

Q on the Chopping Block: Dissent in the Synoptic Problem

**A PAPER
PRESENTED TO
Sarah Schwarz**

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Course
RELS 135 Christian Origins**

by

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May 2003

For most biblical scholars, the “Synoptic Problem” has been settled since at least the latter part of the 19th century. The favored hypothesis for most persons involved in the study of the synoptic gospels is known as the Two-Source Hypothesis (2SH) and its variations (such as the Four-Source Hypothesis)¹. Bucking this trend is a distinct minority of researchers convinced that this hypothesis is incorrect. The prevalent alternative theory in North America is based on the Griesbach Hypothesis, named for its major 18th century proponent², while the predominant theory in the United Kingdom is called the Farrer Hypothesis after A. M. Farrer, its original expounder³. It is my intent to examine these two hypotheses and determine how they differ from the 2SH and why their adherents feel them superior. To this end I will first examine the synoptic problem itself and the majority solution, and then I will examine the opposing theories and examine their assumptions and conclusions.

The synoptic gospels are the biblical narratives attributed to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They are called 'synoptics' because when they are viewed in parallel, they are seen to share a great deal in common: a similar timeline of events and often identical wordings in parallel accounts, indicating that the three gospels share some sort of relationship. This is the heart of the synoptic problem: what is the nature of this relationship? Any theory of the development of the synoptic gospels must approach the problem by asking two questions: which gospel was written first, and what sources were used in the compilation of each gospel?

¹Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (2nd ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 77.

²Stephen Carlson, “Chronology of the Synoptic Problem,” n.p. Cited 22 December 2001. Online: <http://www.mindspring.com/~scarlson/synopt/faq.htm>, §II.

³Allan J. McNicol, “Has Goulder Sunk Q? An Assessment of Mark Goodacre’s *Goulder and the Gospels: An Examination of a New Paradigm*,” n.p. Cited 10 July 1997. Online: <http://www.colby.edu/rel/2gh/mcnicols.htm>, preface.

The 2SH answers the first question by answering that Mark was written first. The majority of scholars, including many who discount the 2SH, believe that this is the case – and the evidence for Markan priority abounds. On superficial examination of the text, Mark’s style can be described as somewhat primitive and vigorous, lacking any sort of birth narrative and ending the story abruptly in the earliest versions we have found. In contrast, the style of Matthew and Luke are somewhat more refined and detailed, each adding much-embellished stories about Jesus’ birth and post- resurrection appearances. There are more important and convincing arguments for Markan priority than stylistic factors, though. The fact that almost all of the content of Mark is found in Matthew’s gospel and that two-thirds of Mark is found in Luke is a strong argument⁴, as well as the agreement between the sequences of narratives that are contained in all three gospels (called “triple-tradition” material)⁵. A third argument for Mark being written first are the ways in which changes were made: when Mark's version of a story found in the triple tradition is awkward or difficult to understand in its context, Matthew and Luke's versions often present a version in which these problems have been remedied. It would be unlikely for Mark to introduce problems into a text that he was revising, if it were already written in clearer language than his own.⁶

Mark Goodacre, a supporter of the Farrer hypothesis, has proposed another argument for the Markan priority that Farrer's hypothesis also supports. The concept of “editorial fatigue” or “docile reproduction”, coined by Michael Goulder (another Farrer supporter), posits that when a writer is copying from a source, he will make changes in

⁴ Stephen Carlson, “The Synoptic Problem FAQ,” n.p. Cited 22 December 2001. Online: <http://www.mindspring.com/~scarlson/synopt/faq.htm>, §1.6.

⁵ Carlson, “The Synoptic Problem FAQ,” §1.6.

