responsible for the rise of negative biblical criticism.

### ***Inductivism***

Farnell says that the inductive method typified by Francis Bacon in the seventeenth century made that which can be learned by experience and experiment the basis for discovering all truth. This produced a dichotomy between natural (historical or scientific) matters that can be tested and the supernatural realm which cannot. This paved the way for Bible critics to remove the supernatural from consideration in any theory. Thus, the Bible becomes authoritative only for non-scientific matters of faith.

### ***Materialism***

Farnell blames Thomas Hobbes for the idea that “reality consists of materiality and nothing else.”<sup>40</sup> Although not entirely consistent, Hobbes believed that human beings were entirely material, and that talk about incorporeal substances was nonsense.<sup>41</sup> This made any appeal to the supernatural out of bounds for philosophical or scientific inquiry. Thus, for any

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<sup>38</sup>Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 17.

<sup>39</sup>H. C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 110.

<sup>40</sup>Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis*, 87.

<sup>41</sup>*The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Materialism.” See also *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Thomas Hobbes - Materialism” <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hobbes/#3> (Accessed

theory to be considered scientific it would necessarily have to exclude any non-natural elements. Given the Bible's alleged supernatural origin, this made biblical studies outside the realm of science.

### ***Rationalism***

The roots of modern biblical criticism are often traced to Benedict Spinoza, a Jewish pantheist. His belief that God is the only substance in the universe served as the control for his remaining thoughts on epistemology, psychology, physics, and ethics.<sup>42</sup> As to epistemology, Spinoza was of the rationalist camp, which can be described as an elevation of the powers of reason and intuition over sensation and experience with an emphasis on certain knowledge as the goal of enquiry. This would make deduction from self-evident axioms the only sure course for coming to knowledge.

Ironically, both empirical inductivism and this deductive method exclude much religious truth, especially from Christianity - a religion rooted in history. While Spinoza's rationalism did not remove the possibility of arguing philosophical matters related to God, he made any revealed religion highly suspect. Once again, the Bible's authority would have to be limited to matters of religion and not sure truth.<sup>43</sup> Spinoza's pantheistic system removed miracles from consideration, for if all nature is God then any act of God is a "law of nature" by definition.

Spinoza denied the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch as well as other Old Testament books, and questioned the inspiration of the New Testament epistles. Spinoza's historical-critical

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<sup>42</sup>*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Rationalism" <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/continental-rationalism/#Spinoza> (Accessed August 10, 2009).

<sup>43</sup>Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis*, 90.

analysis of Scripture made him the “the father of modern biblical criticism,” influencing later critics such as Lessing, Schleiermacher, and Hegel.<sup>44</sup> In the end,

Spinoza and his followers multiplied questions about the physical history of the text to the point that the traditional theological task could never get off the ground. That, however, was precisely the intended effect of the first step: to create . . . an infinitely extendable list of questions directed at the physical history of the text, to the point where the clergy and the political officials allied with them could never bring to bear their own theological interpretations of the Bible. In other words, Spinoza switched the focus from the referent of the biblical text (e.g., God’s activity, Jesus Christ) to the history of the text. In doing so, he effectively eviscerated the Bible of all traditional theological meaning and moral teaching.<sup>45</sup>

### ***Deism***

The rationalism of Hobbes and Spinoza were effective in shaping the religion of Deism. Deism is a “philosophical belief in a god established by reason and evidence . . . without acceptance of the special information supposedly revealed in, for example, the Bible.”<sup>46</sup> Deism’s view located man’s knowledge of God in nature’s “revelation” alone. “The English deists may be regarded as the forerunners of biblical criticism . . . their position that reason precludes the supernatural . . . eventually led to a search for the real Jesus of history, since the historical Jesus could not have been the super-natural person performing the miracles depicted in the New Testament.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 90-92.

<sup>45</sup>Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*, 172.

<sup>46</sup>Ted Honderich, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), s.v. “Deism.”

<sup>47</sup>Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis*, 94.

## ***Skepticism***

Hume, an empiricist, believed that all ideas had to be traceable back to impressions to be considered “matters of fact,” otherwise concepts are merely “relations of ideas.”<sup>48</sup> All the materials of thinking are derived either from sensation or from reflection.<sup>49</sup> Thus, for something to be considered knowledge it must be knowable either *a priori* or via empirical observation. The effect of such thinking is that much of what is generally considered knowledge does not even admit to the categories of truth or falsehood. C. S. Peirce notes that, “The whole of modern ‘higher criticism’ of ancient history in general, and of Biblical history in particular, is based upon the same logic that is used by Hume.”<sup>50</sup> And if truths of history become useless, metaphysical claims become meaningless.

## ***Agnosticism***

Immanuel Kant produced a brilliant synthesis of empiricism and rationalism which led to an agnostic stance on many matters related to religious truth. Kant believed that “no event has occurred that could have been more decisive for the fate of this science than the attack made upon it by David Hume.”<sup>51</sup> It was Hume's attack which first provoked Kant himself to undertake a fundamental reconsideration of his philosophy which resulted in Kant's famous statement: “I freely admit that it was the remembrance of David Hume which, many years ago, first interrupted

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<sup>48</sup>*The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Hume, David.”

<sup>49</sup>*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “David Hume” <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume/#Emp> (Accessed August 10, 2009).

<sup>50</sup>C. S. Peirce, *Values in the Universe of Chance*, ed. (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1958), 292-93 quoted in Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis*, 99.

<sup>51</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, vol. 4 translated and edited by Gary Hatfield, revised edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 257; quoted in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Kant and Hume on Causality” <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-hume-causality/> (Accessed August 10, 2009).

my dogmatic slumber and gave my investigations in the field of speculative philosophy a completely different direction.”<sup>52</sup>

Kant believed that “the raw material for knowledge comes from outside us, yet the mind has a part in processing that material through its own built-in concepts.”<sup>53</sup> This introduces a distinction between the phenomenal world (made up of our concepts) which we know and the noumenal realm (the world-as-it-is) which we cannot know. Kant believed that “metaphysics is utterly impossible, or at best a disorderly and bungling endeavor if we do not separate ideas of reason from concepts of the understanding.”<sup>54</sup> Theological speculation goes beyond the knowable realm and thus produces antinomies (valid arguments that can produce contradictory conclusions). This resulted in “many of Kant's contemporaries in calling him the ‘all destroyer,’ for devastating reason's pretenses to transcendent insight.”<sup>55</sup> In the end, Kant’s philosophy made religious belief an issue of ethics rather than one of metaphysics, science, or history.<sup>56</sup>

### ***Romanticism***

Enlightenment thinking emphasized the power of human reason, rejected both individualism and authority, and “play[ed] down the non-rational aspects of human nature.”<sup>57</sup> In the nineteenth century, Enlightenment thinking began to wane. “The generation that matured

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis*, 100.

<sup>54</sup>*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Kant’s Account of Reason”  
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-reason/#LimRea> (Accessed August 10, 2009).

<sup>55</sup>*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Kant’s Account of Reason”  
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-reason/#LimRea> (Accessed August 10, 2009).

<sup>56</sup>*The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Kant, Immanuel.”

<sup>57</sup>Honderich, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, s.v. “Enlightenment”

about 1800 felt for the Enlightenment a contempt as deep as any on record.”<sup>58</sup> In its wake came the movement known as Romanticism.

Romanticism was not so much a philosophy as a mood affecting literature, music, painting, philosophy, and theology.”<sup>59</sup> William Wordsworth criticized Enlightenment thinking in his poem *The Tables Turned*, writing, “Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books . . . Enough of Science and of Art; Close up those barren leaves; Come forth, and bring with you a heart that watches and receives.”<sup>60</sup> One of the members of the movement Friedrich Schleiermacher, did not accept the Bible “as an actual history of divine interventions and collections of divine utterances. Instead, he stressed the Bible as a record of religious experience.”<sup>61</sup>

The movement’s importance for biblical criticism is partly in the direct influence it had on one of the first modern Synoptic theorists, J. J. Griesbach. As Dungan notes, “Griesbach’s approach toward the Bible and theology was complexed and nuanced. On one side, throughout his life he remained in close contact with Germany’s Romantic thinkers—Goethe and Schiller. . . . [On the other side,] [f]rom his student days with Semler and Michaelis, Griesbach had been exposed to Europe’s skeptical, historicist interpretation of the New Testament and Church history.”<sup>62</sup>

### ***Idealism***

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<sup>58</sup>*The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Enlightenment.”

<sup>59</sup>Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis*, 102-103.

<sup>60</sup>William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* (London: J. and A. Arch, 1798). No. 4 (Victoria College Library, Toronto) reproduced by Ian Lancashire, University of Toronto; <http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/2373.html> (Accessed August 10, 2009.)

<sup>61</sup>Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis*, 103.

<sup>62</sup>Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*, 311-12.



Partly in reaction to Kant, but also imbibing his phenomena / noumena distinction, Idealism sees the world as ultimately spiritual in nature. Hegel and Fichte applied this to the idea of a spiritual outworking of history known as the Dialectic which “concerns history and the idea of historical development or progress.”<sup>63</sup> This developmental idea influenced later writers such as Bauer, Feuerbach, and Strauss. It was Strauss who “applied Hegelian philosophy to the critical analysis of the Gospels [and] . . . constructed the concept of myth [as an idea clothed in the form of history].”<sup>64</sup> This, in turn, influenced Bultmann and others who brought about much of modern biblical criticism.

### ***Evolution***

Although not proposed as a philosophy *per se*, Darwin’s theory of biological evolution “had a strong, quick, and saturating impact in Britain . . . and in Germany, where many new theories regarding the origin and development of the New Testament were arising.”<sup>65</sup> This can be seen in the explanations that assume a simple-to-complex chronology. Streeter, one of the more influential of the early synoptic theorists, “wrote an essay titled ‘The Literary Evolution of the Gospels’ [and] . . . William Sanday, an outstanding propagandist for the British Four-Source Theory praised Streeter’s essay [calling it] . . . ‘a real evolution.’”<sup>66</sup> Evidence of this assumption can be seen in descriptions of Mark as not only the earliest but also the “most primitive” of the Synoptics.

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<sup>63</sup>*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel” <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel/> (Accessed August 10, 2009).

<sup>64</sup>Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis*, 109.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 112.

## Effect of Philosophical Influences

Farnell claims that biblical criticism's philosophical roots are "the same as roots of modern errancy views. . . . the same radical skepticism regarding historical reliability and harmonization of the Gospels that produced modern errancy hypotheses regarding Scripture also produced modern literary dependence hypotheses."<sup>67</sup> He believes that "the historical evidence surrounding Griesbach's and Owen's hypotheses reveals that the primary impetuses for the development of their synoptic approach were errant and unorthodox views of inspiration derived from philosophical concepts."<sup>68</sup> This approach is qualitatively different from that of church tradition. Citing Colossians 2:8 and 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, Farnell concludes that, "due to their aberrant roots, both philosophically and historically, literary-dependence hypotheses will automatically produce significant denigration of the historical accuracy of the Gospel."<sup>69</sup> Farnell's criticism of biblical criticism's philosophical roots is not unique.<sup>70</sup>

Whether or not these problematic influences can be divorced from the current theories offered to explain the Synoptic Problem continues to be debated. Daniel Wallace, a proponent of literary dependence, hardly writes as one that has given up on Christian orthodoxy or on an inspired, inerrant text, when he says,

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<sup>67</sup>F. David Farnell, "How Views of Inspiration Have Impacted Synoptic Problem Discussions." *Master's Seminary Journal* 13 no.1 (Spring 2002): 63.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup>See for example, Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible*; Paige Patterson, "The Historical-Critical Study of the Bible: Dangerous or Helpful?" *The Theological Educator* 37 (Spring 1988): 45-61; Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm of Bible Study* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1973).

