

The Present State Of The Synoptic Problem*

by William R. Farmer

Only once before have I undertaken to address the task of surveying the state of discussion on the Synoptic Problem. That was twenty years ago.¹ The occasion of a Festschrift for a dear friend and colleague who himself has helped shape the discussion is a good reason to take up the task once more.

It was also twenty years ago that Joseph Tyson along with Thomas R.W. Longstaff published *Synoptic Abstract*, which represents the first use of computer analysis in the discussion of the Synoptic Problem.² Six years later Tyson was the first to state publicly that the discussion of the Synoptic Problem had advanced to the point where it was possible to conclude that the view that Mark was third and had conflated the two earlier gospels Matthew and Luke was now the chief rival of the still dominant Two Source Hypothesis.³

This is not the place to give a “Forschungsbericht” of the Synoptic Problem since Tyson made this observation. But I do wish to share my opinion with the reader that Professor Tyson has made a major contribution to the shaping of the discussion of the Synoptic Problem in the United States by the role he has played in Lucan studies since the publication of his book *The Death of Jesus in Luke-Acts* in 1986.⁴

In effect what has happened in Lucan Studies on the western side of the Atlantic in the intervening years is that the once highly regarded work of Hans Conzelmann has gradually but steadily dropped from view. In the place of studying Luke from the perspective of the Two Source Hypothesis utilizing redaction criticism as Conzelmann and his followers were then doing,

* A slightly different and earlier version of this paper has appeared in *Literary Studies in Luke-Acts: Essays in Honor of Joseph B. Tyson*, Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia, 1998, pp. 11-36.

¹William R. Farmer, "The Present State of the Synoptic Problem" *PSThJ* 32/1 (1978) 1-7.

²Joseph B. Tyson and Thomas R. W. Longstaff, *Synoptic Abstract*, Assisted by E. A. Tripper and L. Marvin Guier, Wooster Ohio: Biblical Research Associates, 1978.

³See “The Synoptic Problem” in his *The New Testament and Early Christianity*, 148-58, New York; London: Macmillan; Collier Macmillan, 1984.

⁴University of South Carolina Press; Columbia SC, 1986.

Tyson and others, including Charles Talbert and David Moessner, quietly under the aegis of the annual program meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature, carried through a revolution in Lucan studies. Now Luke was to be studied on its own terms without any particular reference to Mark, and with increasing attention to its companion volume, the Acts of the Apostles. Meanwhile, such redaction critical work on Luke as has been done within the program structures of *SBL* has proceeded on the assumption of the Neo-Griesbach (Two Gospel) Hypothesis where Mark is viewed as third with Luke making use of Matthew. This brings us directly to our topic: “The Present State of the Synoptic Problem”.

The present state of the Synoptic Problem can best be gauged in the light of brief observations on five important publications appearing in the period 1990-1996⁵. The picture that emerges from a consideration of these five books suggests that there is only one major task that remains to be completed in order to solve the synoptic problem.

To verify this conclusion requires a somewhat more detailed discussion of the work of scholars published in three additional books appearing in the years 1988-1990⁶. In effect this report on the present state of the Synoptic Problem draws selectively upon work by scholars published during the eight year period 1988-1996. It is a report written for the eyes of my

⁵First - *The Interrelations of the Gospels: A Symposium* led by M. -É. Boismard - William R. Farmer - Frans Neiryck, Jerusalem 1984, edited by David L. Dungan, Leuven University Press, 1990. *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium* XCV.

Second - *Minor Agreements: Symposium* Göttingen, ed. Georg Strecker; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993.

Third - *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol VIII. Christopher Tuckett, “Jesus and the Gospels”, pp. 75-76 gives a brief summary of the “Synoptic Problem”. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995.

Fourth - Allan J. McNicol, *Jesus' Directions for the Future: A Source and Redaction-History Study of the Use of the Eschatological Traditions in Paul and in the Synoptic Accounts of Jesus' Last Eschatological Discourse*, *New Gospel Studies* 9, Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia, 1996.

Fifth - *Beyond the Q Impasse - Luke's Use of Matthew: A Demonstration by the Research Team of the International Institute for Gospel Studies*, Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, 1996.

⁶(1) W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew: The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments*, T & T Clark Ltd, 1988.

(2) Frans Neiryck, *The New Jerusalem Biblical Commentary*, ed. by Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1990, pp. 1475. See article on “The Synoptic Problem”.

(3) E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, London, SCM, Philadelphia, Trinity Press International, 1989, pp. 51-119.

colleagues Joseph Tyson and his friends. I think especially of Thomas R. W. Longstaff and William O. Walker, Jr., both participants in the ongoing discussion. Needless to say, it is a report that is made from my own point of view, that of an adherent of the hypothesis that the Gospels were probably composed in the sequence Matthew, Luke, Mark, with Luke having made use of Matthew, and Mark of both Matthew and Luke. This theory is now generally known as the Two Gospel Hypothesis, formerly referred to as the “Griesbach Hypothesis”.

The first of the five books on which I wish to make brief observations is the volume *The Interrelations of the Gospels*, edited by David L. Dungan, and published in 1990. This is a report on a Symposium on the Gospels held in Jerusalem in 1984. Among the participants were F. Neirynck and C. M. Tuckett whose responsibility was to advocate the superiority of the Two Source Hypothesis over two rival hypotheses, the “Neo-Griesbach (Two Gospel) Hypothesis” and the “Multiple-Stage Hypothesis”. Readers are referred to the volume itself for the detailed defense given of all three of these hypotheses.

In an “Agenda for Future Reference” set forth at the end of this volume, it was unanimously agreed upon: that a literary, historical and theological explanation of the evangelists’ compositional activity, giving a coherent and reasonable picture of the whole of each Gospel, is the most important method of argumentation in defense of a source hypothesis”.

This remarkable agreement among some of world’s leading experts on the Synoptic Problem represented a sea-change in the study of this Problem. Traditionally, defenses of one hypothesis over against another had been made on the basis of careful detailed analyses of one or more texts, or on the basis of some particular criterion, for example whether one Gospel is more or less Jewish and/or Palestinian than another. But these experts were being advised to undertake a far more comprehensive approach to the problem. Slowly but surely during the intervening years this dictum of the 1984 Jerusalem Symposium has come to be the prevailing criterion in contemporary study of the Synoptic Problem.

The second book on which I wish to comment briefly is the volume: *Minor Agreements: Symposium Göttingen 1991*, edited by the late Georg Strecker, then professor of New Testament

at Göttingen University. Once again the reader is referred to the volume itself for the detailed defenses made in behalf of rival hypotheses. We note only that in this volume, for the first time, a serious break with traditional methodology was made in studying the “minor agreements”. Instead of considering the “minor agreements” in relative isolation from their compositional contexts, a proposal emerged that an effort be made to see these agreements within their widest possible compositional contexts. In this respect the Göttingen Symposium stands in methodological continuity with the Jerusalem Symposium of 1994. In other respects, much of the argumentation was in the traditional mode of atomistic analysis.