⁶ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 77-79.

the early parts of his work but then lapse back into docile reproduction of the source as the composition wears on.⁷ Matthew and Luke both exhibit this phenomenon in various places. For example, in the story of The Cleansing of the Leper (Mt 8:1-4, Mk 1:40-45, and Lk 5:12-16), Matthew starts his account of this bit of triple tradition material by speaking of the “many crowds” that followed Jesus down from the mountain he'd been speaking on. Then the leper comes and gets healed, but, in Matthew as in Mark, Jesus tells him not to tell anyone what has happened. A great crowd is with him, but he's supposed to keep this a secret? And Matthew's Jesus isn't the secrecy freak that Mark's Jesus is – why the sudden emphasis on keeping quiet about it? Goodacre proposes that this is an example of fatigue – Matthew put that detail in his story because Mark's account contained it, not because it was important to his own re-telling of the story. The secrecy made sense in Mark both because it was in character for Mark's Jesus and because the leper in Mark seeks Jesus out in private, but if Matthew reproduced that detail as a result of editorial fatigue, that points again to Mark's being written first.⁸

While the Farrer camp also holds Markan priority as a fundamental basis of its theory, the neo-Griesbach adherents depart from the majority opinion by stating that Matthew came first, then Luke, and that Mark's gospel came last. William R. Farmer most recently revived the Griesbach hypothesis in 1964, in his book *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis*. In his book Farmer puts forward sixteen arguments for Matthean priority; supporters of Markan priority would not oppose most of these arguments. The main points of contention would be the arguments in which Farmer specifically presses for Markan posteriority. Farmer's sixth argument, for example, states

⁷Mark Goodacre, “Fatigue in the Synoptics”, *New Testament Studies* 44 (1998): 46.

⁸Goodacre, “Fatigue in the Synoptics”, 47-48.

that because when Mark varies the order of events in his narrative from the order presented in Matthew or Luke, he always does so in agreement with the other gospel, the conclusion is that Mark came after both and used them in his redaction. He supports this by saying that:

It is as if Matthew and Luke each knew what the other was doing, and that each had agreed to support Mark whenever the other departed from Mark. Such concerted action is excluded by the adherents of Marcan priority in their insistence that Matthew and Luke were completely independent of one another.⁹

A Markan supporter would argue that this is not the only conclusion that can be drawn; in fact, it assumes that Matthew and Luke were writing simultaneously, which is not necessarily the case, and Farmer here ignores Farrer's conclusion (discussed further below) that Matthew and Luke were not completely independent but rather that Matthew's gospel was available to the writer of Luke's. Several of Farmer's arguments also rest on the opinion of the Church Fathers (Augustine and Clement of Alexandria among them) who originated the "Matthew, Mark, Luke" ordering of the Gospels¹⁰. The Church Fathers are not generally considered to be as useful in a scholarly fashion as more modern research, as their conclusions tended to be drawn from theological bases rather than from critical analysis.

From the little I have read, I feel that when looking at the problem from a modern perspective, I agree that the arguments put forward for Matthean priority are less convincing than those given for Markan priority.

The second question involved in examining the synoptic problem, that of deducing the sources used by the evangelists, presupposes that the relationship between

⁹William R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 213.

¹⁰Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem*, 224-7.

the three gospels is indeed due to common use of written sources. While this is not absolutely certain, several things point to this conclusion, including the high rate of verbatim agreement between the three accounts as well as a striking amount of agreement in the timelines of the gospels. All of the arguments for the use of written sources in the composition of the synoptics are made especially strong when the synoptic gospels are compared to the Gospel according to John, which does not meet any of the criteria.¹¹

Assuming that the writers of the gospels used written sources, we realize that for this high degree of congruence between the accounts to exist, the first gospel written had to be available to at least the next writer. In other words, if Mark was written earliest, at the very least either the writer of Matthew or the writer of Luke (referred to hereafter as “Matthew” and “Luke”, respectively) must have had access to a manuscript of Mark and used it when compiling his account. If, as the neo-Griesbachians would claim, Matthew was first, then Luke and Mark must have been able to use his document as a source.

But what of the other material in the synoptics that is not found in Mark but is found in highly congruent passages in both Matthew and Luke? This material, called the “double tradition”, must be accounted for in some way by any theory aimed at solving the synoptic problem. Assuming Markan priority as most scholars do, we are left with three possibilities: either Luke wrote last of all and copied this shared material out of Matthew; Matthew wrote last and copied it out of Luke; or there was an unaccounted-for source from which the shared material was copied.