Literary interdependence is not in any way a denial of inspiration; it is only a denial of mechanical dictation as the mode of inspiration. The nature of the Bible is such that it is both the Word of God and the words of men. To deny the first is analogous to Arianism; to deny the second is analogous to Docetism. Both are Christological heresies. And if the analogy between the incarnate Word (Christ) and the living Word (Bible) is one intended by scripture, then we could say with equal force that to deny either the divine inspiration or the full human involvement in the making of the Bible is heretical. (2) The incarnation invites and even demands that we look at the Bible with the best of our historical-critical tools. If we do not, then our bibliology is really no different than the Muslims' view of the Quran. I am persuaded that the closer we look, the better the Bible looks. Or, as an old British scholar of yesteryear said, "We treat the Bible like any other book to show that it is not like any other book."<sup>71</sup>

Speaking of Farnell's similar attacks in another place, Grant Osborne and Matthew Williams decry Farnell's rhetoric, saying that he "offers no proof for the veracity of these statements, merely an assertion that they must be true."<sup>72</sup> It may not seem as though the mere allowance for literary dependence is enough to invoke Paul's warnings against deceptive philosophy. Any idea that can be plausibly traced back to not only to St. Augustine, but to St. Luke, can hardly be said to be the result of flawed Enlightenment thinking.<sup>73</sup> Further, the lists of philosophical influences sometimes contain rather questionable sweeping elements. For example, if both inductive empiricism *and* deductive rationalism are excluded from the tools biblical scholars are allowed to use, what else remains?<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Daniel Wallace, *The Synoptic Problem and Inspiration: A Response*. Bible.Org, 2004. <http://bible.org/article/synoptic-problem-and-inspiration-response> (Accessed August 14, 2009).

<sup>72</sup>Osborne and Williams, 311.

<sup>73</sup>See Ibid., 311-19.

<sup>74</sup>This is not to take sides with either method when proponents make exclusive claims to their ability to discover truth, but rather to say that removing both methodologies *en toto* from the list of acceptable practices would leave all objects legitimately requiring them to be removed from consideration. What has to be shown is that no Synoptic Problem issues are such objects.

While Christian orthodoxy requires the rejection of any philosophy that is necessarily anti-supernaturalistic (e.g., materialism), to blame critical scholarship on philosophy *per se* is too much. Surely Farnell goes too far when he writes that it was “not until the Reformation corrected the hermeneutical abuses of philosophy that a resolution of the problem surfaced. But just over a hundred years after the Reformers, philosophy reasserted itself to haunt the church.”<sup>75</sup> Were the Reformers free from philosophical presuppositions?<sup>76</sup> Is such a state even possible?<sup>77</sup> Thomas Howe’s evaluation concerning evangelical theologians working within the contemporary philosophical milieu may very well apply here as well:

Similarity of content does not necessarily indicate identity of origin. It is possible that . . . two groups, though perhaps interacting with each other according to standard scholarly practice, have arrived at similar conclusions about the same object of investigation. . . . It may be the case, then, that these parallel conclusions indicate that there are at least some presuppositions that are the same for thinkers with otherwise opposing points of view—presuppositions that transcend one’s otherwise unique preunderstanding or world view.<sup>78</sup>

While it seems to be the case that philosophical influences have negatively affected biblical studies and theology, it is the anti-supernatural presuppositions that are often conjoined to various methodologies that may be the largest obstacle to a more objective assessment.

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<sup>75</sup>Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis*, 85.

<sup>76</sup>For example, an interesting discussion on the philosophical considerations involved in the “real presence” debates within the reformed camp can be found in Lowell C. Green, “Philosophical Presuppositions in the Lutheran-reformed debate on John 6,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 56 no. 1 (January, 1992), 17-38.

<sup>77</sup>Even Etienne Gilson, cited by Farnell in support of his anti-philosophical stance (*Independence View of Gospel Origins*, 14), did not believe in a philosophically neutral starting point. See Etienne Gilson, *Unity of Philosophical Experience* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999), 253-55.

<sup>78</sup>Thomas Howe. *Objectivity in Biblical Interpretation* (Altamonte Springs, FL: Advantage Books, 2004), 182-83.

Whether or not current studies can successfully rid themselves of unorthodox presuppositions and still find legitimate uses for the methodologies of modern philosophy remains to be seen.<sup>79</sup>

### **The Roots of the Modern Synoptic Problem**

#### **Owen, Griesbach, and the Tübingen School**

One of the first to question Augustine's stance was Jean LeClerc, who argued as early as 1716 that the evangelists could have used earlier sources, but it was Henry Owen in 1764 who was the first to create a recognizable theory. Owen proposed that Matthew was the first Gospel written, that Luke used Matthew, and that Mark used both Matthew and Luke.<sup>80</sup> This theory, now called the "Two-Gospel" or "Griesbach" Hypothesis (as it was later popularized by J. J. Griesbach), was held by the majority of scholars for the next century.<sup>81</sup>

Some of the view's strengths included that fact that it generally agreed with Church tradition which held that Matthew was the first Gospel written. This also agrees with the canonical order. More significantly for internal arguments, when comparing agreements between the "triple tradition" (parallel passages in Matthew, Mark and Luke), the Griesbach hypothesis could explain the Matthew-Luke agreements against Mark without resorting to any other source, and markan redundancy can be explained by Mark's having conflated Matthew and Luke when he came across different readings.

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<sup>79</sup>While an anti-supernatural presupposition may be a sufficient condition for biblical skepticism, it has not been proven to be a necessary condition for biblical criticism. The number of scholars who hold to both supernatural inspiration and literary dependency (Wallace, Osborne, Blomberg, Bruce, etc.) mitigates sweeping claims as to the impossibility of such a combination.

<sup>80</sup>William R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem*. 2d ed.(Dillsboro, N.C.: Western North Carolina Press, 1976), 7n8. See also Thomas Richmond Willis Longstaff and Page A. Thomas, *The Synoptic Problem: A Bibliography, 1716-1988* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1989), 183.

<sup>81</sup>Osborne and Williams, 21. See also Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 784-92.

The Griesbach hypothesis is not without its problems, however. Church tradition also maintains that Mark was the interpreter of Peter and wrote his Gospel independently of Matthew. Further, it was believed that Luke was written last.<sup>82</sup> Considering the internal evidence, some features of Griesbach's hypothesis can be explained by other theories and, it is argued in some cases, it can be explained more satisfactorily. These and other difficulties led to the creation of several other theories.

#### Lessing, Eichorn, Schleiermacher

G. E. Lessing and J. G. Eichhorn posited an early written Gospel in Aramaic (the so-called "Ur-Gospel") which was translated into Greek and served as the basis for the other Gospels. This theory was largely abandoned when "reconstructions" began to look like the Gospel of Mark and was therefore an unnecessary postulate. Another short-lived explanation was that of the early nineteenth century theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher, who suggested that the disciples collected their own notes of Jesus' words and deeds and wrote according to these. This fell short of explaining the significant agreements in event order.<sup>83</sup>

#### The Oxford School

During the second half of the nineteenth century a shift occurred when German and, especially, English scholars began making a case for Markan priority.<sup>84</sup> The Oxford School

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<sup>82</sup>"The perspective in the Church for 1800 years was that Matthew, an apostle of Jesus Christ and an eyewitness to much that he reported, wrote the first Gospel. It held that Mark, a close disciple of Peter the apostle, wrote the second Gospel, and in so doing, reproduced the preaching of Peter. The continuing tradition said that Luke wrote his Gospel in dependence on the apostle Paul with whom he was closely associated." Robert L. Thomas, "Historical Criticism And The Evangelical: Another View," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (2002): 98.

<sup>83</sup>See Green, McKnight and Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 784-92.

<sup>84</sup>German scholars included Christian Gottlob Wilke, Christian Hermann Weisse, Heinrich Julius Holtzmann, Paul Wernle, and Bernard Weiss. See Osborne and Williams, 21.

included scholars such as William Sanday and B. H. Streeter,<sup>85</sup> whose arguments continue to be debated to this day.<sup>86</sup> This view, the “Oxford Hypothesis,” was also referred to as the “Two-Source” or “Four-Source” hypothesis (depending on how one extrapolates from Markan priority to additional sources) and became, by the early 1900's, “one of the most widely accepted results of modern criticism of the Gospels.”<sup>87</sup> So sure was Albert Schweitzer that he said the hypothesis should not even be called a theory.<sup>88</sup> By the 1970's this assessment had not changed significantly - Markan priority was considered a standard starting point for scholarly work. This is not, however, to say it had not been challenged.

#### Butler and Farmer

The first major critique of Markan priority came in 1951 from B. C. Butler.<sup>89</sup> Butler argued that arguments from material order only showed that Mark was a “middle term” and not that his was the first Gospel.<sup>90</sup> Butler was followed by William Farmer who, noting the historical circumstances that gave rise to the Markan priority view, began a renewal of interest in the Griesbach Hypothesis. Other scholars followed suit, and by the end of the 1970's confidence in Markan priority was considerably lessened. The generally accepted conclusion of participants at

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<sup>85</sup>Others include Sir John C. Hawkins and W. C. Allen. See Osborne and Williams, 21.

<sup>86</sup>Streeter's arguments (which will be seen below) have been called “the classical statement and defence” of this view. See William R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem*, 51.

<sup>87</sup>V. H. Stanton, *The Gospels as Historical Documents*, part 2, *The Synoptic Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909); quoted in Robert L. Thomas. Ed. *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002.

<sup>88</sup>Albert Schweitzer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1906), 201; quoted in Robert L. Thomas. Ed. *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002.

<sup>89</sup>B. C. Butler, *The Originality of St. Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951).

<sup>90</sup>See Osborne and Williams, 22.

the 1979 Cambridge Gospel Conference was that the Two-Source Hypothesis could not longer be spoken of as an assured result.<sup>91</sup>

### **The Contemporary Fruits of the Synoptic Problem**

As far back as 1976, J. A. T. Robinson noted, “The consensus frozen by the success of ‘the fundamental solution’ propounded by B. H. Streeter has begun to show signs of cracking. Though it is still the dominant hypothesis, encapsulated in the textbooks, its conclusions can no longer be taken for granted as among the ‘assured results’ of biblical criticism.”<sup>92</sup>

In 1998 William Farmer wrote an article titled “The Present State of the Synoptic Problem.”<sup>93</sup> He surveyed the results of several symposiums that were held in the 1990's, as well as publications resulting from said symposiums and summarized findings that indicated serious problems with the Two-Source Theory. These included the extensive amounts of agreement between Matthew and Luke against Mark, Mark's omission of important material, Mark's ordering of material in concert with Matthew and Luke, and other versions that are too complex to be workable. Farmer asserted that,

It has been *forty-seven years* since . . . B.C. Butler's book, *The Originality of Mathew* [*sic*]. It was this book which first established the point that Streeter's argument for order was not valid. Since some form of the argument from order has been basic to confidence in Matthew's and Luke's dependence on Mark both in Germany and in the English-speaking world, and almost a half-century of research on the Synoptic Problem has produced no new arguments to support the Two Source Theory . . . Unless defenders of the Two Source Theory can produce new arguments to defend that theory, and renew critical confidence in it, source criticism in Gospel studies appears destined to remain at an impasse.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup>See Ibid.