The third book to be considered is Volume VIII of the *New Interpreters Bible*, 1995, edited by Leander E. Keck. This volume contains “General Articles on the New Testament”. That on “Jesus and the Gospels” is by Christopher M. Tuckett. This includes a section on “Source Criticism” which in turn treats the topic “The Synoptic Problem”. Tuckett notes that the contemporary debate has highlighted the “weak and inconclusive nature” of some of the arguments in the past that have been used to promote the Two-Source Theory. This applies especially to some of the more “formal” arguments. For example, in arguing for Marcan priority Tuckett observes that some scholars appeal to the fact that “nearly all of Mark is paralleled in Matthew or Luke or both”. Tuckett continues:

Yet all this shows is that some literary relationship exists; it does not prove that the only possibility is that Mark’s Gospel was the *source* of Matthew and Luke. Similarly, the much discussed appeal to the failure of Matthew and Luke ever (or hardly ever) to agree against Mark in order and wording does not prove that Matthew and Luke independently used Mark as a source; it only shows that Mark is some kind of “middle term” between the other two in any pattern of relationships.

On the basis of this observation in a commentary that represents main line scholarship we can say that the present state of the Synoptic Problem is one where it is now openly acknowledged that the standard arguments for the priority of Mark popularized by Streeter

seventy-four years ago have at long last come to be recognized in a “flagship” publication as “weak and inconclusive”.

Yet, in another publication appearing in the same year (1995), it was possible for highly regarded specialists in Gospel studies to state that the research of the team of scholars who were responsible for the conclusions in the publication concerned, rested in part on the two pillars of Marcan priority and the existence of ‘Q’.⁷ Then, to explain to their readers the scientific basis upon which these two pillars rested the editors of this volume cited in support of the Two Source Hypothesis the very same arguments (albeit in different words) discounted by Tuckett.⁸

The present state of the Synoptic Problem is characterized by a remarkable lack of consensus among practicing specialists in Gospel Studies as to the scientific grounds for their work. The fact is that the ongoing discussion of the Synoptic Problem has reached a “critical mass” where a “consensus” among *experts* on the Synoptic Problem (that the Streeterian arguments for Marcan priority are no longer to be relied upon) serves to raise questions about work based upon that hypothesis. We have already noted the way in which this has led some of the most creative Lucan scholars in the United States to prescind from use of the Two Source Paradigm.

Our fourth book to be considered is Allan J. McNicol’s monograph on *Jesus: Directions for the Future*, 1996. McNicol was a participant in the 1984 Jerusalem Symposium. Since that conference called for “a literary, historical and theological explanation of the evangelists’ compositional activity, giving a coherent and reasonable picture of the whole of each Gospel...”, McNicol undertook a ten year study of a major section of the Gospels, the Synoptic Apocalypse, with just this task in mind. Beginning with the Pauline parallels and then proceeding to the text of Matthew, Luke and Mark in that order, he set forth a “literary, historical and theological explanation of the evangelists’ compositional activity” in composing this part of their respective

⁷*The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, Macmillan, New York, 1995, Introduction by Robert Funk and Roy W. Hoover, p. 3.

⁸*The Five Gospels*, pp. 10-11.

Gospels. This is far short of the coherent and reasonable picture of the *whole* of each Gospel, called for by the Jerusalem Symposium. But it is a significant step in the direction of providing readers some idea of how this picture is going to look once it is completed for each Gospel. Meanwhile, in the case of the Gospel of Luke, we are already treated to the way in which such compositional analysis can help provide us with a “coherent and reasonable picture” of the whole of at least this Gospel. This leads us to the final book we wish to consider.

The fifth and final book on which we wish to make some brief comments is: *Beyond the Q Impasse: Luke's Use of Matthew*, 1996, edited by Allan J. McNicol, with David L. Dungan and David B. Peabody.

The importance of this book for understanding the present state of the Synoptic Problem resides in the fact that it removes the theoretical basis for “Q” by giving a “coherent and reasonable picture” of the whole of Luke assuming a direct use of Matthew by Luke. Until the publication of this book no one had ever given a pericope by pericope account of how the author of the Gospel of Luke had used the text of the Gospel of Matthew. As a consequence it was critically possible if not necessary for scholars who had difficulty imagining how Luke could have derived his Gospel out of Matthew, to assert that in fact Luke did not do so. If Luke did not use Matthew directly, then at least that material common to Matthew and Luke which could not have been derived from Mark, must *ipso facto* have been derived from some hypothetical source, i.e. “Q”. This is the theoretical basis for “Q”. At present, critical confidence in this theoretical basis will be further eroded to the extent that *Luke's use of Matthew* serves to demonstrate that it is possible to provide a “coherent and reasonable account” of Luke's compositional activity on the hypothesis that Luke had direct access to the text of Matthew.

We see then that the present state of the Synoptic problem, as represented by these five books, is one in which there appears to be no longer any theoretical basis for the existence of “Q”, and it appears that the old Streeterian reasons for belief in Marcan priority are no longer regarded as valid. None the less, *most* scholars continue to use the Two Source Hypothesis as the “best working hypothesis”. The reasons given for this vary. But the most recurring one is that all major

alternatives appear to be fraught with even greater difficulties than those associated with the Two-Source Hypothesis.

Among these difficulties the only one which appears to be so serious as to block a shift away from the Two Source Hypothesis in the direction of its major rival, the Two-Gospel Hypothesis, is the difficulty in imagining how one can explain the omissions Mark has made from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke on the assumption that the author of Mark has derived his Gospel largely from those two earlier Gospels.

In order to verify this claim that in effect there is only one major task that remains to be completed in order to solve the Synoptic Problem we turn now to a more detailed examination of three important publications. Our analysis of the first two serves to assure the reader that there are no new arguments for the priority of Mark that can take the place of the “weak and inconclusive” arguments made by Streeter. Our analysis of the third serves to make the point that of all the major hypotheses under consideration today the least satisfactory is the Two-Source Hypothesis. It also serves to confirm the point that the failure until now of the adherents of the Neo-Griesbach (Two Gospel) Hypothesis to explain Mark’s omissions from Matthew and Luke blocks the way to a serious consideration of the merits of this theory.

W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison (1988)

In 1988 the first volume of the commentary on Matthew by W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison appeared.⁹ In the 148 page “Introduction”, Davies and Allison devoted 30 pages to the question of “The Sources of Matthew”, in which they survey the study of the literary relationships among the Gospels.¹⁰

Not since the 39 page defense of Streeter by Joseph A. Fitzmyer¹¹ has anyone attempted to accomplish what Davies and Allison have attempted, namely a comprehensive and even-handed

⁹See note 6 above.

¹⁰*Op. cit.*, pp. 97-127.

¹¹“The Priority of Mark and the ‘Q’ Source in Luke,” *Jesus and Man’s Hope*, D.G. Buttrick, ed., Vol. 1, pp. 131-170, Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1970 (Perspective 1).

analysis of the main arguments against Marcan priority and a defense of the Two-Document Hypothesis.

