

# A Brief Discussion of the Synoptic Problem

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## Introduction

As one reads the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is hard to not notice significant similarities between the three synoptic gospels. However, at the same time, a careful reading will also reveal striking differences between the presentations of each gospel. These similarities and differences in the Synoptic gospels pose some significant problems and challenges to the evangelical doctrine and affect the exposition of these very important New Testament books. In this paper, I will discuss the significance of the Synoptic Problem, various solutions to the problem, and argue for my solution to the problem.

## Summary of the Synoptic Problem

The Synoptic Problem is a problem concerning the relationship between the three gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Donald Guthrie outlines several considerations to the problem's development in a four-fold manner.<sup>1</sup> First, there are similarities of arrangement among all three gospels. Second, there are similarities in "style and wording" among all three gospels. Third, however, there are cases where there are similarities in only two of the three gospels. In particular, there is material in Matthew and Luke that are absent in Mark. Finally, there are some common accounts among all three that simply diverge from each other on many minor points. In spite of the Synoptics' similarities, these issues are not easily explained. In summary, the Synoptic Problem is the questions about the relationship between three Synoptic Gospels in light of their unique blend of similarities and differences.

## The Significance of the Synoptic Problem

Even in a robust understanding of the inspiration of Scripture, the Synoptic Problem leads us to seek a more complete understanding of the process that the authors went through as they wrote these inspired accounts of the life of Christ. Why is this more complete understanding appropriate? First, it is not enough to just believe in inspiration. The *how* of inspiration is important, because the way the gospels were put together under that inspiration will affect the way we understand the final written forms.<sup>2</sup> Second, the Synoptic Problem affects the way the historical nature of these gospels is understood. Christianity is first and foremost a religion rooted in revelation and history. As such, the answer to the Synoptic Problem can undermine the roots of orthodoxy, if it undermines those twin pillars of Christianity. Finally, the Synoptic Problem has an apologetic and evangelistic motivation. This problem can lead scholars and laity alike into heterodoxy, and likewise it can prevent unbelievers from accepting the truths of salvation. The Synoptic Problem affects basic doctrines concerning the inspiration of the Bible and the historicity of these inspired writings. As such the Synoptic Problem demands a faithful, orthodox response from evangelicals.

## Solutions to the Synoptic Problem

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<sup>1</sup>Guthrie, Donald. *New Testament Introduction: The Gospels and Acts* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1965), pp.114-115.

<sup>2</sup> Robert L. Thomas, "Introduction", *Three Views On the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2002), loc. 68, Kindle edition.

The number of solutions to this problem can be as creative as the human mind. However, on a statistical level, one author<sup>3</sup> outlines a maximum of 18 “fundamental” ways to explain the relationships between these gospels, in a literary interdependence framework. I will at this time summarize some of the more notable solutions to the Synoptic Problem, as have been put forward in recent times and through history. While literary interdependence is often supposed to be the only possible solution,<sup>4</sup> meaning that there had to be common written sources used by the authors to explain why their wording is exactly the same, I am going to be more cautious in that assumption. As such, the solutions I will cover will include the literary independence view and two major divisions of the literary interdependence views.

### Literary Interdependence

In the interdependence field, there are two primary camps. One camp holds to Matthean priority, the idea that Matthew was written first, and the other holds to Markan priority, namely that Mark was written first.

#### Matthean Priority Solutions

While there is scholarly debate regarding historical studies that I cannot engage in here, there is some support that the position of Matthean priority is the historic position of the church.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Carson and Moo’s work cite two Matthean priority solutions as two of the three major solutions in church history.<sup>6</sup> As such, it is appropriate for me to begin with solutions based on Matthean priority, and I will focus on the two solutions mentioned by Carson and Moo.

The first Matthean priority solution is the Augustinian view.<sup>7</sup> In this view, which was put forward by Augustine, the flow was Matthew, then Mark, and then Luke. Mark would draw from Matthew, and then Luke would draw from both the earlier two. While there is a lack of significant support for this view in the last two centuries, it does have a certain simplicity and appeal to it. Once the standard view, it has definitely been eclipsed by other proposals.

The most popular Matthean priority view today is the Griesbach hypothesis, also known as the Two-Gospel Hypothesis.<sup>8</sup> In this view, it is understood that Luke preceded Mark, comparing to the Augustinian solution, and thus Mark drew from Matthew and Luke. The first proponent of this view was J. J. Griesbach, for whom the hypothesis is sometimes named. As outlined by Stein<sup>9</sup>, this view’s major strengths include its ability to explain the similarities between all three gospels together and also the uniquely Markan redundancies. William Farmer, who is perhaps one of the strongest modern supporters of this view, simply affirms that it is the preferred solution to the problem.<sup>10</sup> Yet critiques of the view by

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<sup>3</sup> William R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem: A critical analysis* (Dillsboro: Western North Carolina Press, 1976), pp. 208-209.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. Carson and Moo, pg. 92.

<sup>5</sup> F. David Farnell, “The Case for the Independence View of Gospel Origins”, in *Three Views On the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2002), loc.2637-2707, Kindle edition.

<sup>6</sup> Carson and Moo, pg. 93.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Carson and Moo, pp. 93-94; Stein, R. H. “The Synoptic Problem”, in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 215, 217

someone like Stein merely affirm the opposite.<sup>11</sup> While not the preferred solution today, the Greisbach is worthy of consideration in the Synoptic Problem.