<sup>92</sup>J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 93.

<sup>93</sup>William R. Farmer, “The Present State of the Synoptic Problem” in *Literary Studies in Luke-Acts: Essays in Honor of Joseph B. Tyson* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998), 11-36.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 36 [emphasis in original].



Farmer then concluded that “there is only one major task that remains to be completed in order to solve the synoptic problem.”<sup>95</sup> Namely that when “advocates of the Neo-Griesbach (Two Gospel) Hypothesis are able to provide readers with a literary, historical and theological explanation of Mark’s compositional activity, giving a coherent and reasonable picture of the whole of this Gospel, the last major task in solving the Synoptic Problem will have been completed.”<sup>96</sup>

This seems to have become more of a daunting task than Farmer’s earlier description implied.<sup>97</sup> Eschewing positive statements of assurance regarding solutions to the Synoptic Problem has become commonplace in scholarly journals.<sup>98</sup> Statements to the contrary, however, are not difficult to find. McKnight states that, “But we can never be totally certain about some of these matters since we can never be totally confident of a solution to the Synoptic Problem.”

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<sup>95</sup>Ibid.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid.

<sup>97</sup>It seems as if Farmer is saying that as soon as the Synoptic Problem is completely solved, then it will be completely solved!

<sup>98</sup>E.g., “Observations of Lukan structure make a strong case—perhaps even stronger than other arguments—for Markan priority”[Douglas S. Huffman, “Lukan Theology in the Light of the Gospel’s Literary Structure,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49 no. 3(2007): 605.] “We seem to have two choices: either opt for Matthean priority and a reasonable exercise of form criticism, or accept Marcan priority” [James Breckenridge, “Evangelical Implications Of Matthean Priority,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26 (2002): 121.] “At least the option should be entertained that the three synoptists worked in relative independence of one another in producing their Gospels.” [Robert L. Thomas, “An Investigation Of The Agreements Between Matthew And Luke Against Mark,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 19 (2002): 111-112.]

In the same vein, Dungan states that, “As time goes on, matters are getting more confusing, not less.”<sup>99</sup> Indeed, one source lists over 25 different variations on just *some of* the most important Synoptic theories that have surfaced since Owen’s initial hypothesis.<sup>100</sup> In fact, following standard Synoptic solution strategies, 1,488 “viable, documentary synoptic source theory types that employ at most two hypothetical documents” are possible.<sup>101</sup> Fortunately for this discussion, there are only a few that have both gained and retained a high degree of plausibility among scholars, and it is to these that we will now turn.

### **Three Popular Solutions to the Synoptic Problem**

In 2002, Osborne and Williams wrote that, “Five main solutions are held by scholars today.”<sup>102</sup> They list the following:

- (1) The Two-Gospel Hypothesis (or Owen-Griesbach / Neo-Griesbach)
- (2) The Two-Source Hypothesis (or Markan Priority / Oxford Hypothesis)
- (3) Multiple Source Hypotheses
- (4) Oral or Literary Independence
- (5) No Solution Possible (Insolubility)

The authors go on to note that multiple-source theories are unpopular among scholars as they require multiplying speculative sources. They briefly discuss oral / literary independence, and finally give brief mention of the possibility of the problem’s insolubility.

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<sup>99</sup>David Laird Dungan, *Interrelations of the Gospels*, xi; quoted in Osborne and Williams, 24.

<sup>100</sup> Stephen C. Carlson, “Overview of Proposed Solutions” <http://www.hypotypothesis.org/synoptic-problem/2004/09/overview-of-proposed-solutions.html> (Accessed August 4, 2009).

<sup>101</sup>Carlson says that “graph theory tells us that the initial [*sic*] number of possible solutions . . . are 25 for three documents (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and no other), 543 for four (the synoptics and one hypothetical document), and 29,281 for five (plus two hypothetical documents).” To be considered a viable solution type, “the relationship between any two of the synoptic Gospels must be direct or indirect through a hypothetical document . . . [and] any solution type must have at least two descendants for each hypothetical document.” Stephen C. Carlson, “Enumeration of Synoptic Theory Types” <http://www.mindspring.com/~scarlson/synopt/enum.htm> (Accessed August 5, 2009).

<sup>102</sup>Osborne and Williams, 23.

What emerges from Osborne's and Williams's summary is that there are three primary views up for consideration today, namely the Markan-Priority Two-Source Hypothesis (2SH), the Matthean-Priority Two-Gospel Hypothesis (2GH), and the Independent Gospel Hypothesis (IGH). It is important to keep in mind the distinction between multi-*source* and multi-*Gospel* views. Multi-source views posit the use of additional sources (usually two or four) besides the Gospels. The typical two-source view is Mark plus "Q" - a theoretical collection of sayings,<sup>103</sup> while the four-source is Mark plus "Q" plus whatever sources (whether oral, literary, or even an author's own memory) Matthew and Luke used for their unique material. Multi-Gospel views, on the other hand, merely assert interdependency between Gospel writers. In the case of the theories suggested here, the multi-source theory will reflect the standard "Mark plus 'Q'" two-source hypothesis (2SH), and the two-Gospel hypothesis (2GH) which has Matthew writing first, Luke borrowing from Matthew, and Mark borrowing from both. The Independence hypothesis (IGH) denies any literary borrowing between the Gospel writers or any other source.

According to Thomas, the following the major arguments for each view are said to constitute the "best evidence that the cases for the Markan Priority [Two-Source] View, the Two-Gospel View, and the Independence View have to offer."<sup>104</sup>

### Two-Source Hypothesis

#### ***Exposition***

The fact of literary dependence is taken to follow from agreements between the Synoptics in content, wording, and order. "Incredible similarities sometimes appear in the precise wording,

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<sup>103</sup>See James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann, and John S. Kloppenborg. *The Sayings Gospel Q In Greek and English* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 23-26.

<sup>104</sup>Robert L. Thomas, *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, 388.

even down to identical tenses and moods for every word in an entire verse (or series of verses).”<sup>105</sup> Examples include:

1. The “Ask, Seek, and Knock” passages (Mt. 7:7-11 = Lk. 11:9-13)
2. The Healing of the Paralytic (Mk. 2:1-12 = Mt. 9:1-8 = Lk. 5:17-26)
3. The Parable of the Sower (Mk. 4:1-9 = Mt. 13:1-9 = Lk. 8:4-10)
4. The Olivet Discourse (Mk. 13:1-27 = Mt. 24:1-31)
5. The Question About the Resurrection (Mk. 12:18-27 = Mt. 22:23-33 = Lk. 20:27-40)

It is concluded from samples like these that “the similarities in vocabulary and usage . . . are too close to be accidental or the result of oral tradition. They strongly suggest written sources and some type of literary dependence.”<sup>106</sup> Passages describing events rather than spoken words are said to be even greater evidence for lack of an oral tradition as one would have to have been created very soon after the event itself. Further, the likelihood that Jesus spoke in Aramaic makes the Greek agreements even more compelling. The idea that these could be explained by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is dismissed as it assumes a mechanical dictation view of inspiration that cannot account for differences.<sup>107</sup>

It is also noted that “almost always at least two Gospels— many times all three— agree in order.”<sup>108</sup> This ordering cannot be accounted for by chronology as the material is sometimes arranged topically. Further, minor narrative features like the flashback to John the Baptist’s death or interspersing Peter’s denial into the account of Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin also would not be explained by historical order.

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<sup>105</sup>Osborne and Williams, 25.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid., 30. (And this is not even taking John’s Gospel into consideration!)

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., 31.

For any Synoptic theory to work it must not only explain similarities, but also differences in (again) content, wording, and order. The Feeding of the Five Thousand, The Sermon on the Mount, and The Crucifixion pericopes are favorite examples of similar stories with differing details, and The Empty Tomb and Appearance narratives are “so different . . . from one another that the Gospels seem to tell of four different resurrections.”<sup>109</sup>

Arguments for the 2SH include Marks’s comparative brevity, psychological explanations for alleged redaction, and from the “primitive nature” of Mark’s language.<sup>110</sup> Added to these are B. H. Streeter’s classic five heads of evidence. Not only is this list considered to be the “classic statement” on Markan priority but some argue that no truly new evidence has been brought forward since its creation.<sup>111</sup> The five heads are as follows:

- (1) Synoptic literary overlap (as mentioned above).
- (2) Matthew and Luke’s wording rarely agrees compared to their agreement with Mark.
- (3) Matthew and Luke generally agree with Mark in order.
- (4) Matthew and Luke improve Mark’s primitive wording.
- (5) Distribution of Mark’s material.

It will be useful here to give initial responses to Streeter since few of these arguments are considered useful today. Evidences (1) and (3) merely support literary dependency—not Markan priority—but do show Mark to be a middle term. Evidence (2) must explain away Matthew-Luke agreements that are so strong they actually serve as good evidence for the 2GH. Evidence (5) either begs the question or is more of a summary of the whole.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>110</sup>See Thomas R. Edgar, “Source Criticism: The Two-Source Theory” in Thomas and Farnell, *Jesus Crisis*, 133-135.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>112</sup>Ibid., 36-37.

Evidence for (4) warrants more discussion as it is basically the only one still being taken seriously on its own. Osborne and Williams state that, “Here, *and only here*, is firm evidence that demonstrates Markan priority.”<sup>113</sup> The basic issue revolves around how one answers the question, “Could Mark have been dependent upon Matthew’s grammatically refined Gospel, yet still have written a grammatically worse Gospel?”<sup>114</sup> An objective analysis of grammatical features is admitted to be difficult to come by. After surveying several writers who either denounce the possibility, or serve as failed examples of those who tried,<sup>115</sup> Osborne and Williams reply that the criteria used in text criticism will suffice. Assuming a direct literary relationship between the Synoptics, it seems that they may be analyzed in the same manner as that of varying copies of single texts. Text-critical criteria include the following:<sup>116</sup>

1. Explanation: the variant that best explains the others and cannot be explained by them is original.
2. Difficulty: the more difficult is more original.
3. Authorial Conformity: the variant that best conforms with the author’s writing is original.
4. Refinement: the less refined grammar or expression is original.
5. Smoothness: the less smooth is the original.
6. Harmony: the variant that is not a harmonization is original.
7. Orthodoxy: the less orthodox is original.

The above criteria are said to remove the complaint that no scientific analysis has been done on the standard linguistic arguments. Osborne and Williams point out that while these are not “mathematically certain” criteria, such is simply the case with textual criticism (whether

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<sup>113</sup>Ibid., (emphasis in original).

<sup>114</sup>See Ibid., 44.

<sup>115</sup>See Ibid., 46-47. Examples include E. P. Sanders, C. M. Tuckett, T. R. W. Longstaff, J. A. Fitzmyer, G. M. Styler, and S. McKnight.