As Fitzmyer in writing his commentary on Luke attempted to justify his view that Luke used Mark and “Q”, so Davies and Allison in writing their commentary have attempted to justify their view that Matthew used the same two sources. Unlike Fitzmyer, however, who saw the Synoptic Problem as a “can of worms”, and held to the Two-Document Hypothesis basically because it seemed to be the most useful, Davies and Allison speak confidently of “compelling” reasons for believing in Marcan priority.¹²

Like Fitzmyer, Davies and Allison also recognize the difficulty of explaining the minor agreements on the Two-Document Hypothesis. They write:

The so-called ‘minor agreements’ between Matthew and Luke in the triple tradition are generally admitted to be the most serious obstacles in the way of accepting the view-point we have taken in this commentary--for they appear to be *prima facie* evidence for literary contact between Matthew and Luke.¹³

This statement is followed by an acknowledgment of the criticisms that have been made of Streeter’s attempt to explain these agreements by dividing them into different categories and thus atomizing the evidence. Then follows an extraordinarily candid paragraph which helps explain why so many scholars continue to adhere to the Two-document hypothesis even though it has been convincingly falsified in the eyes of a very large and ever increasing number of critics. The paragraph needs to be cited in full to be appreciated:

Despite the queries concerning Streeter’s approach and conclusions, we have not become convinced that the minor agreements are as devastating to his position as some have made out. Furthermore, *because the reasons for Marcan priority are compelling, whatever one infers from the minor agreements will have to be*

¹²*Op. cit.*, p. 110.

¹³*Op. cit.*, p. 109.

consistent with the priority of Mark. With this in mind we offer the following observations. [Italics added.]¹⁴

Then follows an analysis of Hans-Herbert Stoldt's compilation of "two hundred and seventy-two" minor agreements. This analysis is preceded by the observation: "At first glance, Stoldt's listing of the data appears overwhelming."¹⁵ Then comes the statement:

Our conclusion concerning Stoldt's listing of the minor agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark is this: it is only their sheer number that impresses. When looked at one by one, almost [sic] every agreement has an obvious [sic] explanation if one assumes that Matthew and Luke independently employed Mark.¹⁶

What confidence are we to place in the conclusions of scholars who operate on the principle that "whatever one infers from" a given body of data "will have to be consistent with" something which is at issue in the discussion, in this instance, Marcan priority? Only those who agree with the premise of Davies and Allison that there are compelling reasons for Marcan priority will be disposed to take seriously their attempt to explain away the minor agreements. So the prior question is this: What are the compelling reasons for Marcan priority which dictate that a correct understanding of the minor agreements *must be consistent with that postulate*? One searches in vain for any compelling reason for believing in Marcan priority in the seventeen pages which Davies and Allison devote to their discussion of Mark. To prove this we must note exactly what they have written under the five headings of: (a) The argument from order; (b) The tendencies of the synoptic tradition; (c) Inconcinnities; (d) The Marcan 'additions'; (e) The minor agreements. We will take up these matters one by one in reverse order.

¹⁴*Op. cit.*, p. 110.

¹⁵*Op. cit.*, p. 110.

¹⁶*Op. cit.*, p. 112.

Minor Agreements

We have already noted that Davies and Allison acknowledge that the ‘minor agreements’ are admitted to be a difficulty for the Two-document hypothesis. Indeed, the final point Davies and Allison make in their discussion of the ‘minor agreements’ is very revealing. They write:

One way of getting around [sic] the apparent problem of the minor agreements is to postulate Luke’s knowledge of Matthew or Matthew’s knowledge of Luke. As proponents of the two-source theory, and for reasons given immediately below, we resist this alternative. We prefer to solve the riddle of the minor agreements by recourse to coincidental editing, oral tradition, and textual corruption.

In other words, after a quarter century of critical reflection on the ‘minor agreements,’ which has led the majority of experts to conclude that either Luke had access to Matthew (so Griesbach and Austin Farrer) or Luke and Matthew cannot have independently copied the Mark known to us (the Deutero-Marcus Theory), Davies and Allison continue, with the minority, to place their trust in the method of Streeter, as a preferable *way of getting around* the problem of the minor agreements.

Because of the determination of Michael Goulder to press his Two-document colleagues on this issue it is doubtful that the recourse to “coincidental editing,” “oral tradition,” and “textual corruption” by Davies and Allison will succeed in persuading anyone except those who want to be persuaded. Goulder has taken what Streeter designated as one of his “residual cases,” where Jesus is being mocked, Matthew 26:67-68// Mark 14:65// Luke 22:64, and he has shown that the agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark cannot be explained on any of these grounds, but on the contrary, call for the expansion of ‘Q’ to include a passion narrative. This reduces to an absurdity the chief tenant of the Two-Document theory: i.e. that it can most simply satisfy the synoptic data by offering Mark to explain narrative agreement of Matthew and Luke, and ‘Q’ to explain their agreement in sayings of Jesus not in Mark.¹⁷

¹⁷Michael D. Goulder, *Luke: A New Paradigm*, Vol. 1., JSNTSS 20, Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1989, pp. 6-11.

There is clearly no compelling reason for Marcan priority in Davies and Allison's treatment of the 'minor agreements.'

The Marcan additions

There are passages present in Mark but wholly absent from Matthew and Luke. They are eighteen in number, totaling some forty verses. Only one of these passages causes Davies and Allison any problem at all, namely Mark 4:26-29. Streeter's attempted explanation, namely that neither Matthew nor Luke had it in their copies of Mark, because it had dropped out due to a well known scribal error, is passed on by Davies and Allison without comment.

On the Two-Gospel hypothesis these passages represent significant agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark, and should be added to that category of evidence against the Two-Document Hypothesis. Davies and Allison conclude their discussion under this heading with a question:

. . . can one seriously envision [on the Neo-Griesbach (Two-Gospel) Hypothesis] someone rewriting Matthew and Luke so as to omit the miraculous birth of Jesus, the sermon on the mount, and the resurrection appearances, while, on the other hand, adding the tale of the naked young man, a healing miracle in which Jesus has trouble healing, and the remark that Jesus' family thought him mad?¹⁸

At best this very misleading aggregative approach provides a nice rhetorical question, and points to a consideration that needs to be explained on the view of Mark being third, but it is difficult to see in it any "compelling" reason for Marcan priority.

Inconcinnities

Under this heading Davies and Allison review two passages put forward by G. M. Styler as containing "logical flaws" which he thinks are best explained by the hypothesis of Marcan

¹⁸*Op. cit.*, p. 109.

priority (Mk 6:17-29//Mt 14:3-12 and Mk 15:6-10//Mt 27:15-18). Although no mention is made of this fact, Lamar Cope had discussed Styler's treatment of the first pericope and concluded:

In this case, too, the evidence reverses itself. Matthew's account of the death of John the Baptist, and the context in which it is set, is the more coherent but the more difficult text. One can understand Mark's revision not only by noting his knack for storytelling detail, but also as an attempt to clarify what was for him a confusing passage. The alternative is to argue that Matthew, in 'improving and abbreviating' Mark, edited so as to produce a blunder. But since that argument [as demonstrated above] is grammatically unsound, there appears to be compelling reason to believe that here Mark has edited Matthew.¹⁹

Four years later, Riley discussed Styler's work on both passages.²⁰ He gave reason to conclude that in the case of the death of the Baptist Styler overlooks evidence that indicates that the direction of borrowing was from Matthew to Mark.²¹ And in the example of "Pilate's Offer to Release a Prisoner," Riley, after giving Styler's discussion a close look, concludes that his claim that this passage offers decisive evidence for Marcan priority "is a claim that is difficult to appreciate."²²

It is obvious that there is no valid argument, let alone a compelling reason for Marcan priority to be found under this heading.

