

A New Look At The Marcan Hypothesis

And Gospel Research

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For more than half a century there had been a "consensus" among the scholars not only as to the nature of the Synoptic Problem but as to its solution. As early as the nineties, students at Cambridge had been told that there was no longer a synoptic problem to solve.¹ Between that time and the end of the first dozen years of the twentieth century the remaining major schools of the English-speaking world had followed the lead of the Germans and the British. The occasional voice that was still raised in protest found itself ignored. An "assured result" had emerged from a century of research. Mark was the first of the Synoptic Gospels to be written, and the other two writers had copied from it and from another major source, named Q, which no modern eye has ever seen and concerning which ancient testimony has been less than clear.

This, indeed, seemed to be a useful and harmless bit of information. There is no law against sources. Inspired writers can be guided in the use of materials as well as in original composition. Did not the writer of the Third Gospel claim access to the best sources for his production (Luke 1:1-3)? And all the Gospel writers were apparently more interested in the truthfulness of their proclamation than in any personal claim to originality. It was, no doubt, quite remarkable that no one in the first seventeen centuries of the Christian era had suspected the priority of Mark or thought it worth mentioning. In fact, they obviously had quite consistently held the opposite view. But the ancients could be wrong. And one must keep step with learning. So, more and more throughout the first half of the present century the priority of Mark became not only the view of Liberals but of many Conservatives and even Roman Catholic scholars. They felt strongly that to move away from the priority of Mark would be a scholarly retreat. And they did not hesitate

1. Foakes Jackson, *Constructive Quarterly* (June 1920), p. 326.

to attack the brethren of their own camps who dared to forsake the new conclusions.

There were, to be sure, brave souls (or stubborn obscurantists and blind fundamentalists, as some would prefer to call them) such as H. C. Thiessen,² John H. Kerr,³ and James Orr,⁴ who dared to doubt such use of Mark by other Gospel writers. And they appealed to early writers as Alford⁵ to show the absurdity of the Marcan hypothesis. The other source, Q, was also questioned. Ropes doubted that the document ever existed⁶ and Chapman devoted a whole chapter to proving its non-existence.⁷ Thus the "Two-Document Hypothesis" (as also Streeter's extended "Four-Document Hypothesis") was not without criticism. But a consensus formed within a certain echelon of scholars; and these scholars so dominated the first half of the twentieth century that it was generally possible to pass off objections as born of a desire, conscious or unconscious, to serve some ecclesiastical or traditional interest. The year 1950 still found the consensus quite intact.

But in 1961 William R. Farmer, of Perkins School of Theology, said, "During the past ten years the situation has changed."⁸ He cites the work of Butler in England (1951), Parker in America (1953), Vaganay in France (1954), and Ludlum in America (1958), all of whom opposed the view that our Mark could have been used as a source by our Matthew. Upon investigation, Farmer rejects the hypothesis that these writers were

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2. Henry C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), pp. 110-118.
 3. John H. Kerr, *An Introduction to the Study of the Books of the New Testament* (New York: Revell, 1892), p. 11.
 4. James Orr, "Criticism of the Bible," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, original copying 1929), pp. 748-753.
 5. Greek Testament, "Prolegomena," Ch. I, Sec. II, 5, 6.
 6. James H. Ropes, *The Synoptic Gospels* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1943), p. 68.
 7. Dom John Chapman, *Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (London: Longmans, 1937), Ch. 9.
 8. William R. Farmer, "A 'Skeleton in the Closet' of Gospel Research," *Biblical Research*, VI, (Papers of the Chicago Society of Biblical Research, published at 800 West Beldon, Chicago 14, Illinois), pp. 18-42.

but serving some ecclesiastical or traditional cause. And the major thrust of his paper is to present the question whether, in the light of serious research, the priority of Mark can still be assumed as an assured result of nineteenth century criticism. Since this question haunts every serious student of the Gospels, he has entitled his treatise, "A 'Skeleton in the Closet' of Gospel Research."