<sup>116</sup>Summarized from Osborne and Williams, 51.

secular or sacred), and to reject these text-critical principles would be to reject the standard Greek Bibles in use today (the editors of which are said to employ the same methods when trying to discover the original text).<sup>117</sup>

The conclusion reached by the authors using this method is that “If Mark were using Matthew as his source, he used it in a manner that is unlike virtually anything that scribes did to texts.”<sup>118</sup> On the contrary, “Markan scribes made the same types of changes to Mark’s Gospel as did Matthew, if he used Mark’s text as a source.”<sup>119</sup>

Once again, the authors follow this up with a “non-assurance” clause, and it is indeed welcome here. For these evidences to be convincing, not only must one assume direct dependence, but he must also accept all of the above text-critical criteria. Contra Osborne and Williams, it may not be logically inconsistent to use the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament and disagree with Markan priority, for the criteria are not necessarily the same. Daniel Wallace’s first general rule of internal textual criticism is “Generally, the shorter reading (by at least one whole word) is to be preferred.” This rule does not even make Osborne’s and Williams’s list. Concerning the other two, Thomas Howe asserts that “most contemporary textual critics have expressed reservations with each of these three basic rules. Wallace, for example, asserts that the first two rules are ‘not entirely valid.’”<sup>120</sup> Further, it is questionable whether the comparison of texts “with themselves” (so to speak) is truly analogous to comparing texts known to be distinct.

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<sup>117</sup>Ibid., 52 and 60-61.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>119</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>120</sup>Thomas Howe, “Textual Criticism” (course notes, Southern Evangelical Seminary, 2009), 26.

Finally, any theory that treats one of the Twelve Apostles as a mere recorder or redactor of a non-eyewitness seems strained at best.

Adding to Streeter's five heads, other evidence for Markan priority includes (6) reports that sound like that of an eyewitness that are more vividly described than the same events in Matthew or Luke. Some believe this to be due to stylistic factors and provide no help in determining priority.<sup>121</sup> (7) Mark also includes several Aramaic expressions that are difficult to explain if he added them to Matthew or Luke for a Gentile audience(if he "added" at all). (8) Mark follows the LXX when citing the Old Testament and Matthew usually does so only when including "markan material." Further, (9) although Mark's Gospel is shorter than either Matthew or Luke's, his version of triple-tradition accounts (those found in all three Synoptics) are generally much longer. This suggests that he was not abridging Matthew, especially since he did not include critical material from Matthew and often added inconsequential details.<sup>122</sup> Additionally, (10) Mark's material is often the more difficult reading when it comes to blunt or embarrassing material, and (11) his Christology is underdeveloped. Many of the above suffer from the same problems as Streeter's.

### ***Evaluation***

Varying narratives can explain most of the above evidences. Some are based on questionable presuppositions (such as literary and theological evolution), and some are reversible. Textual Criticism is itself fraught with presuppositions even when dealing with its "more scientific" set of criteria. Ben Smith notes how several text-critical criteria lack the objective directionality needed for them to be determinative and non-reversible:

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<sup>121</sup>Osborne and Williams, 37.

<sup>122</sup>Ibid., 38.



- **Christology:** It may be that the text with the higher Christology copied from the text with the lower Christology, but what if the author of the text with the lower Christology is actually correcting the higher Christology of the other text?
- **Theology.** It may be that the text with the more orthodox theology copied from the text with the less orthodox theology, but what if the author of the less orthodox text is actually attempting to correct the theology of the more orthodox text?
- **Semitisms.** It may be that the text with fewer Semitisms copied from the text with more Semitisms, but what if the author of the text with more Semitisms is Semitic himself and finds that Semitisms come naturally, while the author of the other text did not?
- **Jewishness.** It may be that the text that is less Jewish is copied from the text that is more Jewish, but what if the author of the more Jewish text is writing for a Jewish readership, while the author of the other text is not?
- **Grammar.** It may be that the text with the better grammar copied from the text with the worse grammar, but what if the author of the text with the poorer grammar wishes to sound picturesque or rustic?
- **Length.** It may be that the longer text copied from the shorter text, but what if the author of the shorter text is writing an epitome, or abbreviation, of the longer text?
- **Detail.** It may be that the most detailed text copied from the least detailed, but what if the author of the less detailed text felt that the details distracted from the main point?<sup>123</sup>

Additional issues have been brought against the 2SH that call it into question.

Agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark are especially difficult for the 2SH to answer. Since Matthew and Luke allegedly relied on Mark for their material they should not both depart from his writing in the same manner, or if so it should be rare (some estimate there are over 270 such occurrences).<sup>124</sup> The 2SH explanations of this phenomena sometimes include the possibility of yet another hypothetical document such as an Ur-Gospel, but the *ad hoc* nature of

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<sup>123</sup>Ben Smith, "The Synoptic Problem" <http://www.textexcavation.com/synoptic problem.html> (Accessed August 10, 2009).

<sup>124</sup>Osborne and Williams, 62-63.

this response removes it from serious consideration without further evidence.<sup>125</sup> Some will argue that Mark may have overlapped “Q” (the very document that supposedly accounts for *non-Markan* material), and some think it is just a coincidence born out of shared experiences. Allowing that Luke used Matthew brings with it even greater problems.<sup>126</sup>

Further, external evidence in the form of historical assertions of Markan priority are non-existent, whereas there are a multitude for Matthean priority.<sup>127</sup> While attacks on patristic sources must be considered, it has been said that a key to identify liberal criticism is that it “assumes a superior knowledge of ancient history over original authors who lived 2,000 plus years closer to the events which they record.”<sup>128</sup>

Finally, the difficulty that causes some of the greatest discomfort for many is the positing of additional sources that have little evidence for their existence except the 2SH theory itself. The most popular is “Q” - a source suggested to explain the Matthean and Lucan material (mostly sayings of Jesus) not found in Mark.<sup>129</sup> No such document has ever been found, nor cited in antiquity.<sup>130</sup> Osborne and Williams suggest that “Q” might have been an oral tradition “based on the following four reasons: (1) the likelihood of literary dependence among the Synoptic Gospels, (2) Markan priority, (3) the presence of material common to Matthew and Luke, and (4)

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<sup>125</sup>Ibid., 62.

<sup>126</sup>Ibid.

<sup>127</sup>See Osborne and Williams, 64.

<sup>128</sup>Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 112 .

<sup>129</sup>Osborne and Williams, 66. “Q” is said to be short for the German *Quelle* (“source”) from Schleiermacher.

<sup>130</sup>Ibid.

the likelihood that Luke does not use Matthew.”<sup>131</sup> Such reasoning will probably not be found convincing to those already in disagreement with the 2SH. Interestingly, disagreements amongst “Q” materials is suggested as additional evidence for it having been an oral tradition.<sup>132</sup>

Other problems noted by Osborne and Williams include the additional “M” and “L” sources that some followers of the multi-source theories add to the mix. While “L” might be reasonably deduced from Luke 1:2, positing QML to explain the Synoptic Gospels may seem analogous to the JEPD theory of the Pentateuch - a view, notes Gleason Archer, whose “every supporting pillar has been shaken and shattered by a generation of scholars.”<sup>133</sup> Indeed, like JEPD, one of the problems with the positing of additional hypothetical documents is either inconsistency or additional multiplication.<sup>134</sup>

In the end, Osborne and Williams assert that “most of the arguments used to ‘prove’ the Two-Source Hypothesis are not altogether convincing.”<sup>135</sup> Further, it is admitted that “no single argument of those presented earlier is conclusive;” yet these proponents of the 2SH maintain that “the cumulative effect constitutes the probability that the Two-Source Hypothesis is by far the best solution to the problem of synoptic relationships.”<sup>136</sup> As we move on to the next view up for consideration, these assessments should be kept in mind.

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<sup>131</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>132</sup>Ibid., 68-69.

<sup>133</sup>Archer, *Survey of Old Testament*, 104.

<sup>134</sup>With regard to Luke’s “L” source, “Some scholars have posited that much of the foregoing [examples of “L” material] was composed before Luke had become familiar with Mark and so was a proto-Luke.” Osborne and Williams, 73.

<sup>135</sup>Osborne and Williams, 35.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid., 42.

## The Two-Gospel Hypothesis

### *Exposition*

As stated above, this hypothesis was first proposed by Owen in 1764 and is thus the earliest of the modern views. The 2GH argues that Matthew was the first Gospel written, that Luke used Matthew, and that Mark used both Matthew and Luke. It was popularized by Griesbach and has been revived recently through the work of Farmer and others including John H. Niemelä who has amplified Farmer's arguments with statistical analysis.

Niemelä notes first that literary collaboration should not be taken to diminish Scriptural truth. Luke 1:1-4, he claims, is proof that literary sources were used by at least one Gospel writer, and therefore it must not "compromise inerrancy, inspiration, or the need for a consistent hermeneutic."<sup>137</sup> Responding to the charges that Luke is actually denigrating the former works to which he refers in his prologue, Niemelä notes that the term "*epecheir\_san* does not discuss the sufficiency or insufficiency of earlier attempts," and points out that Luke thought it "good" to do the same as they did.<sup>138</sup> Citing Ephesians 1:3-4, he further argues that the term for "just as" (*kath\_s*) does not necessarily indicate a distinction between the apostolic witnesses and the "many" of 1:2.<sup>139</sup> Therefore, Luke 1:1-4 gives license not only for literary borrowing, but may indicate that Luke borrowed apostolic material.

Niemelä questions the reliability of the Church Fathers, but he does note that Augustine "creates the strongest case within the patristic evidence, referring to alternating patterns between

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<sup>137</sup>Niemelä, 126.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid., 130.

<sup>139</sup>Ibid., 133-35.

Matthew-Mark and Luke-Mark and supports his conclusion with textual data.”<sup>140</sup> This alternating pattern changed Augustine’s opinion as to the order of composition, making Luke second and Mark third.<sup>141</sup> Further, Chrysostom believed that Mark knew Matthew.<sup>142</sup>

The 2GH’s main contention is that Mark used Matthew and Luke. The idea that Matthew used Mark is often based on content order arguments.<sup>143</sup> What we see in the Synoptics with regard to order is that either (1) all three Gospels have the same order, or (2) Luke differs from Matthew and Mark, or (3) Matthew differs from Luke and Mark. Mark’s order never differs from Matthew and Luke and all three never differ from one another. The trouble is that “any synoptic theory can account for these data.”<sup>144</sup> The same can be said for content-only arguments. Because all of these arguments are reversible, none are decisive.<sup>145</sup>

What Niemelä suggests is a study based on an order-and-content model (OCM). By removing Luke from the discussion (as no major view has Luke first), the OCM reduces the possible combinations of order-and-content to ten. What the OCM analysis showed is that Matthew-Luke twin departures are much more rare than the 2SH should expect.<sup>146</sup> If Matthew and Luke used Mark, but did not consult each other (as the 2SH asserts), why did they not depart

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<sup>140</sup>Ibid., 144. (Discussion of patristic reliability can be found from 136-55.)

<sup>141</sup>Ibid., 145.

<sup>142</sup>Ibid., 149.