The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition

In their discussion of this topic, Davies and Allison state that those who hold the view that Mark has made use of Matthew and Luke "can summon support from the conclusions of E. P. Sanders' *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition*".²³ Streeter's argument for Marcan primacy based on Matthew's tendency to improve Mark's style is for Davies and Allison quite

¹⁹"The Argument Revolves: The Pivotal Evidence for Marcan Priority is Reversing Itself," *New Synoptic Studies: The Cambridge Gospel Conference and Beyond*, M. U. P., 1983, p. 150.

²⁰Appendix 1: "Styler's Key Passages," *The Order of the Synoptic Gospels?* M.U.P. 1987, pp. 100-104.

²¹*Op. cit.*, p. 100.

²²*Op. cit.*, p. 103.

²³*Op. cit.*, p. 104.

unconvincing. Nonetheless, there seem to remain “at least three facts or tendencies which make Mark appear [sic] to be earlier than Matthew.”²⁴

The first of these concern the “general direction of early Christology.” Davies and Allison list 27 passages where they think Mark makes Jesus more human than Matthew.²⁵ But there is no argument here since it has never been established, independent of a source theory, what direction primitive Christology took. A high Son of God Christology, according to evidence from Paul’s letters, was well entrenched in the church long before the Gospels were written.

The second fact or tendency which makes Mark appear to be earlier than Matthew has to do with twelve verses where Mark has a “rare or unusual word,” and Matthew has a “common word or phrase.” Davies and Allison ask: “How are we to explain this?” and they conclude: “It is not impossible that this question has a satisfactory answer; but what it might be we cannot guess.”²⁶

First it should be noted that the reader is not given the contrary evidence, if there is any, where the reverse may be true. Moreover, it has never been shown by reliable criteria what was usual or unusual for Mark’s readers. In fact this would be almost an impossible task. We can only be confident that Mark was reasonably successful in using language that was well understood by his intended readers. There is no argument here. And there certainly is no “compelling” reason given for Marcan Priority.

The third fact or tendency which Davies and Allison treat is a source of great confusion, namely “Semitic words.” This topic deserves special attention.

Davies and Allison cite six Semitic expressions found in Mark but not in Matthew (Streeter’s argument #4) and ask how those who see the text of Mark as secondary account for this data.²⁷ Related to this question is the problem created by the fact that the Greek text for

²⁴*Op. cit.*, p. 104.

²⁵*Op. cit.*, p. 104-105.

²⁶*Op. cit.*, p. 106.

²⁷*Op. cit.*, p. 106. Davies and Allison appear to be unaware of David Dungan’s discussion of this data in “Mark: The Abridgment of Matthew and Luke.” In *Jesus and Man’s Hope*, D. G. Buttrick, ed., Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1970, p. 68.

Jesus' question "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me" conforms to Aramaic orthography in Mark 15:34 whereas Matthew's parallel Greek text (27:46) conforms to Hebrew orthography.

It is generally understood that only with Matthew's Hebrew "Eli, Eli" is it possible to understand the bystander's observation "This man is calling Elijah." Mark's Aramaic "Eloi, Eloi" is, therefore, best explained as a change which destroys the point of the observation repeated by Mark. Davies and Allison overlook the relevance of how one would apply Burton's criterion of "clear omission from one document of matter which was in the other, the omission of which destroys the connection," to decide that Mark's text is secondary to Matthew in this instance.²⁸

Davies and Allison direct attention away from the problem this data causes for Marcan priority and succeed in creating the illusion that these data really support that view by suggesting that there can be no credible answer to the question why Mark would make such a change. If Mark was composed in any cosmopolitan center of the Roman empire, we can easily imagine that he would have been able to locate one or more persons who knew a little Aramaic, if he didn't himself. The fact that Mark has used Aramaic expressions elsewhere in his Gospel indicates that he had an interest in including such expressions in his text. Furthermore, the use of the Aramaic word *Abba* for Father in addressing God, well established in churches acquainted with Paul's letters, including the Christian community in Rome, constantly reminded Mark's readers of the importance of Aramaic in the (prayer) life of Jesus and the liturgical life of the earliest Christians. This affords a simple explanation for why Mark would want to archaize the text of his Gospel by enriching it with expressions from this sacred language.²⁹

²⁸Cf. *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis*, pp. 277-232 for a comprehensive list of nine canons of criticism to be used in historical critical work with synoptic texts, including six set forth by Ernst DeWitt Burton in his monograph, *Some Principles of Literary Criticism and their Applications to the Synoptic Problem* (p. 198), of which this canon is listed as number three.

²⁹That some Aramaic expressions used by Mark were no longer understood by many of his readers is clear from the fact that he sometimes translates them (e.g. Mark 3:17; 5:41; 7:11). The fact that Mark translates the Aramaic word *korban* (Mark 7:11) for the benefit of his readers whereas, when Matthew uses a related word elsewhere in his Gospel (Matt 27:6), he leaves it untranslated, clearly indicates that at least some of the Greek text of Matthew was first used in Greek speaking circles where Aramaic loan words in Greek were well understood.

No critic would deny that the Gospel of Matthew is more Jewish than Mark, and more Palestinian. So the significance of the highly selective set of data presented by Davies and Allison under this heading is doubly misleading.

In any case, there certainly is no “compelling” reason for Marcan priority to be found in their treatment of Semitic usage in the two gospels.³⁰

The Argument from Order

We come now to the final topic we must treat before we can say that we have dealt with all the arguments cited by Davies and Allison to back up their claim that there are “compelling” reasons for Marcan priority. We have attempted to trace their confidence in their reasons for believing in Marcan priority back to its presumed source: “The phenomenon of order.” Here we hope to find the answer to our question: “How is it possible for scholars to write that there are compelling reasons for Marcan priority in the demonstrated absence of such reasons and in the fact of so much contrary evidence?”

For the first half of the twentieth century the argument from order was believed to be the main reason for accepting Mark as our earliest Gospel. Rudolf Bultmann, in the spring of 1965, with a copy of *The Synoptic Problem* in his hands, said to its author: “If the argument from order does not support Marcan priority that would make a great difference to me, because that has always been the main reason why I have accepted Marcan priority.”