The 2SH postulates the last of these options. Calling the unaccounted-for source Q (from the German word “*Quelle*”, meaning “source”), the majority opinion is that the authors of Matthew and Luke each wrote from a pair of sources: a copy of Mark’s gospel

¹¹ Carlson, “The Synoptic Problem FAQ,” §1.5.

and a copy of Q. This makes the 2SH a combination of the Markan priority hypothesis and the Q hypothesis. The major variant of the 2SH is called the Four-Source Hypothesis (4SH). This theory postulates the additional existence of two other sources: L (for Luke's special source or sources) and M (for Matthew's special source or sources).¹² Thus, Matthew would have used Mark and M, and Luke would have written using material from Mark and L; that material appearing in the double tradition but not in Mark would then be said to derive from Q, and things appearing only in Matthew or only in Luke would have been drawn from the special sources.

This is the first stage where the dissenting scholars throw up their hands. “If you allow for the proliferation of theoretical documents,” they say, “you can theorize almost anything merely by proposing another source.” They point to Occam's Razor as a useful principle that they claim is being ignored by the 2SH/4SH camp. William of Occam, a medieval British philosopher, stated that entities should not be multiplied beyond what is necessary¹³ – or that, in other words, a simple theory is to be preferred over one that needlessly complicates matters. If it complicates matters to postulate the existence of Q (of which no mention in antiquity nor any fragments have ever been found), then it is even more egregious to start postulating other (similarly non-evidenced) documents.

In lieu of Q (and M and L), the minority camp proposes a simple progression in the chronology of the gospels. The neo-Griesbachian scholars propose that Matthew wrote first, followed by Luke (using Matthew), followed by Mark (using both). The Farrer supporters propose that Mark was indeed first, and that Matthew wrote his gospel using Mark as a source, followed by Luke, who used both as sources. These progressions

¹²Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 77.

¹³Mark Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem: A Way Through the Maze* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 160-1.

negate the need for any hypothetical source documents, but assume that the evangelists had access to the gospels that preceded it.

And why not assume just that? ask the dissenters. A.M. Farrer said, when postulating the hypothesis that bears his name:

Now St. Matthew and St. Luke both emanate from the same literary region – both are orthodox Gentile-Christian writings – composed (let us say) between A.D. 75 and A.D. 90, in an area in which St. Mark's Gospel was known. Moreover, St. Luke's own preface informs us that he writes “in view of the fact that several authors have tried their hands at composing an account of the things fulfilled among us”. He claims to know, and, one would naturally suppose, to profit by, more than one gospel-narrative other than his own. By all agreement he knew St. Mark's, but what other did he know? It would be natural for him to know St. Matthew's, supposing always that it had been in existence long enough.¹⁴

In the limited amount of analysis I was able to do for this paper, it seems that the progression of the gospels and the possibility that the later authors may have had access to other previously written, non-canonical gospels (that is, taking Luke at his word that he knew of many previously-written narratives) is not an impossibility, and I find myself (somewhat distressingly) in agreement with the Farrer scholars that this may be a better way to account for the triple tradition material than by conjecturing a multiplicity of documents never alluded to in antiquity and never (or at least, not yet) discovered in even a fragmentary manner.

The main point of contention leveled at the 2SH by its opposition is the matter of the “minor agreements” – parts of stories that do appear in the triple tradition but in which some details are in agreement between Matthew and Luke in opposition to Mark. There are a large number of minor agreements in Matthew and Luke; these agreements

¹⁴A.M. Farrer, “On Dispensing with Q,” in *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot* (ed. D.E. Nineham; Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1957), 56.

are troublesome for both the adherents of the 2SH and for the opposition. The instance most mentioned in my sources is a passage from the story of Jesus Before the High Priest, in particular Mt. 26:68 / Lk 22:64 / Mk 14:65. In all three accounts, the accusers strike Jesus while his face is covered, mocking him and telling him to prophesy for them. In Matthew and Luke, the account continues with the line *τις εστιν ο παισας σε*; (“Who is the one who struck you?”) Mark, on the other hand, leaves the question out.¹⁵