<sup>143</sup>Difficulties with proving priority using order-only arguments have produced what has been named the *Lachmann Fallacy*, after its alleged originator. See Ibid., 157; and Osborne and Williams, 37.

<sup>144</sup>Ibid., 158.

<sup>145</sup>Ibid., 158-59.

<sup>146</sup>Ibid., 159-64.

from Mark in the same ways and as often? Conversely, if Mark was first why does his order-and-content often match Matthew-Luke, rather than just Matthew, or just Luke?

Niemelä says that the IGH “has the same difficulty but to a greater degree” than the 2SH.<sup>147</sup> This is because (1) when Mark’s order differs from Matthew his order-content matches Luke, and (2) when Mark’s order differs from Luke his order-content matches Matthew, and (3) when Matthew omits Markan content his order-content matches Luke, and (4) when Luke omits Markan content his order-content matches Matthew.<sup>148</sup> This alternating pattern revolves around Mark. How else, it is asked, could this be explained without literary dependency?<sup>149</sup>

Beyond these statistical arguments, it is also asserted that the 2GH can better explain Matthew-Luke agreements because Luke used Matthew (and Luke would have had opportunity to familiarize himself with Matthew’s material while traveling with Paul).<sup>150</sup>

### ***Evaluation***

The 2GH agrees with Church tradition that Matthew wrote first, and therefore does not need to explain away the historical data. However, this agreement is not across the board. The 2GH does not mesh well with Papias’ statement that Mark had Peter as his main source and wrote his Gospel independently of Matthew.<sup>151</sup>

The 2GH can account for agreements between the triple tradition, including the Matthew-Luke agreements against Mark with which the 2SH has difficulty. While

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<sup>147</sup>Ibid., 176.

<sup>148</sup>See Ibid., 177.

<sup>149</sup>Inspiration is said to be capable of doing so only on a mechanistic model (Niemelä, 177.).

<sup>150</sup>Niemelä, 183.

<sup>151</sup>Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39 (see Appendices).

Matthew-Mark agreements against Luke, and Mark-Luke agreements against Matthew are not so easily explained, they can at least be plausibly accounted for, and all this without recourse to any hypothetical sources such as “Q.” However, some difficulties arise including the explanation of redactional actions taken by Mark/Luke if they used Matthew. It is easier, for example, to understand why Matthew added his emphasis on Jesus as the “Son of David” to the Markan account than to understand why Luke and Mark would have chosen to omit this reference (cf. Mt 12:23; 15:22; 21:9, 15). Further, certain Markan stylistic features are found in Matthew almost always in the material which Matthew has in common with Mark. The famous Markan use of “immediately” occurs forty-one times within his Gospel, and only eighteen times in Matthew. Of these eighteen times, fourteen occur in the material he shares with Mark.

Finally, it was stated by Osborne and Williams that Niemelä’s statistical arguments are tenuous because (1) they are very difficult to understand, (2) Niemelä cites no other authorities to show that his figures are correct, (3) it is doubtful that math can explain history, (4) Niemelä counted words instead of pericopes and this is not how authors would have chosen their material, (5) words may have been taken out of order, (6) Eta Linnemann used statistics to *disprove* literary dependence, (7) there is nothing like this method used on any other ancient literature and so it is difficult to assess its viability, (8) Niemelä separated out divergent accounts such as The Sermon on the Mount / Plain when most scholars would not agree, (9) Niemelä’s statistics may be reversible, and (10) Niemelä’s arguments are overly general when dealing with the text.<sup>152</sup>

## The Independent Gospel Hypothesis

### ***Exposition***

Independence view representative F. David Farnell decries the use of text-critical means to make pronouncements on the relationships between the Synoptic Gospels due to the unorthodox scholarship involved. He says that because orthodox evangelical and unorthodox liberal “approaches diametrically oppose each other, any attempt at synthesis produces inherent instability.”<sup>153</sup> Farnell says that liberal approaches are the product of presuppositional roots that are hostile to the Christian faith, and “the design of historical critical methods was not to determine the meaning of the text but to avoid its normal meaning.”<sup>154</sup> Citing 2 Corinthians 10:5 and Colossians 2:8, Farnell warns that evangelical scholars are having their thoughts taken captive to skeptical thought and they “unwittingly are bringing the Trojan horse into the arena of biblical criticism, thereby contributing greatly to the neutralization of the Word of God.”<sup>155</sup> Farnell cites Louis Berkhof, Henry C. Thiessen, Eta Linnemann, Robert G. Gromacki, Merrill C. Tenney, John Wenahm, Robert L. Thomas, and other scholars who reject popular critical scholarly opinion in favor of the independence view due to the former’s flawed presuppositions.<sup>156</sup>

Farnell begins his positive case for Synoptic independence with an appeal to Church history. His arguments concern facts that are agreed upon by virtually all involved in the debate -

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<sup>152</sup>See Thomas’s summary in *Three Views*, 360-65.

<sup>153</sup>Farnell, “Independence View of Gospel Origins,” 231.

<sup>154</sup>*Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>155</sup>*Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>156</sup>*Ibid.*, 242-49.



that the early Church saw Matthew as written first, Luke second, and that there is no mention of literary dependency between the Gospel writers (Mark being the interpreter of Peter's sermons). As evidence for these claims Farnell quotes from Eusebius, Papias, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Chrysostom.<sup>157</sup> Further, Farnell defends the reliability of these men against claims made by some scholars that these sources are not dependable. These Church fathers were "scholars who lived quite close to the time of composition of the Gospels, [and so] their testimony must receive serious consideration in any hypothesis regarding chronological order and sources used."<sup>158</sup> Farnell then lists six axioms that can be listed that comprise the IGH:

1. The "Synoptic Problem" is a Historical Myth.
2. The Roots of Historical Criticism are the Same as Those for Errancy.
3. Four Gospels Were Written Based upon Independent Apostolic Eyewitnesses.
4. The Gospels are Inerrant, Having Plenary, Verbal Inspiration.
5. Traditional Harmonization of the Text Is Essential.
6. Grammatical-Historical Hermeneutics Are to be Advocated.<sup>159</sup>

With regard to (1), it is stated that "scholars who hold a high view of inspiration must realize that any problem regarding synoptic origins is a creation of an anti-inspiration and antisupernatural stance."<sup>160</sup> This point is amplified by (2), wherein it is argued that, "In this factor alone, supporters of the Independence View find sufficient evidence to reject dependency hypotheses."<sup>161</sup> Farnell summarizes his beliefs regarding dependency views when he notes that

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<sup>157</sup>Ibid., 236-41.

<sup>158</sup>Ibid., 237.

<sup>159</sup>Ibid., passim.

<sup>160</sup>Ibid., 250.

<sup>161</sup>Ibid. N. B. Farnell reinforces this recurring theme with surveys of the types of material found in "The Philosophical Roots of the Synoptic Problem" above. Its non-inclusion here is to avoid redundancy, not to lessen support for Farnell's insights.

one's conclusions cannot be more valid than his concepts, and so "if a method, no matter how logical, stems from a false ideology, then such a method will lead to wrong conclusions."<sup>162</sup>

Beyond the presuppositional problems noted above, (3) states that independence is required by Deuteronomy 19:15 (the requirement for two complementary witnesses to confirm a fact). Dependency theories reduce the witnesses to one (inspired) source.<sup>163</sup> The dependency views also imply an order of preference for whichever Gospel is considered most original.<sup>164</sup>

Axiom (4) is key to the Independent View. Inspiration is rarely said to play any serious role in historical critical theorizing, yet if the Bible is truly a divine-human product, any theory that considers the Bible as merely human is destined to fail.<sup>165</sup> However, (5) if the Bible is God's inspired word, then it cannot err, is without contradiction, and can be harmonized. Axiom (6) is tangential to the debate (other than reinforcing that one must be open to supernatural explanations of the text).<sup>166</sup>

The Independence View explains the similarities that exist in order and content by appealing to the writers' "sharp memories, aided by the Holy Spirit," and the differences as being related to distinct but non-contradictory reports.<sup>167</sup> One of the primary arguments against any dependency view are the many differences between the Synoptic Gospels. "Limiting attention

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<sup>162</sup>Ibid., 257.

<sup>163</sup>Ibid., 255.

<sup>164</sup>Ibid., 258.

<sup>165</sup>Ibid., 259.

<sup>166</sup>Ibid., 268-69.

<sup>167</sup>Farnell, "Independence View of Gospel Origins," 274-75.

solely to the agreements among the Gospels however, is precarious because of the additional obligation to explain the substantial disagreements.”<sup>168</sup>

As to similarity of wording, the eyewitness writers would have had direct knowledge of much of what they wrote, and their memories could be buttressed with oral tradition (itself based on Apostolic teaching), or personal written notes.<sup>169</sup> These alone could account for order and content agreement without reliance on literary dependency or hypothetical source documents.

Even so, after completing her analysis of the actual words of the Synoptic Gospels (and not just “mere agreement in content”), Eta Linnemann concluded that “verbal similarities were comparatively small and extended chiefly to identical accounts of Jesus’ words and to specific and unalterable vocabulary that is required by the nature of what is being related.”<sup>170</sup> She concludes with her oft-cited statement that “not only the Two-Source theory but also the Griesbach hypothesis, with their underlying assertion of literary dependence among the three Synoptic Gospels, are both finished when the Synoptic data has been sifted. No room remains for free-floating hypotheses.”<sup>171</sup>

One of the more troubling similarities found in the Synoptics concerns parenthetical statements such as “Let the reader understand” (Mt. 24:15 = Mk. 13:14).<sup>172</sup> It is said that “one of the most persuasive arguments for the literary interdependence of the synoptic Gospels is the presence of identical parenthetical material, for it is highly unlikely that two or three writers

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<sup>168</sup>Ibid., 271.

<sup>169</sup>Ibid., 273-82.

<sup>170</sup>Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* 14.

<sup>171</sup>Ibid., 152.

<sup>172</sup>“\_\_ναγινώσκων νοεῖτω” (Mt. 24:15 and Mk. 13:14).

would by coincidence insert into their accounts exactly the same editorial comment at exactly the same place.”<sup>173</sup> In reply, the IGH can explain these as not being editorial additions in the first place. Rather, this is “Jesus’ comment that readers of Daniel should understand the meaning of Daniel’s writing.”<sup>174</sup> Although this is the strongest of the evidences, other remarks can be explained as flowing naturally from the story (e.g., “he said to the paralytic” in Mt. 9:6 = Mk. 2:10 = Lk. 5:24), and some, even in this very example, do not actually agree in exact wording as can be seen from the comparison below.<sup>175</sup>

|                            |            |
|----------------------------|------------|
| τότε λέγει τ παραλυτικ·    | (Mt. 9:6)  |
| _____ λέγει τ παραλυτικ·   | (Mk. 2:10) |
| _____ επεν τ παραλελυμέν_· | (Lk. 5:24) |

The next issue the IGH faces is explaining how Jesus’ Aramaic speech was translated into Greek by independent writers yet shows so much similarity. In response it may be argued that the interpenetration of Judaism and Hellenism by the time of Christ produced enough overlap to account for similarity. “Jesus’ language environment was not exclusively Aramaic but also included considerable use of the Greek.”<sup>176</sup> This is all the more likely considering that Jesus was from Gentile-dominated Nazareth and many of his disciples had jobs that would demand facility in Greek.