Davies and Allison begin their discussion of the argument from order by stating Streeter’s formulation of it. Then they note that in 1951 B. C. Butler demonstrated that the alternating support for Mark’s order found in Matthew and Luke requires only that Mark be the middle term. They go on to observe that on the Two Gospel hypothesis it is possible to turn Streeter’s argument on its head by observing that only someone writing after Matthew and Luke and who

³⁰Readers could be misled by the reference to “six Semitic expressions found in Mark but not in Matthew,” (op. cit., p. 106) since, while none of these six expressions are in the parallel texts of Matthew, one of the most frequently used, korban, in the related form of korbanas is found elsewhere in Matthew (27:6). In addition there are other Aramaic words used in Matthew that do not appear in Mark.

was attempting to combine these two narratives has the possibility of preserving what order Luke preserved from Matthew and then, whenever Luke departed from Matthew, following the order of either one or the other.

At this point, however, they draw back and state that “It is exceedingly hard to fathom” how this observation (which they do not challenge), can “move us beyond Butler’s analysis, according to which the phenomenon of relative order proves by itself only the mediating position of the Second Gospel.”³¹

It is no less hard for the critic who sees Mark as third to “fathom” how Davies and Allison, having come so close to the solution of the Synoptic problem, can fail to see what seems so obvious. We may turn to their words to illustrate the point.

In discussing the text of Matthew, Davies and Allison write:

The Greek text printed in this commentary is based primarily upon two sources: the twenty-sixth edition of the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* and the Huck-Greeven *Synopse der drei ersten Evangelien*. Where these two handbooks agree, we have judged their combined testimony to be truly weighty. Indeed, only a very few times . . . have we been moved to dissent from their concurrence. Where (these two sources) do part company, we have indicated this, cited pertinent textual witness, and usually given our reasons for following one authority rather than the other (“order” in the original must be a misprint).³²

The description Davies and Allison have given of their procedure in combining their sources is very similar to that given by the historian Flavius Arrian, a contemporary of the evangelists, when he faced the task of producing a new biography based on two earlier biographical sources.³³ One

³¹*Op. cit.*, p. 100.

³²*Op. cit.*, p. 147.

³³“Wherever Ptolemy the son of Lagos and Aristoboulos the son of Aristoboulos have both written the same things concerning Alexander the son of Philip, these I have written as being completely true. But those things (they wrote) that were not the same, I chose (from one or the other) those things which seemed to me more believable and at the same time more interesting.” This is from Arrian’s Preface to his account of “The Expedition of Alexander”, as translated in *Documents for the Study of the Gospels* by David R. Cartlidge and David L. Dungan, Collins, 1980, p. 126.

does not have to proceed as Arrian proceeded, or as Davies and Allison did. But so to proceed is understandable. It is not hard to fathom why one would so proceed.

So why have Davies and Allison drawn back from what would appear to be obvious in the case of Mark when they have used a very similar procedure? In order to answer this question we must go back to the opening paragraph of their discussion. There we discover a root of the problem. Davies and Allison do not seem to understand one of the most elementary facts of the debate over the Synoptic Problem. In this opening paragraph they write:

Serious study of the literary relationships among the gospels began in the latter half of the eighteenth century, and the time since then has seen an array of theories propounded. But in the twentieth century, the majority of scholars have come to accept one or the other of two fundamental positions. According to most, Mark was a source for both Matthew and Luke. A minority, however, has postulated the primacy of Matthew. In their view, both Mark and Luke knew and used the First Gospel.³⁴

At this point Davies and Allison provide a footnote (51) which states: “This is the Griesbach hypothesis.” This is the first signal that something is amiss. For while on the Griesbach hypothesis it is indeed true to say that “Mark and Luke knew and used the First Gospel,” this is no less true on the so-called Augustinian hypothesis,³⁵ as was noted by Davies and Allison in footnote 50 immediately preceding. However, from this point forward Davies and Allison proceed as if all they have to do is to prove that you can explain why Matthew has changed the order of Mark, and to point out that there are difficulties in explaining why Mark would have changed the order of Matthew. This procedure is effective in arguing against the so-called Augustinian hypothesis where Mark is second and composing his gospel with Matthew as his primary source.

³⁴*Op. cit.*, p. 97.

³⁵“So-called,” because as David Peabody has shown, Augustine himself preferred a hypothesis which envisioned Mark combining themes of Matthew and Luke, to the view that Mark wrote second and abbreviated Matthew. Cf. “Augustine and the Augustinian Hypothesis: A Re-examination of Augustine’s Thought in *De consensu evangelistarum*,” *New Synoptic Studies: The Cambridge Gospel Conference and Beyond*, ed. William R. Farmer, Macon, M. U. P., 1983, pp. 37-64.

But this is not a way to test the Griesbach hypothesis. For on the hypothesis that Mark is third, the evangelist never faces the order of episodes in Matthew in isolation from the corresponding order of episodes in Luke. To fail to grasp this essential difference between these two hypotheses is the chief source of the methodological confusion that reigns over the entire Davies-Allison discussion of the synoptic problem.

For example, in their chart on pp. 100-101, it is clear that Davies and Allison confine themselves to the comparison of the order of Mark and Matthew. On the view that Mark was third and had *both* Matthew *and* Luke before him, one would expect that it might be difficult if not impossible with this chart, to understand Mark's compositional procedure. And this is exactly what Davies and Allison conclude. So from the vantage point of Mark being third, it could be said that all that Davies and Allison have done is to render the service of showing that one of the chief rivals to the Griesbach hypothesis (i.e. that Mark was second and Luke used Mark and Matthew) faces difficulties. These difficulties must be answered by adherents of that view. But Davies and Allison have done more. They have done damage. They have shut out for themselves and their readers the opportunity of viewing evidence which comes as close as anything to being "compelling" in solving the synoptic problem. One has to see a chart which shows the sequential relationships between all three Gospels *together* in order to understand the Synoptic Problem. That is what the word "synopsis" means: to see these three Gospels *together*.

Frans Neiryck

At the close of the eighties the editors of the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* nailed to the masthead of their treatment of the church's Gospels an article on the "Synoptic Problem" by Frans Neiryck.³⁶ Neiryck tells his readers that the priority of Mark became the predominant scholarly opinion as a result of "decisive debate in the 1830's to 1860's." Nowhere has this ever

³⁶See note 6 above.

been demonstrated. In fact, to the contrary, what can be demonstrated is that nothing critically decisive in favor of Marcan priority happened in this period.³⁷

In 1866 Hajo Uden Meyboom surveyed this period and noted the growing popularity of the Marcan hypothesis, culminating in his own day in the work of Holzmann published in 1863.³⁸ He documents the fact that as of 1866 this development was taking place not primarily because of scholarly debate, but because of philosophical, political and theological considerations inherent in the discussion. The idea that the shortest Gospel must be first is based on the 19th century philosophical idea of development from the simple to the complex, the simple is smaller or shorter, the more complex is larger or longer. The idea that the grammatically improved texts of Matthew and Luke come after Mark is in accord with the nineteenth century theory of progress, according to which there is a tendency for things to get better, not worse. Every careful student of literature knows that this can not be used as a canon of literary criticism.