### Markan Priority Solutions

Many scholars today prefer a Markan priority solution to the Synoptic Problem, and there are three primary modern views that I found.

The first Markan priority solution is the Two-Source Hypothesis.<sup>12</sup> In this view, Markan priority is established, and then a written document containing sayings of Jesus is postulated to explain the agreements between Matthew and Luke.<sup>13</sup> The “Q” document is said to have been used by both Matthew and Luke, and the source of their agreements. While being subject to considerable criticism in recent times, my evaluation of the materials I have searched is that this hypothesis, or some form of it, seems to be the most popular solution of the Synoptic Problem. A second development of this view was the four-source hypothesis.<sup>14</sup> This view posits two more hypothetical sources that are the basis of the unique material to Matthew and Luke. Carson and Moo summarize this view by saying that “Streeter took source criticism as far as it could be taken[.]” It is notable because it was an attempt to “provide a comprehensive explanation of the origin of the gospel through source criticism.”<sup>15</sup> The four-source theory’s comprehensiveness and intricateness makes it noteworthy, in my view. Finally, in line with the significant criticism of the two-source view in recent history, there are some who are attempting to maintain Markan priority, while rejecting the existence of Q. The most obvious example of this suggestion is found in Mark Goodacre<sup>16</sup>, who suggests Luke used Matthew and Mark instead of using Q and Mark.<sup>17</sup> This is also a legitimate consideration as a solution to the Synoptic problem.

### Literary Independence

While literary interdependence is often assumed today, there is a school that claims to be the historic view of synoptic origins. The literary independence view<sup>18</sup> places significantly less emphasis on common literary sources. Instead this view emphasizes the eyewitness accounts through the authors or apostolic tradition, collaboration amongst the authors without rote copying, and divine inspiration as legitimate explanations of the Synoptic Problem. This position is not an isolated view, as David Farnell cites several examples of other scholars in the recent era who have adopted an independence view of the Synoptic Problem.<sup>19</sup> However, some in this camp, and Farnell is the representative example, place a stronger emphasis on theological and philosophical concerns about source criticism as it developed in the last two centuries, as well as historical and external evidence regarding the issues involved. In other words, there is a focus not on source criticism as such, but allowing presuppositions and other aspects of a Biblical worldview to inform our solution to the Synoptic Problem. Not all scholars will agree with

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Carson and Moo, pg. 94

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pg. 98

<sup>14</sup> Carson and Moo, pp. 94-95; this hypothesis originated with B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A study of origins*, (London: Macmillan, 1924).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pg. 94

<sup>16</sup> *The Case Against Q*, (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> See summary in Carson and Moo, pg. 100.

<sup>18</sup> Farnell, “The Case for the Independence View of Gospel Origins.”; also see fuller treatment in Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, eds., *The Jesus Crisis: The inroads of historical criticism into evangelical scholarship*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> Farnell cites 9 distinct individuals/works from the last century who supported the independence view, ranging from 1915 to himself.

his approach, and do come to conclusions that Farnell would not allow because of prior commitments. Nevertheless, the independence view is supported with good scholarly research, and it should not be left out of consideration.

### **My Preferred Solution to the Synoptic Problem**

While I do not necessarily expect a final, perfect solution to the Synoptic Problem, I do prefer the independence approach to the Synoptic Problem, with some clarifications and modifications. First, regarding the historical/theological and presuppositional arguments of David Farnell, I believe he has some valid points, but I do question whether he goes too far. Second, as may have already been seen, I do not believe that the case for literary interdependence is as much of a certainty as many scholars are suggesting it is. On the negative side, the fact is that we do not have a Q manuscript. It is merely speculation. On the positive, the historicity of these accounts as given by eyewitnesses is an acceptable explanation for the similarities. The Holy Spirit even promised to aid the apostles in the remembrance of the LORD's teaching (John 14:26), and this may account for the Spirit's involvement in the historical narratives of the gospels as well.<sup>20</sup> Having rejected strict literary interdependence, I then finally suggest that traditional harmonization, such as that advocated by Farnell,<sup>21</sup> allows us to reconstruct the history as it actually happened. Then, I would use this reconstruction as the foundation upon which we are able to study the redactions of the authors. This is more in line with traditional redaction criticism that allows us to gain insight into what was motivating their writing and the modifications of the material they had, all the while still realizing they were not violating the historicity of their material with these redactions. In this, I may be diverting slightly from Farrell's intent. In summary, the accuracy of eyewitness accounts remembered by either authors or eyewitnesses the authors spoke to and the process of harmonization lay a good foundation for a full study of the Synoptic Gospels, and this will be the general framework I intend to work out of going forward.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we must make sure we do not remove either the divine element in inspiration or the human element in inspiration. While we believe the Spirit was inspiring people as they wrote the Synoptic Gospels, we also must account for the human elements at work in the process. I think Carson and Moo's caution about the two-source hypothesis is applicable to all the views discussed in this paper, including my own. They wrote, "[W]e should treat this hypothesis more as a working theory than as a conclusion set in concrete."<sup>22</sup> I too should continue to treat my view as a working theory, and continue to refine and develop the best view of the Synoptic Problem to further support and demonstrate the methods God used in the divine inspiration of the gospels.

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<sup>20</sup> See representative discussion of this point in Robert G. Gromacki, *New Testament Survey*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), pp. 57-58. I also may be indebted to class discussions in which this verse was mentioned as well.

<sup>21</sup> Farnell, loc. 2984.

<sup>22</sup> Carson and Moo, pg. 103