Finally, it must be remembered that the New Testament is not merely a human book. It is an inspired document written by authors who shared life-altering experiences and were guided in

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<sup>173</sup>Stein, *The Synoptic Problem*, 37.

<sup>174</sup>Farnell, “Independence View of Gospel Origins,” 287. N.B. The underlying Greek text does not indicate through any notations that this is a parenthetical statement. “Terming these explanations ‘side comments’ or ‘parenthetical material’ begs the question.” (Ibid.)

<sup>175</sup>Ibid., 287.

<sup>176</sup>Ibid., 288.

their memories and words by the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:26; 16:13). Therefore, “attempts to draw parallels to the Gospels from other ancient historiography are tenuous and ignore the unique positions of the Gospels.”<sup>177</sup> Thus, Farnell concludes that “if evangelicals continue this unrelenting march toward embracing historical-critical ideologies, the historical foundation of the Gospels will be lost.”<sup>178</sup>

### ***Evaluation***

The IGH’s respect for early Church history is appreciated, as well as its high view of inspiration. Its explanations sound reasonable in general, even if particular instances seem less likely. In some cases, though, the IGH seems to overstate its case.

First, disagreements from Church history concerning dependency (such as those from Augustine, Chrysostom, and Clement) must also be explained. Further, if it is the case that dependency theories (of any kind) existed prior to the Enlightenment then an equivocation between liberal and orthodox views should be avoided.

Second, even if no dependency view can be shown to predate the Enlightenment influence, it is difficult to prove with absolute certainty that methods birthed out of false presuppositions can never be separated from them.<sup>179</sup> While false initial presuppositions and unorthodox adherents should not be ignored, a case, not just repeated assertions, must be made for the *impossibility* of such a separation. Because he fails to show this impossibility, Farnell borderlines on committing the Genetic Fallacy. He also has difficulty explaining

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<sup>177</sup>Ibid., 292.

<sup>178</sup>Ibid., 296.

<sup>179</sup>An analogy from eschatology debates can be offered here: proponents of Historicism chide both Preterists and Futurists for following views formed by Jesuits during the counter-Reformation. Yet how many Futurists or Preterists today would accept a positive connection to Roman Catholicism?

counter-examples in scholarship (i.e., orthodox scholars who accept certain tools of unorthodox origin).<sup>180</sup>

The IGH also seems to be overly-cautious when it comes to the possibility of literary borrowing. Literary collaboration is seen in Kings and Chronicles, and Jude uses 2 Peter (or vice-versa), and Luke 1:1-4 alone seems to give evidence that borrowing is not a problem for inspired writers.<sup>181</sup> Farnell argues that Luke's language shows a disdain for these other accounts, but as was noted above, this position is open to serious question. Further, even if Luke 1:1-4 is discounted, Farnell allows for note taking and interpersonal sharing between authors.<sup>182</sup> How is this significantly different from borrowing written materials? In fact, would not literary borrowing from other inspired sources be even more acceptable? Finally, it is recognized that Jesus, Paul, and Jude borrowed from non-inspired sources.<sup>183</sup> If the Holy Spirit can inspire literary borrowing from pagans, certainly the theories suggested by dependency views cannot be completely dismissed. *That* the Holy Spirit inspired the Gospel writers can be conceded by all even if *how* that inspiration was accomplished is debated.

### **Issues Raised by Synoptic Studies and Solutions**

Before moving on to a potential solution that claims a higher degree of orthodoxy than the critical views discussed so far, it will be helpful to point out that solving the Synoptic Problem is not just a matter of importance for critical scholars. One's answers to the questions

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<sup>180</sup>See Osborne's and Williams's response to Farnell in *Three Views*, 310-315.

<sup>181</sup>See Niemelä's response to Farnell in *Three Views*, 325-28.

<sup>182</sup>Farnell, "Independence View of Gospel Origins," 280-83.

<sup>183</sup>E.g., Jesus (Acts 26:14); Paul (1 Corinthians 6:13; 15:32-33; Titus 1:12; Acts 17:28), Jude (1:9, 14).

raised by the Synoptic Problem has implications for other aspects of Christianity including its historicity, the interpretation of the Gospels, the doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy, and the apologetic responses available when one defends the faith.

### Historicity

If some of the presuppositions involved in Synoptic Problem research cause difficulties, the same can be said of some of its proposed solutions. In many cases the historicity of both the Church and the Gospels are called into question. This, in turn, can result in questioning the historicity of Christianity itself. This has already been seen in manner in which The Jesus Seminar has put the 2SH to use.<sup>184</sup> While such attacks may not be necessarily detrimental to many religions, “Christianity claims that God has acted in history, and above all he has acted in the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>185</sup> Indeed, “the Christian Religion has its origin neither in general religious experience, nor in some esoteric mysticism, nor in dogma, . . . [it] rests upon a particular event in history.”<sup>186</sup>

Just one example, that of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, will suffice to show the importance of history to Christianity. Thomas points out that when comparing the resurrection and appearance accounts in the Gospels the following features are called into question by critical scholars: the timing of the women’s arrival, their number and names, their motives for coming,

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<sup>184</sup>This is pointed out by Robert L. Thomas who writes, “What degree of editorial liberty is allowed? That of Stonehouse? Of Gundry? Of Carson? Or even of the Jesus Seminar? All have the same presuppositions regarding interdependence and Markan priority.” Thomas and Farnell, *Jesus Crisis*, 360. “Such debates are meaningless if the MH [2SH] were not true.” Niemelä, 186.

<sup>185</sup>Reginald H. Fuller, “Historical Criticism and the Bible” in Frederick Houk Borsche, ed. *Anglicanism and the Bible* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse Barlow, 1984), 143.

<sup>186</sup>E. C. Hoskyns and F. N. Davey, *The Riddle of the New Testament* (London: Faber, 1931), 10; quoted in Fuller, “Historical Criticism and the Bible,” 143.

the tomb guards, the stone, the earthquake, the race, the angels, the location of Christ's appearances, and the deception of the priests.<sup>187</sup> If these issues are solved by appeal to redaction criticism, then their historicity is called into question, and "if Gospel writers handled actual events as loosely as [is proposed by scholars both critical and evangelical], what proves that they did not handle *all* the data that loosely?"<sup>188</sup>

Given the historical nature and claims of Christianity, any Synoptic Problem solution that denigrates Christianity's historical base should be deemed unacceptable by Christians unless the reasoning and facts behind it are incontrovertible.

### Doctrine

As has been noted several times above, the doctrines of biblical inspiration and inerrancy can be threatened when various theories espouse views that are in conflict with a high view of Scripture. Milton S. Terry charges "rationalistic theories of interpretation, which ignore or deny the supernatural" as producing only confusion.<sup>189</sup> Traditional theology challenges non-traditional history with questions such as: If the only the apostles are inspired by God, why does the Church believe Mark and Luke to be Scripture? Why would Matthew use a non-inspired source for his Gospel? If Matthew's changes to Mark's Gospel are corrective, why are these not followed by Luke?<sup>190</sup> How one answers these questions is either caused or effected by his view of inspiration. Bernard Ramm notes that "how authentic the materials are depends on the

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<sup>187</sup>Thomas and Farnell, *Jesus Crisis*, 360-61.

<sup>188</sup>*Ibid.*, 361 [emphasis in original].

<sup>189</sup>Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Academie Books - Zondervan, 1974), 242.

<sup>190</sup>Responses to questions such as these may even affect how one defines these doctrines. Examples of redefining standard doctrines can be found in Clark Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (San



convictions about inspiration and revelation of the scholar.” He concludes that the evangelical must accept them as authentic.<sup>191</sup>

### Interpretation

The Synoptic problem is also important for interpreting the Gospels. One example concerns the Mission Discourse of Matthew 10:5-42.<sup>192</sup> Verses 24-25 contains an important feature of Jesus’ message, that the fate of the disciple is no different than that of their teacher. This theme is further evidenced by Jesus’ words in 10:40 concerning the one receiving the disciples receiving Jesus himself. Theories such as the 2SH would say that Matthew used Mark and Q for this discourse, while Luke used Mark for his charge to the Twelve (Lk. 9:3-5) and “Q” for the sending out of the seventy-two (Lk. 10:1-15).<sup>193</sup> The difficulty is that the non-Markan parallels between Matthew and Luke (which are what “Q” supposedly explains) apparently came from a distinct “Q” discourse whose point was not Jesus’ warning to the disciples of the cost of following him, for Q 10:2-16 has no such warning.<sup>194</sup> Has Jesus’ original point, then, been lost?

Even the proper understanding of individual verses can be called into question once critical methodologies are employed. Mark 10:18 (ESV) has “Why do you call me good?” while Matthew 19:17 (ESV) says, “Why do you ask me about what is good?” These are very different

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Francisco: Harper & Rowe, 1984), 57-59.

<sup>191</sup>Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics* (3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 145.

<sup>192</sup>Allan J. McNicol, “The Importance of the Synoptic Problem for Interpreting the Gospels”(research paper, Austin Graduate School of Theology) <http://www.colby.edu/rel/2gh/importanceofsp.htm> (Accessed August 10, 2009).

<sup>193</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup>Robinson, *Sayings Gospel Q*, 97-101.

questions and the answers given will have to be adjusted accordingly.<sup>195</sup> Further, which question did Jesus actually ask? As noted above, if inspiration is plenary and verbal then it is not simply “‘pedantic precision’ that seeks to weave the Gospels together into a harmonious whole, even to the point of insisting they contain the *ipsissima verba* [vs. *ipsissima vox*] of Jesus.”<sup>196</sup>

Difficulties of interpretation have also been said to lead to an abandonment of the historical-grammatical method of hermeneutics. Thomas notes that allegorical interpretation, an allowance for error, an ignoring of original historical and / or geographical settings, a de-emphasis on the role of eyewitness testimony, and subjectivism, have all resulted from failure to take the text on its own terms.<sup>197</sup>

### Apologetics

Finally, there are apologetic issues related to one’s solution to the Synoptic Problem. “Q,” for example, is said to reveal a non-miraculous Jesus.<sup>198</sup> Norman Geisler writes, “From an apologetic vantage point, the so-called ‘Gospel of Q’ has serious implications for the authenticity of the Gospels and the historic apologetic for Christianity. But the evidence shows that the

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<sup>195</sup>“τί με λέγεις ὑπαθόν;” and “τί με ῥωτῶς περὶ τοῦ ὑπαθο;” respectively. See also Thomas and Farnell, *Jesus Crisis*, 357-59.

<sup>196</sup>Thomas and Farnell, *Jesus Crisis*, 358. See also Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*. 2d ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Academic, 2007), 117-18.

<sup>197</sup>From Robert L. Thomas’s chapter “Impact of Historical Criticism on Hermeneutics” in Thomas and Farnell, *Jesus Crisis*.