Theology seems to have played the major role in winning support for the Marcan hypothesis. Meyboom traces the development favoring the Marcan hypothesis to theological reaction to David Friedrich Strauss in 1835 and carefully lays bare the logical flaws in Holzmann's work. He reviews the scholarly literature of his time, documenting the fact that the growing popularity of the Marcan hypothesis was not supported by the most careful research of the day. Meyboom predicted that mainly for theological reasons the popularity of the Marcan hypothesis would continue for a long time, but that eventually its scientific inadequacies would become apparent and it would be replaced by a theory or theories that recognize the secondary character of Mark in relation to Matthew and Luke.

³⁷Cf. David Peabody, "Chapters in the History of the Linguistic Argument for Solving the Synoptic Problem: The Nineteenth Century in Context," *Jesus, the Gospels, and the Church, Essays in Honor of William R. Farmer*, ed. E. P. Sanders, Macon, M. U. P., 1987, pp. 47-68.

³⁸Hajo Uden Meyboom [Meijboom], *Geschiedenis en critiek der Marcushypothese*. Amsterdam, 1866, 248 pp. Now available in English as *A History and Critique of the Origin of the Marcan Hypothesis 1835-1866: A Contemporary Report Rediscovered*, New Gospel Studies 8, trans. and ed. John J. Kiwiet, M. U. P., Macon, Georgia 1993.

This is exactly what is happening today, not only with neo-Griesbachians, but also with scholars like Boismard and even with scholars who remain within the ranks of those who continue to adhere to some significantly modified form of the Two-source theory, as may be seen in the work of Helmut Koester.

After the Franco Prussian War and the reactionary decrees of the Vatican Council (1870) on Papal supremacy and Papal infallibility something decisive did happen that led to the entrenchment of the Marcan hypothesis in the German universities. And in the period of the Second Reich, when the German universities were at the height of their international influence, this theory was effectively exported around the world as one of the assured results of “rigorous” nineteenth century German scholarship. But what was decisive, once again, was not scholarly debate, but in this instance, *Kulturpolitik*. It is more difficult to document the way in which Berlin exercised influence within the state controlled German universities in the Second Reich than it is to document such influence in the Third Reich. But the same kind of archival research that has been used to demonstrate how this control was exercised in the interests of National Socialism during Hitler’s rule³⁹ may now be used to explore how this State-university connection, which in Prussia goes back to at least the early decades of the nineteenth century, can have functioned to meet the ideological needs of Bismark’s Imperial Germany.⁴⁰ What this research will uncover about our guild’s past remains to be seen. Meanwhile, we can say that the myth that Marcan priority was established during the nineteenth century in academic debates where there was a free and open discussion of this question is misleading. Belief in this myth contributes to that “false consciousness” which prevails in any society where it is wrongly assumed that certain axioms accepted by members of that society were agreed upon at an earlier time in free and open debate.

³⁹Cf. Robert P. Erickson, *Theologians Under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, Emanuel Hirsch*, Yale University Press, 1985. See the more recent work of Susannah Heschel, "Redemptive Anti-Semitism: The De-Judaization of the New Testament in the Third Reich," *Literary Studies in Luke-Acts, Essays in Honor of Joseph B. Tyson*, Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia, 1998, pp. 235-263.

⁴⁰Cf. Christian Simon, *Staat und Geschichtswissenschaft in Deutschland und Frankreich 1871-1914*, Situation und Werk von Geschichts- professoren an den Universitäten Berlin, München, Paris. Peter Lang, Bern, 1988.

This “false consciousness” in turn makes it difficult for such a society to function in a healthy manner and frustrates reaching consensus on the need for enduring and progressive reforms on the part of well-intentioned representatives of that society.⁴¹

This is one reason why it is imperative for representatives of ecumenical New Testament scholarship to undertake in earnest the investigation of the history of their own discipline. The preliminary meeting of specialists on 19th century German universities with Professor Graf Reventlow, September 8-10, 1990 in Latrobe, Pennsylvania is of special interest in this regard. This conference led to a major conference on Biblical Studies in the Nineteenth Century held at the University of the Ruhr, in Bochum, Germany in 1992.⁴²

In the second paragraph of his article Neiryck turns to Mark and explains the distribution of its content in Matthew and Luke in terms of the “Two-Source theory or Two-document hypothesis.” Thus at the outset it is clear that the title “Synoptic Problem” that has been placed at the head of Neiryck’s article does not stand for a scientific exposition of the nature of that problem. Rather, Neiryck’s article is an exposition of the Marcan hypothesis and a rejection of rival theories. Moreover, it proceeds from a particular understanding of the *history* of that problem, an understanding which, as we have just seen, is at best problematic, and at worst misleading. Neiryck is willing to admit that the Marcan theory “has obvious limitations.”⁴³ If this theory has “obvious limitations” why does Neiryck not give it up? The answer is found in his insistence on disagreeing with his colleagues on the fundamental starting point for a scientific discussion of the problem. It is to the credit of Neiryck that he acknowledges the methodological

⁴¹I believe that I owe credit to Jürgen Habermas for this understanding of “false consciousness.” But I have been unable to document its source in his writings. Any help in identifying the source of this idea will be most welcome. Failing such identification, I assume responsibility for the use of the expression “false consciousness” in the sense it is used here. Christopher Tuckett’s article, “The Griesbach Hypothesis in the 19th Century,” *JSNT* 3, 1979, pp. 29-60 reflects this “false consciousness” which issues in his “talking past” scholars who read 19th century developments differently. Cf. David Peabody, *Op. cit.*, pp. 47-68. Obviously more research is called for to settle the issue of what actually happened in the 19th century.

⁴²See *Biblical Studies and the Shifting of Paradigms, 1850-1914*, edited by Henning Graf Reventlow and William R. Farmer, JSOT, Sheffield Academic Press, 1995.

⁴³*Op. cit.*, p. 594.

challenge addressed to him by his opponents and that he publicly states how he would defend himself against this challenge.

The challenge Neiryck faces may be put this way: since the Synoptic Problem is the problem of explaining the Synoptic “fact” of agreement and disagreement between the Synoptic Gospels - Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is important to see these three Gospels *together*. The point is so obvious to the scientist that it would seem that it need hardly be stated. Yet since Neiryck proceeds to divide the Synoptic Gospels into pairs, and like Davies and Allison, engaging in a false abstraction, discusses as his first pair Mark and Matthew under the heading “Marcan order in Matthew” (p. 588), and then, unlike Davies and Allison, goes on to discuss his second pair, Mark and Luke, under the heading “Marcan order in Luke” (p. 589), it is clear that he stands within an exegetical tradition which no longer places the critic under the obligation of explaining the phenomenon of order between these three Gospels taken together. In his defense against the arbitrary character of this procedure, which Neiryck acknowledges he has taken over from Lachmann, he writes:

The objection that the argument from order explains Matthew in relationship to Mark on the one hand, and then Luke in relationship to Mark on the other, but that the relationship among all three remains unexplained is hardly convincing. Mark need not be explained ‘in relationship to both Matthew and Luke taken together.’ For it cannot be decided a priori that all three Synoptic Gospels should be interrelated. A solution of independence between Matthew and Luke is possible.⁴⁴