I

What difference does it make if Mark was the first of the Synoptic Gospels to be written and was the most reliable in its materials? This, indeed, contradicts an old tradition, but does it discredit the Scriptures or undermine their authority? The answer would seem to be, "Not necessarily." At least there are many Conservative scholars who hold to the "Priority of Mark" and to some form of the "Two-Document Hypothesis." Ladd has well reminded us that "inspiration operated through living men and actual historical literary processes."⁹ Our task is to identify these processes without pre-judging the matter. However, it would only be realistic to note a few obstacles over which the Marcan hypothesis must rise if it is to deserve a universal acceptance.

If Mark is to be considered the first Gospel to be written, certain other matters of history and tradition must be resolved harmoniously. One must then either reject quite definite statements of early writers as to the time and circumstances of the writing of Mark or place Matthew and Luke at a period hard to reconcile with the known facts. Clement of Alexandria declared that it was after Peter had preached in Rome that the people entreated Mark to write down what he had spoken.¹⁰ Irenaeus says that it was after their (Peter's and Paul's) departure that Mark complied.¹¹ The word for departure is often rendered "death." Either of these statements would place the date of Mark's Gospel rather late in the missionary expansion of the Church and would tend to thrust the more obviously Palestinian

9. George Eldon Ladd, "More Light on the Synoptics," *Christianity Today*, Vol. III, No. 11 (Mar. 2, 1959), p. 16.

10. Hypotyposes, in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI, xiv.

11. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III, i, 1.

Gospel of Matthew rather late. The study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the works of Dr. Albright and others seem to point to an earlier date to explain the Jewish coloring of the Gospels. Of course, if positive proof of the priority of Mark were found, one would have to adjust theories to fact.

Another problem would be the authorship of the First Gospel. The early Church unanimously ascribed this book to the Apostle Matthew. And no motive has been found for mistakenly attributing it to such an inconspicuous apostle.¹² It would take rather strong evidence to overthrow the traditional view. And it would seem passing strange for Matthew, an apostle, to be quoting Mark, who was not an apostle, concerning various events of which Matthew was an eye witness. The problem is heightened by the fact that such accounts include the call of Matthew himself and the feast which he provided for the other publicans (Matthew 9:9-13 and Mark 2:14-17). But, then, the Gospel does not claim to be written by the Apostle. Much of the evidence is external. If one solid fact could be adduced in favor of the priority of Mark, it could invalidate many theories and opinions. Many, of course, would feel that such a conclusion would narrow the apostolic witness from three to one--leaving only a brief account that does not mention the virgin birth or the resurrection (except in the disputed end of chapter 16). But the real issue is not the identity of the writers but the reliability of their writings. This could still be preserved.

It might also be said that the priority of Mark would give a less natural historical orientation than the traditional view. The thrust of the gospel was in Jerusalem, then Judaea, then Samaria, and finally to the uttermost part of the earth (Acts 1:8). Mark is admittedly addressed to Roman and Western peoples. Matthew has an obvious Jewish orientation, though universalized by the Great Commission of the gospel. That Mark was first and Matthew second is what Chapman calls the "topsy-turvy theory" that seems to suggest that the gospel was first preached to the Gentiles and then carried to Palestine.¹³ Of course, if facts should make it necessary, one could construct a more awkward theory than the traditional and assume an island of Jewish-oriented people in the sea of Gentile Christians of a

12. Thiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

13. Chapman, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

later day to justify the writing of a document such as our Matthew. But we will not so tamper unless it is necessary.

To some the priority of Mark would suggest a gross poverty of material and sources available at so late a date as would then be required for the writing of the Synoptic Gospels. Such a conclusion, however, would contradict known facts. At whatever time Luke wrote (presumably last, if one follows the majority view), he tells us plainly that there was a considerable body of truth emphatically believed in the Christian community of that day, that many had set out to put this in orderly arrangements, that the reports had come directly from eyewitnesses who were occupied with the ministry of the Word, and that Luke himself had a perfect understanding of these things from the very first.¹⁴ If there is any credibility at all to Luke's account, there was indeed an abundance of reliable source material in addition to whatever may have been incorporated in Mark, Q, or any other document known to or conjectured by modern scholars.