<sup>198</sup>Adam Beresford makes the following argument: “Q contained no miracle stories at all (or perhaps just one). It did not contain the story of the resurrection. . . . Matthew and Luke contain more miracle stories than Mark. . . . These tendencies, combined with our principles of interpretation, suggest the following tentative hypothesis: Jesus did not perform any miracles during his life; he did not claim to have performed any; nobody else claimed that he performed any.” *The Gospels, Some General Points* (Boston: University of Massachusetts), 4-5.  
[http://www.faculty.umb.edu/adam\\_beresford/research/jesus/jesus-overview.pdf](http://www.faculty.umb.edu/adam_beresford/research/jesus/jesus-overview.pdf) (Accessed August 10, 2009).

hypothesis in no way undermines the authenticity of the biblical Gospels.”<sup>199</sup> The evidence he cites is the poor foundation for the “Q” theory (lack of compelling literary or documentary evidence, circular reasoning, a reconstructionist view of history, etc.). However, “Q” was theorized to complete a given theory of Synoptic dependency, not simply to create a non-miraculous Jesus.<sup>200</sup> A satisfactory means of removing the need for a “Q” (or any other problematic source[s]) from the picture will require a positive Synoptic theory with explanatory power that meets or exceeds any that are based on, or result from, anti-Christian presuppositions.

### **A Proposed Historical Solution to the Synoptic Problem**

As late as 2001, it was noted that “No completely satisfactory solution to the synoptic problem is at hand.”<sup>201</sup> Perhaps this situation is indicative of a flawed methodology rather than any of its particular manifestations. A wise man once said, “A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.”<sup>202</sup> Perhaps this poor fruit is due to poor roots, but what other options are available?

John Wenham answers that, “It is important to realise [*sic*] that the critical procedures which have whittled away the authority of different parts of the Gospels are neither infallible nor sacrosanct. It is valuable, even if only as an experimental exercise, to break away from these procedures and to work on the supposition that the evangelists may have got their facts right, and

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<sup>199</sup>Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), s.v. “Q Document.”

<sup>200</sup>Geisler notes that, “Possessing an early document of sayings does not allow us to conclude that Christ did not perform miracles unless the document explicitly says so. . . . [and] When segments of text attributed to Q are examined as a whole, there is evidence of Jesus’ miracles and divinity.” Ibid.

<sup>201</sup>Elwell and Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Synoptic Problem.”

<sup>202</sup>“παν δένδρον \_γαθ\_v καρπο\_ς καλο\_ς ποιε, τ\_δ\_ σαπρ\_v δένδρον καρπο\_ς πονηρο\_ς ποιε.” (Mt. 7:17) - attributed to Jesus Christ, although no claim will be made at this time as to who actually penned these exact words.

see what happens.”<sup>203</sup> Not only might the authors of the Gospels be deemed trustworthy (at least until incontrovertible proof of untrustworthiness is produced), but the same can be said of their disciples, the Church Fathers. Should it be possible to produce from the testimony of the Gospel authors and that of the Church Fathers a coherent narrative that explains the Synoptic data, this would seem to be preferred over critical theories that begin with anti-supernatural presuppositions and which produce unorthodox theology.

### The Four-Fold Gospel Hypothesis

#### ***Exposition***

Dom Bernard Orchard, general editor of *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, as well as *The Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition of the Holy Bible*,<sup>204</sup> believed that he had formulated “a hypothesis that does justice both to modern critical scholarship and to the integrity of the ancient Fathers of the Church who first recorded for us the fundamental facts.”<sup>205</sup>

This is important because,

the ancient churchmen were primarily interested in the spiritual authority of the Gospels, that is, in their being the actual witnesses of the apostles or a witness sanctioned by the apostles. Only when church tradition came to be seriously questioned and challenged by heretics and dissidents did Christian writers bestir themselves to defend it vigorously.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>203</sup>John Wenham, *Easter Engima: Are the Resurrection Accounts in Conflict?* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand rapids: Baker, 1992), 8; quoted in Thomas and Farnell, *Jesus Crisis*, 362.

<sup>204</sup>Peter J. Thuesen, *In Discordance with the Scriptures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 142-44.

<sup>205</sup>Dom Bernard Orchard, *The Origin and Evolution of the Gospels* (London: Ealing Abbey Scriptorium, 1993), 3.

<sup>206</sup>David Alan Black, “The Historical Origins of the Gospels,” *Faith and Mission* 18 no. 1 (2001): 23.

Orchard's view was set forth in three volumes, specifically in the final volume, *The Order of the Synoptics*.<sup>207</sup> His thesis is that the four Gospels were composed in correspondence to four main phases of early Church history: "four turning points at each of which a suitable Gospel document was found to be necessary for its proper growth."<sup>208</sup> These include:<sup>209</sup>

- 1) Matthew: A.D. 30-42, The Jerusalem Phase under Peter (Acts 1-12)
- 2) Luke: A.D. 42-62, The Gentile Mission Phase under Paul (Acts 13-28)
- 3) Mark: A.D. 62-67, The Roman Phase under Peter and Paul (Acts 28:30)
- 4) John: A.D. 62-98, The Johannine Supplement Phase (post-Acts)<sup>210</sup>

Orchard chose a term used by Irenaeus in naming his view the "Fourfold-Gospel Hypothesis"<sup>211</sup> in order to distinguish it from both Griesbach's and Farmer's views.<sup>212</sup> The primary contribution of Orchard is the explanation he developed for this order.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>207</sup>Dom Bernard Orchard and Harold Riley, *The Order of the Synoptics* (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1987). See also Black, *Why Four Gospels?*

<sup>208</sup>Orchard, *Origin and Evolution of the Gospels*, 4.

<sup>209</sup>Adapted from Black, *Why Four Gospels?* 15, and Orchard, *Origin and Evolution of the Gospels*, 4.

<sup>210</sup>Orchard says that John's Gospel "may have been written quite soon after the appearance of Luke and Mark, about AD 62/63, but the final chapter was not written until after the martyrdom of Peter in AD 65/67. The date of publication, probably from Ephesus, may have been at any time between then and the death of John at the end of the century." Orchard, *Origin and Evolution of the Gospels*, 19.

<sup>211</sup>"*Quadriformia autem animalia, et quadriforme Evangelium.*" Latin text from Irenaeus, *Argumenta Capitem, Libri Tertii, Contra Hæreses*, ed., tr. W. Wigan Harvey (Cambridge: Typis Academicus, 1857). "The living creatures are quadriform, and the Gospel is quadriform." English text from Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.11.8 in Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. I* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 429. (Note: *Against Heresies*, 3.2.8 is listed as the reference in Black, *Why Four Gospels?* 9.)

<sup>212</sup>Black notes that "it was Dr. Orchard who originally suggested the term 'Two-Gospel Hypotheses' to Farmer" in order to distinguish Farmer's view from Griesbach's as well. See Black, *Why Four Gospels?* 8-9.

<sup>213</sup>The following material is found in Orchard's *Origin and Evolution of the Gospels, The Order of the Synoptics*, David Alan Black, "The Historical Origins of the Gospels," and *Why Four Gospels?* [which is "essentially a popularization of Dr. Orchard's views." (See Black, *Why Four Gospels?* 9)].

There is a sense in which all Synoptic theorists are simply attempting to construct a single narrative that makes sense out of the various similarities and differences found in the Synoptic Gospels. Simply put, what each theorist must do is attempt to integrate the “external evidence” of Church history with the “internal evidence” within the Synoptic Gospels themselves.

In order to appreciate the narrative suggested by the Four-Fold Gospel it will be helpful to summarize the various historical records it draws from so that the conjectural aspects are in their proper context. These are "the chief recorded witnesses of the first four centuries, presented in chronological sequence according to the date of the documents in which they first appear."<sup>214</sup>

1. Justin: “And when it is said that he (Jesus) changed the name of one of his apostles to Peter, and when it is written in his (Peter's) memoirs that this happened....”
2. Irenaeus: "So Matthew brought out a written Gospel among the Jews in their own style, when Peter and Paul were preaching the Gospel at Rome and founding the church. But after their demise Mark himself, the disciple and recorder of Peter, has also handed on to us in writing what had been proclaimed by Peter. And Luke, the follower of Paul, set forth in a book the Gospel that was proclaimed by him. Later John, the disciple of the Lord and the one who leaned against his chest, also put out a Gospel while residing in Ephesus of Asia."
3. Clement of Alexandria: "Mark, the follower of Peter, while Peter was publicly preaching the Gospel at Rome in the presence of some of Caesar's knights and uttering many testimonies about Christ, on their asking him to let them have a record of the things that had been said, wrote the Gospel that is called the Gospel of Mark from the things said by Peter."
4. Tertullian: "from among the apostles, John and Matthew implant in us the faith, while from among the apostolic men Luke and Mark reaffirm it"
5. Origen: "For Matthew did not 'take in hand' but wrote by the Holy Spirit, and so did Mark and John and also equally Luke."
6. The Muratorian Fragment: "In the third place, the book of the Gospel according to Luke. . . . The fourth of the Gospels is John's, one of the disciples."

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<sup>214</sup>Black, "The Historical Origins of the Gospels," 24-27.

7. The Anti-Marcionite Prologue to Luke: "There were already Gospels in existence, that according to Matthew, written down in Judea, and that according to Mark in Italy. But guided by the Holy Spirit, he [Luke] composed in the regions around Achaia the whole of the Gospel"

8. The Old Latin Prologue to Mark (Recension 2): "Mark, . . . had been the disciple and recorder of Peter, whom he followed, just as he had heard him relating. Having been asked by the brethren in Rome, he wrote this short Gospel in the regions of Italy. When Peter heard about it, he approved and authorized it to be read to the church with (his own) authority. But after the demise of Peter, taking this Gospel that he had composed he journeyed to Egypt, . . . Last of all John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospel, and being urged by his friends and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel."

9. Eusebius: "To such a degree did the flame of true piety illuminate the minds of Peter's hearers that, not being satisfied with having just one hearing or with the unwritten teaching of the divine proclamation, with every sort of entreaty they urged Mark, whose Gospel it is reputed to be, being the follower of Peter, to bequeath to them also in writing the record of the teaching handed on to them by word (of mouth), nor did they let up before convincing the man. And by this means they became the cause of the Gospel writing that is said to be 'according to Mark.'"

10. Papias: "Mark, having become the recorder of Peter, indeed wrote accurately albeit not in order whatever he (Peter) remembered of the things either said or done by the Lord. For he had neither heard the Lord nor was a follower of him, but later, as I said, of Peter, who used to deliver his teachings in the form of short stories, but not making as it were a literary composition of the Lord's sayings, so that Mark did not err at all when he wrote down certain things just as he (Peter) recalled them. For he had but one intention: not to leave out anything he had heard nor to falsify anything in them."

11. Clement of Alexandria: "the earliest written Gospels were those containing the genealogies, and that the Gospel of Mark had this arrangement. When Peter had publicly preached the word in Rome and by the Spirit had proclaimed the Gospel, those present, who were numerous, urged Mark, as one who had followed him for a long time and remembered what had been spoken, to record what was said. And he did this, handing over the Gospel to those who had asked for it. And when Peter got to know about it, he exerted no pressure either to forbid it or to promote it."

12. Origen: "[Eusebius said of Origen that he knew] only four Gospels. The first written was that according to the one-time tax collector but later apostle of Jesus Christ, Matthew, who published it for the believers from Judaism, composed in Hebrew characters. And second, that according to Mark, composed as Peter guided. . . . And third, that according to Luke, the Gospel praised by Paul, composed for those from the Gentiles. After them all, that according to John."