This defense not only rests on an erroneous premise, it proceeds from a complete misunderstanding of the challenge being addressed to it from the side of the Griesbach (or Two-Gospel) Hypothesis. We will take up the misunderstanding first. The methodological objection to any arbitrary division of the three synoptic Gospels into two disparate pairs does not proceed from a denial of the right to experiment with various categories of evidence. The right to

⁴⁴*Op. cit.*, p. 589.

categorize is essential to all scientific work, and has been since the time of Aristotle. But once one has decided to categorize the data, she/he must be consistent and uniform in his/her treatment of *all* the data in *all* the categories. If we divide the Synoptic Gospels into pairs, we will have *three* pairs: Matthew-Mark; Mark-Luke; and Luke-Matthew. Any analysis of the synoptic data that confines itself to any one or any two, rather than *all three* of these pairs will by definition be something less than scientifically adequate. So the objection to Lachmann's procedure is not to categorization *per se*, but to its arbitrary character *de facto*. Nor do colleagues of Neiryneck who challenge his method hold that it can be decided *a priori* that all three Gospels should be interrelated. Rather, they recognize the obligation to demonstrate this fact, as they have sought to do. The healing of the centurion's servant in Matt 8:7-10 and Luke 7:6-9, not found in Mark, is only one example of clear evidence that there is some literary interrelationship between Matthew and Luke that cannot be satisfied by hypothecating their dependence upon Mark. Since there are also agreements like this between Matthew and Mark against Luke and Luke and Mark against Matthew, it follows that without additional hypothetical documents it will not be possible to explain the Synoptic "fact" without acknowledging (not *a priori*, but *de facto*) that there is some presumed direct literary interrelation between all three Synoptic gospels. So it is a mistake for Neiryneck to think that colleagues who oppose him on this point regard it as self-evident that there is an interrelationship between all three synoptic gospels. They only insist that the proper method to follow is to test those arrangements which posit this three-way interrelationship before opening Pandora's box of "hypothetical sources." Having performed this test, they put before the public the hypothesis they claim can best explain all the data, and that, without appeal to "Q," namely a sequence of Matthew, Luke, Mark, where the second used the first, and the third used both the first and the second.⁴⁵

⁴⁵*The Synoptic Problem*, pp. 191-232. These pages have been reissued in *The Two-Source Hypothesis: A Critical Appraisal*, Arthur J. Bellinzoni, Jr., ed., with the assistance of Joseph B. Tyson and William O. Walker, Jr., 163-47, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985.

We take up now the premise on which Neiryck rests his defense, namely that “Mark need not be explained in relationship to both Matthew and Luke taken together.” This premise follows only if some major hypothetical source (or sources) is brought in to explain the agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark. Otherwise, how would Neiryck explain these agreements if there were not some interrelationship between all three--given corresponding agreements of Matthew and Mark against Luke, and Matthew and Luke against Mark?

Therefore to the degree that the existence of ‘Q’ may be questioned, as well as that of other hypothetical documents like Proto-Mark, Proto-Matthew, Proto-Luke, M, L, K, let alone Deutero-Mark, etc., Neiryck’s defense as stated in the article rests upon a questionable premise. That this intrinsically questionable premise is backed up in turn by a misunderstanding, leaves Neiryck’s method without effective defense and renders his whole treatment of the Synoptic Problem unsatisfactory, and in the end unreliable, as a report of the discussion under way.

Neiryck’s concluding sentence: “A solution of independence between Matthew and Luke is possible,” is so modest it suggests that he may be aware of the difficulties in his defense. Even the unlikely oral theory, which Neiryck correctly rejects, is “possible.” So is the complex theory of Helmut Koester with its several earlier versions of Mark, and so also a whole host of solutions that have been propounded over the past two hundred years. The historian can ill afford overly to concern himself/herself with what is merely possible. The question is whether literary independence between Matthew and Luke is probable. That is required on the Two-Source hypothesis. And that is where the Two-Source theory runs contrary to the evidence. The total array of agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark have never been satisfactorily explained by advocates of the Two-Source theory. Until they are so explained the Two-Source theory will not only be judged as having “obvious limitations,” it will be judged to be less probable than other major alternatives, chiefly (1) Boismard’s Multiple Source theory, (2) Austin Farrer’s theory of Marcan priority which acknowledges that Luke knew Matthew and thus dispenses with “Q”, and (3) the Neo-Griesbach (Two Gospel) Hypothesis which postulates that Luke was second and used Matthew, and that Mark used both Matthew and Luke, thus dispensing with “Marcan priority” as

well as “Q.” This way of evaluating the Two-document hypothesis conforms rather closely if not exactly with the conclusions reached in the volume to be examined next.

Sanders and Margaret Davies

In their book *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, E.P. Sanders and Margaret Davies devote 68 pages to a discussion of the Synoptic Problem.⁴⁶ This book is an advanced level study guide to the Synoptic Gospels. While numerous charts and diagrams are used to make the subject understandable, these authors indulge in very little of the oversimplification that characterizes most comparable handbooks. As a consequence the reader finds the presentation tough going as he/she is skillfully led through a maze of synoptic considerations.

After surveying what they see as the strengths and weaknesses of the Two-Source theory and the Griesbach theory, Sanders and Davies conclude that the Two-Source hypothesis is “unsatisfactory” for three reasons:

- (1) The ‘minor’ agreements are too many and too substantial to be explained away.
- (2) There are instances in which Matthew is the middle term, and in which the simplest explanation is that Mark and Luke copied Matthew.
- (3) The defense of the Two-Source hypothesis by appeal to overlaps between Mark and Q is not satisfactory. This proposal simply shifts some of the principal problems of the hypothesis to the relationship between Mark and ‘Q.’ ‘Q’ then keeps growing to explain numerous agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark.

The Two-source hypothesis, then, must maintain (1) the independence of Matthew and Luke--against the strong evidence that one knew the other; and (2) the independence of Mark and Q--despite the numerous “overlaps.” It is not adequate to the task.⁴⁷

Sanders and Davies ask:

⁴⁶*Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (note 6 above), pp. 51-119.

⁴⁷*Op. cit.*, p. 91.

If the two-source hypothesis is not fully satisfactory, can we give the nod to the Griesbach [Two-Gospel] hypothesis? It seems to us mechanically feasible. Mark could have written his entire gospel by conflating Matthew and Luke. In this sense the Griesbach proposal has an advantage over the two-source hypothesis. The latter simply cannot account for all the agreements between Matthew and Luke, and thus must be modified and complicated in numerous ways in order to be maintained at all. But Mark could have done what the Griesbach proposal had him do.⁴⁸

After noting some of the conventional objections raised against the view that Mark was written third, and after noting that these objections do not require a full answer, Sanders and Davies offer some suggestions as to why Mark might have combined Matthew and Luke, including the oft-made suggestion: “Perhaps he wrote to synthesize competing gospels and thus achieve harmony.” Yet they finally conclude:

While we agree that we cannot fully recover an ancient author’s intention, and thus that we cannot say that Griesbach’s Mark is impossible, still it must be granted that, to the modern mind, there is very strong objection to putting Mark third.⁴⁹

Without making quite clear whether they themselves strongly object to putting Mark third, and if so why, Sanders and Davies proceed to take up a series of other theories, including Proto-Mark and Deutero-Mark, though focusing on the two most satisfactory, i.e., those of Austin Farrer and Boismard. Sanders and Davies conclude that Goulder (representing the Austin Farrer theory) has proven that Luke did know Matthew.⁵⁰ Yet Goulder’s explanations of the composition of Matthew are not “fully convincing.”⁵¹

As for Boismard’s theory, it answers all the data, but is very complicated. “In explaining everything Boismard takes us into the realm of conjecture, where everything is possible.”⁵²

⁴⁸*Op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁴⁹*Op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁵⁰*Op. cit.*, p. 96.