Against the Q side, the minor agreements can be seen as pointing away from Matthew and Luke's independence from each other; the passage from the Passion above is the strongest argument for this, since Q is not generally thought to contain a Passion narrative and thus the agreement must be accounted for in some other way. The Greek makes the agreement particularly surprising because the verb *παλω* (to strike) is used in these verses in both Matthew and Luke, but is never used anywhere else in either gospel – and such precise agreement in this case is difficult to reconcile with a Q without a Passion narrative.¹⁶ The most widely accepted defense of this particular agreement, for example, is that of the 2SH hardliner Frans Neiryneck, who claims that this can be accounted for by supposing that every single manuscript of Matthew that we have found has been corrupted to include the five-word question¹⁷. This defense seems to me to strain credulity to an unacceptable level. Other minor agreements are also accounted for by 2SH scholars in other various ways, such as positing simple coincidence, corruption of texts, and overlapping Q and oral traditions.¹⁸

¹⁵Goodacre, “The Case Against Q,” § 6-7.

¹⁶ Goodacre, “The Case Against Q,” § 7.

¹⁷Michael D. Goulder, “Is Q a Juggernaut?”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 (1996), 670, referencing Frans Neiryneck, “ΤΙΣ ΕΣΤΙΝ Ο ΠΑΙΣΑΣ ΣΕ: Mt 26,68 / Lk 22,64 (diff. Mk 14,65),” *Ephimerides theologicae lovanienses* 63 (1987), 5-47.

¹⁸Carlson, “The Synoptic Problem FAQ,” § 2.6.

In their defense, the Q theorists claim that the minor agreements are too minor to constitute a real problem for the 2SH. This is argued against strenuously by Goodacre, who feels that:

In the attempt repeatedly to point to a concrete difficulty for the Two-Source Theory, Q sceptics have inadvertently given the impression that the best evidence in their favour is only “minor”¹⁹.

and he suggests a spectrum of Matthean influence on Luke, from

..pure triple tradition passages which feature Minor Agreements, to Mark-Q overlap passages which feature major agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark, to double tradition passages where Luke is dependent solely on Matthew. It is the attempt to categorize all the data in accordance with the demands of the [2SH], Minor Agreements into one class, Mark-Q overlaps into another, double tradition into another, that causes us to miss this.²⁰

He seems to feel that by allowing themselves to classify the agreements in ways that minimize their effect on the 2SH, the two-source supporters refuse to confront the possibility that the minor agreements pose a problem for their hypothesis, as well as making themselves unable to see the existence of this interesting phenomenon of the continuum of Matthean influence.

At the start of my research, I expected to be bolstered in my acceptance of the Two-Source Hypothesis (or the 4SH variant as included by Dr. Ehrman in our textbook). Instead I began to feel that perhaps the 2SH adherents are being a little too casual in their dismissal of those who would do away with Q; I am particularly interested in delving deeper into the Farrer hypothesis, having found Goodacre and Goulder’s arguments to be

¹⁹Mark Goodacre, “A Monopoly on Marcan Priority? Fallacies at the Heart of Q”, *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers 2000* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000): Cited 31 October 2001. Online: <http://ntgateway.com/Q/monopoly.htm>, § 4.

²⁰Goodacre, “A Monopoly on Marcan Priority?”, § 4.

plausible at least to someone with my basic level of understanding of the problem. It was not difficult to notice many instances in pro-2SH material where the existence of dissenting theories or their arguments were glossed over or ignored, however; Ehrman himself does this in the chapter regarding the Synoptic Problem in our text.²¹ Presumably he did so in order to simplify the problem by giving only the majority opinion in his introductory text, but this “blind-eye” approach almost seems endemic in the scholarly community. Without ranging into complex conspiracy theories about suppression of the dissenting view, it still can seem at times that the Q scholars would prefer to ignore any opposition and pretend it never existed. This can do nothing but obscure the truth; the worst thing that could happen in this field would be for both sides to do the academic equivalent of sticking their fingers in their ears and loudly humming. Fortunately, at this point, there are a few 2SH supporters who continue to engage the Farrer and neo-Griesbachian camps, and there is an e-mail list (synoptic-l) devoted to the problem where much conversation is occurring between both camps. Obviously, unless we should find Q, or dig up a first-century copy of “How to Write a Best-Selling Gospel” in a scroll-case labeled “Property of Matthew the Evangelist”, we have no way of knowing for sure what really happened. In the meantime, we should not discount the ideas of the Q skeptics, and I feel we must at least make a serious exploration of their ideas.

²¹Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 77-78.

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