13. Jerome: "[Paul] had Titus as a recorder just as blessed Peter had Mark, whose Gospel consists of Peter's narration and the latter's writing."

14. Augustine: "Therefore these four Evangelists, well known to the whole world, four in number, perhaps because of the four parts of the world, are said to have been written in this order: first Matthew, then Mark, thirdly Luke, lastly John. . . . Of the four, Matthew alone is said to have been written in Greek. . . . Mark seems to have followed him as his footman and abbreviator."

The importance of these witnesses is clear: they have been preserved from the earliest times by some of the most distinguished scholars of the early Church, who "represent the widest possible spread: Irenaeus of Lyons who originally came from Asia Minor; Clement and Origen who came from Egypt; Eusebius and Jerome from Palestine; Augustine from North Africa; while the Prologues represent the consensus of a number of European churches."<sup>215</sup>

Several important features emerge from these writings: (1) Matthew always heads the list and is considered to have been written first. (2) The Gospel of Luke is attributed to the disciple of Paul, and is usually placed third. (3) Mark is usually listed second.<sup>216</sup> Mark's function is that of the "go-between" or "interpreter" of Peter who is described as the person responsible for creating the text of Mark. However, Peter did not write down his Gospel stories; he spoke them before an audience in Rome. Peter's words were made available by Mark, who did not alter anything. Thus, the patristic evidence has the Synoptic Gospels all written within the lifetime of the Apostles Peter and Paul, but "utterly fails to support the priority of Mark at any point."<sup>217</sup>

### ***Orchard's Historical Reconstruction***

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<sup>215</sup>Black, "The Historical Origins of the Gospels," 27.

<sup>216</sup>Clement of Alexandria relates that both Matthew and Luke came into existence before Mark. Black notes that Mark may be regarded as both the second and the third; second as to order of composition, and third in order of authority. Black, "The Historical Origins of the Gospels," 28.

<sup>217</sup>Black, "The Historical Origins of the Gospels," 30.



## The Jerusalem Phase

Jesus arrived and began his ministry at an important nexus in history. The *Septuagint* had been written, giving Greek readers the ability to have the Old Testament Scripture in their own language. The *Diaspora* had produced a world with Jews and synagogues in many populated areas. The *Pax Romana* made it possible for travelers to criss-cross the empire and carry with them news of goings-on even in its far reaches. Prophetic time had reached its apex; the time was truly “full.”<sup>218</sup> After the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit, the Church was birthed in Jerusalem.<sup>219</sup> The Church, made up of local gatherings of home churches, met and worshiped according to the doctrine of the Twelve Apostles.

The Apostles realized that their main apologetical task would be to demonstrate to the Jewish authorities that Jesus had in fact quite literally fulfilled all the prophecies about the Messiah. These considerations indicate the original motivation for the composition of the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>220</sup>

## The Gentile Mission Phase

The Gospel of Matthew naturally became the fundamental document for the growing Church (still Jewish) as it began its evangelization of the world (in accordance with Jesus’ command in Acts 1:8). Eventually, however, the Gentiles began entering the Church as well. Their primary apostle, Paul, however, desired a similar document better suited to his own uses (i.e., “adapted to his own converts’ requirements”).<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>218</sup>See Dan. 9:25 and Eph. 1:10 respectively.

<sup>219</sup>See Acts 2.

<sup>220</sup>Orchard, *Origin and Evolution of the Gospels*, 5.

<sup>221</sup>Black, “The Historical Origins of the Gospels,” 36.

Paul's traveling companion, Luke, was a physician and a good choice for a researcher (as Matthew, a tax collector, had been a trustworthy "detail person"). Luke undertook the project, researching eyewitness sources and carefully crafting an orderly account.<sup>222</sup> This was important because Luke was not an eyewitness and therefore did not have the firsthand knowledge nor the authority of the Twelve Apostles. Further, "the tension between circumcision and non-circumcision was still at a precarious level, [and] this Gospel of Luke might well have proved extremely divisive if published without the approval, or at least the knowledge of Peter, the mediating leader of the Twelve and the most authoritative eyewitness of all."<sup>223</sup>

#### The Roman Phase

We know from 1 Peter 5:12–13 that both Peter and Mark were in Rome when Paul was there as a prisoner.<sup>224</sup> It is thus possible that Peter was asked to check Luke's Gospel for errors and to give his imprimatur in some way. This might have been accomplished by a series of sermons delivered in Rome wherein Peter referred to both Matthew's and Luke's Gospels as his "sermon notes." Considering the handling of scrolls, he could have been switching back and forth between the two and inserting his own comments here and there as he saw fit. After a series of five of these sermons, Mark took the records made of them (that either he had written or hired others to transcribe) and combined them into the corresponding five sections of Mark. These would include neither the genealogies nor the post-resurrection events, as these were not relevant

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<sup>222</sup>Luke 1:2-3. "καθ' ος παρέδοσαν μιν ος π' ρχς α τόπται κα πηρέται γενόμενοι το λόγου, δοξε κ μο παρηκολουθηκότι νωθεν πσιν κριβς καθεξς σοι γράψαι" English (ESV): "just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account."

<sup>223</sup>Black, "The Historical Origins of the Gospels," 36-37.

<sup>224</sup>Cf. Colossians and Philemon.

to Peter's purpose of comparison.<sup>225</sup> Mark asked Peter for permission to distribute the sermon and was not opposed. Later, after Peter's death, Mark published this work as a Gospel after adding in some concluding material to round it out.<sup>226</sup>

This mediating and unifying action of Peter in linking the Gospels of Matthew and Luke together with the aid of his personal reminiscences of the Lord's words and deeds also explains and justifies the tradition that puts the Gospel of Mark between those of Matthew and Luke. For though Griesbach was right in asserting that Luke was composed before Mark, it was the harmonizing and binding quality of our Mark that provided the approbation necessary for Luke to find general acceptance in all the churches. It also explains why Mark practically disappeared from view for several centuries thereafter; for simply by being the link between Matthew and Luke it had fulfilled the original purpose of both Peter and Paul.<sup>227</sup>

Black notes that, unlike the fantastic hypotheses thought up by exponents of Markan priority, "the Fourfold Gospel Hypothesis respects and accepts the real-life situation of the universal church in the years A.D. 30-67 and agrees with the known history of the apostolic churches at all key points. . . [and] is the only solution that conforms to the historical and patristic evidence; it also meets the internal critical data at least as well as the Markan Priority Hypothesis, and often much better; and finally, it is the only solution that explains the need for three Synoptic Gospels—no fewer and no more."<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>225</sup>See Black, *Why Four Gospels?*, 79.

<sup>226</sup>Hence, the disputed ending of Mark's Gospel (16:9-20).

<sup>227</sup>Black, "The Historical Origins of the Gospels," 37.

<sup>228</sup>Black, "The Historical Origins of the Gospels," 38.

## ***Evaluation***

As noted above, the result of over two hundred years of synoptic research on internal evidence has produced no consensus. Indeed, some have come to the conclusion that the problem is insoluble.<sup>229</sup> All that internal literary criticism can do is to show how an existing text *could* have originated in more than one way. "The internal evidence is of its very nature unable to offer any agreed solution to the problem of the literary relationships between the Synoptic Gospels. It is therefore necessary to look beyond it to the other two criteria, namely the external evidence and to the historical likelihood of the [FGH]."<sup>230</sup> The decision as to which is the *correct* way is said to require the help of history, that is, the source theory that best reflects the actual historical circumstances is the one most likely to be the real explanation. According to FGH proponents, besides being more historically faithful, the FGH:

1. Accounts for the agreements in church history (being largely based upon them).
2. Accounts for canonical order (Mark being "published" second although Luke was written earlier).
3. Accounts for agreements and disagreements in wording, content, and order (as Peter would have sometimes followed and sometimes departed from Matthew or Luke).
4. Requires no presuppositions hostile to orthodox faith (for it is based on orthodox accounts and does not deny inspiration).
5. Accounts for literary dependence and independence (since Peter would sometimes read verbatim and sometimes speak extemporaneously).
6. Requires no hypothetical documents ("Q" material is Matthew-Luke overlap caused by Luke's use of Matthew).
7. Requires no hypothetical community to explain theological development (theological considerations developed early and for certain emphases already present in the book of acts).
8. Accounts for Mark's less-refined Greek (being a sermon and not a literary work).
9. Accounts for Mark's zig-zag pericope order (due to Peter's switching back and forth between Matthew and Luke as he gave his sermons).
10. Accounts for agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark (for Peter did not always follow their accounts).

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<sup>229</sup>See Osborne and Williams, 23-24.

<sup>230</sup>Black, "The Historical Origins of the Gospels," 35.

11. Accounts for eyewitness detail in mark (as Peter was an eyewitness).
12. Accounts for markan conflation of Matthew and Luke (since Peter was giving short sermons, not writing out an entire scroll's worth of material).
13. Accounts for the inclusion of embarrassing material (because by now Peter had learned his lessons regarding his earlier behavior).
14. Accounts for the exclusion of genealogies (which were not part of Peter's interest at the time as he was giving accounts of Jesus' acts during his ministry).
15. Accounts for the disputed ending of mark (which was not part of Peter's interest at the time as he was giving accounts of Jesus' acts during his ministry, but was added to the "sermon versions" later by mark when they were published as an official gospel).

The FGH also avoids the difficult issue of having non-apostolic sources being used by eyewitness apostolic writers (which seems to be unnecessary at best), giving full credence to inspiration and introducing no theological issues regarding literary borrowing: Matthew, an eyewitness apostle, wrote his Gospel; and Peter, another an eyewitness apostle, gave his imprimatur to Luke and became the source of Mark.

Why, if the FGH has such great explanatory power, has it not been widely accepted?

One reason may be that its similarity to the 2GH has kept it from being considered according to its own merits.<sup>231</sup> Black has a more nefarious explanation. He believes that,

The stubborn adherence to Markan priority in the face of all its weaknesses compels one to conclude that it has been regarded almost unconsciously as a dogma of liberalism over against the claims of the church to control the dogmatic interpretation of the Scriptures; for the critics seek always to offer an alternative explanation to that of church tradition and belief.<sup>232</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The historical study of Christianity's founding documents is a necessary endeavor for the Church. "The Christian religion," writes Davey, "is not merely open to historical investigation,

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<sup>231</sup>As Carlson does in <http://www.hypotypoeseis.org/synoptic-problem/2004/09/overview-of-proposed-solutions.html> (accessed August 17, 2009).

<sup>232</sup>Black, "The Historical Origins of the Gospels," 35.

but demands it, and its piety depends on it.”<sup>233</sup> Chrysostom wrote that if “there be four that write, not at the same times, nor in the same places, neither after having met together, and conversed with one another, and then they speak all things as it were out of one mouth, this becomes a very great demonstration of the truth.”<sup>234</sup> If Christians are to overturn many of the critic’s anti-Christian conclusions, they must produce theories better than those which led to those conclusions. It is my belief that the FGH explains the main issues that the other hypotheses do, subsuming their strongest points while avoiding their major pitfalls.

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<sup>233</sup>Hoskyns and Davey, 143-44.

<sup>234</sup>John Chrysostom, *The Gospel of St. Matthew*, Homily 1.5 in Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 10 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 3.

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