⁵¹*Op. cit.*, p. 113.

⁵²*Op. cit.*, p. 111.

With reference to these two theories Sanders-Davies write:

Our own inclination is to accept some of each hypothesis but to avoid the extremes. The evangelists were authors, though perhaps not as inventive as Goulder thinks, but in any case authors rather than only wielders of scissors and paste. On the other hand Boismard is probably on the right track in thinking of different editions and in allowing for criss-cross copying. . . .

Thus we think that Luke knew Matthew (so Goulder, the Griesbachians and others) and that both Luke and Matthew were original authors of some of their sayings material (so especially Goulder). Following Boismard, we think it likely that one or more of the gospels existed in more than one edition, and that the gospels as we have them may have been dependent on more than one proto- or intermediate gospel.⁵³

As we can see, Sanders-Davies have no theory of their own. By their own admission, theirs is a hybrid or eclectic view. The merit of their work is not in their having offered a viable solution for the Synoptic problem, which they make no claim to have done, but in their clearing away much of the conflicting synoptic “underbrush.” They succeed in clarifying in an original way why the Two-Source theory is critically “unsatisfactory” and in pointing out the remaining difficulties (no mean achievement) standing in the way of fully accepting any one of the major alternative theories now under consideration. These are, according to Sanders-Davies, three in number:

The Griesbach hypothesis (Matthew was copied by Luke, and Mark conflated them both) is technically possible. It suffers from the inability to explain Mark. . . .

Goulder’s hypothesis (Mark without Q) is also technically possible. . . . Thus far Goulder has not persuaded us that one can give up sources for the sayings material. With this rather substantial modification, however, we accept Goulder’s theory: Matthew used Mark and Luke used them both.

⁵³*Op. cit.*, p. 112-113.

Boismard's multiple source theory is also technically possible. What is dubious is that such fine detail in the reconstruction of hypothetical documents can be correct. It certainly cannot be validated. . ."⁵⁴

We may offer our own somewhat more detailed and explicit summary of Sanders-Davies' survey of the present state of the Synoptic Problem:

(1) Although Sanders and Davies never go so far as to say so, their analysis suggests that the Two-source theory in its conventional form can hardly be said to be technically possible. The main problem is the extensive amount of agreement between Matthew and Luke against Mark. These extensive agreements are most simply explained by Luke's use of Matthew, thus paving the way for dispensing with Q as well as the priority of Mark.

(2) The Griesbach (Two-Gospel) Hypothesis, on the other hand, is technically possible. Its main advantage over all rival theories is its simple and straightforward explanation of the phenomenon of alternating support of Mark by Matthew and Luke in order of pericopes without appeal to "lost sources."⁵⁵ Its main difficulty is providing a comprehensible account of Mark's composition, in particular in offering explanations for Mark's omissions of certain material in his sources Matthew and Luke.

(3) The Goulder (Austin Farrer) theory is also technically possible. It is superior to the Two-source theory because it can explain the agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark by acknowledging Luke's direct use of Matthew, thus dispensing with any need for 'Q.' But it cannot explain the phenomenon of order in Mark in relationship to Matthew and Luke as well as can the Griesbach theory. Yet Sanders and Davies prefer Goulder's theory to Griesbach's, presumably because it appears to them to be easier to explain how Matthew used Mark and how Luke used Mark and Matthew, than to explain how Mark used Matthew and Luke.⁵⁶

⁵⁴*Op. cit.*, p. 85.

⁵⁵*Op. cit.*, p. 88.

⁵⁶A recent, appreciative but not uncritical study of Goulder's work, by his best student Mark S. Goodacre, is *Goulder and the Gospels: An Examination of a New Paradigm*, JSNT Sup. 133 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

(4) The Boismard Multiple Source theory too is technically possible. It affords an explanation for agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark and is thus superior to the Two-document source theory. Yet it is so complex as to be less likely than the Goulder (Austin Farrer) theory. The major difficulty of Boismard's theory is its complexity. This renders it less satisfactory than the Goulder theory. No preference is expressed as to the relative satisfactoriness of the Griesbach and the Boismard theories. Both are more satisfactory than is the Two-source theory for reasons clearly stated. Yet both are less satisfactory than the Goulder theory for reasons not clearly stated.

Evaluation

The Sanders-Davies analysis of the ins and outs of the Synoptic Problem marked a clear transition in the general discussion. When a major British ecumenical press, SCM, joins with a prestigious American ecumenical press, Trinity Press International, in the publication of a major textbook, and the authors of that textbook clearly designate the reigning hypothesis as "unsatisfactory," it is safe to say that the long term erosion of critical confidence in that theory, beginning with the decision of Cambridge University Press to publish B. C. Butler's *The Originality of Matthew: A Critique of the Two-Document Hypothesis* in 1951, continues unabated.

Concluding Comments

If and 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. Of course there will be the further need to provide a literary, historical and theological explanation of Matthew's compositional activity, giving a coherent and reasonable picture of the whole of this Gospel as well before the Synoptic

Problem can be put to final rest. That task will help explain why Matthew was the foundational Gospel of the Church.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, it should be observed that it has been *forty-seven years* since Cambridge University Press, on the recommendation of Professor C.H. Dodd, published B.C. Butler's book, *The Originality of Mathew*. 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, the observation that "the Emperor has no clothes," already being made, is likely to spread.

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. The only other way this impasse can be broken, it seems to me, is by some development in Gospel studies that will satisfy the critical need for a comprehensive solution to this problem.

⁵⁷See *The Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew on Christian Literature before Saint Irenaeus*, by Édouard Masseaux, translated by Norman J. Beval and Suzanne Hecht, edited and written with an introduction and addenda by Arthur J. Bellinzoni, Peeters and M.U.P., 1990, translated from *Influence de l'Évangile de saint Matthieu sur la littérature chrétienne avant saint Irénée*, Leuven University Press, 1950. The significant and often compelling Colloquium in Memory of William G. Thompson, S.J., on "The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study," June 12-14, 1998 at Loyola University in Chicago, with papers from Donald Senior, C.P., Amy-Jill Levine, Graham Stanton, Daniel Harrington, S.J., Elaine Wainwright, R.S.M., Richard Ascough, Wendy Cotter, David Rhoads, Jack Dean Kingsbury, and Anthony Soldarini was notable for its eloquent testimony to the growing scholarly interest in the First Gospel.