Still another element of the Marcan hypothesis calls for caution. The priority of Mark was "discovered" just at the time when the Bible was losing its age-long position and prestige as the infallible Word of God.¹⁵ R. H. Lightfoot joyfully elaborates on this fact as if it were an open door to unhampered investigation with the hope of perhaps finding the historical Jesus.¹⁶ Having rejected Matthew and Luke as not being valid primary sources, the critics have turned hopefully to Mark in search of a document with some ground of truth. The theory is in bad company, but we will investigate before calling it a bad theory.

A final matter for investigation is the assumption of the principle of development from the simpler to the more complex. Since Mark is the shortest, it is held to be the source. At least that was the implication of the evolutionary frame of reference so common to scholars of the day. And it appears to have accelerated the speed of biblical studies at this point. It is, however, proper to ask for evidence. As we shall see, Mark

14. Luke 1:1-3.

15. Thiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

16. R. H. Lightfoot, *History and Interpretation in the Gospels* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), pp. 10, 12.

could be a condensation of Matthew or Matthew an expansion of Mark--once direct dependence is established.

As has been seen, if the priority of Mark were proved, some adjustments would be necessary in the thinking of those who have both a simple faith in the Gospels and confidence in the general integrity and competence of the early Church Fathers. But faith should survive. Since we do not know the precise historical situations that gave rise to the Gospels, we must avoid dogmatism. And there appear to be many who agree with Dr. Ladd that "The usual solution to the synoptic problem does not necessarily mitigate against either the authority, the apostolic origin, or the inspiration of the Gospels."¹⁷ In any case, the matter must be decided on the basis of evidence.

II

But was Mark first? What are the proofs? These are historical questions that must have historical answers. Opinions without proofs are relatively worthless, however much they may be publicized, or however compatible with biblical faith they may be.

If the results are "sure," it is remarkable that the situation has changed and that the cause is losing converts among serious scholars. Dr. Ludlum describes his radical conversion from the view which he once "cordially embraced."¹⁸ Dr. Farmer, to whom previous reference has been made, remarks that for ten years he followed in his classes the logical fallacy commonly used to prove the priority of Mark.¹⁹ Later, with a grant for study in Europe, he investigated the background of the modern consensus and wrote the paper to which attention has been called. We cite a few of his findings and recommend to the reader the careful perusal of the complete article.

Dr. Farmer asserts, "It is not the source critics of the nineteenth century who claim to have solved the synoptic problem. This claim was made for them by the consensus--

17. Ladd, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

18. John H. Ludlum, Jr., "New Light on the Synoptic Problem," *Christianity Today*, Vol. III, Nos. 3, 4 (November 10 and 24, 1958), pp. 6, 7.

19. Farmer, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

makers who faced the twentieth century with a firm belief in progress in their hearts."²⁰ At the same time that some scholars were saying that the Two-Document Hypothesis had been established, the equally great Hilgenfeld was saying that "The preference at present shown for Mark is opposed to the most certain conclusions of science." Dr. Farmer proceeds to show the impatient process by which the Oxford and Cambridge scholars (Sanday, Burkitt, and Streeter) glossed over the uncertainties and insisted that the problem was solved. With no additions to the evidence at hand, the consensus-makers carried the hypothesis from "only partial dissent" to "highly probable" to "basic solution" to "no longer requires to be proved." Then, of course, the American universities, impatient to build on the basis of "assured results," followed the same course. Voices were raised even within the Oxford seminar, but they were minimized by chairman Sanday and manipulated so as to lose force. Works by Badham²¹ and Burton²² were published but were largely ignored. Meanwhile, German scholars were divided on the subject. Most of those who did accept the priority of Mark and its use as a source were not thinking of our Mark but of an original written gospel that was the source of all three canonical Gospels.

It is here that Butler²³ and Farmer²⁴ call attention to the Lachmann fallacy or the "non sequitur." Wellhausen, by some sleight of hand, takes Lachmann's statement about the manner in which the three Synoptic Gospels are copied from the original source and makes it decisive proof of the priority of Mark. But as Butler and Farmer point out, "Once the terms of the argument are changed and you are no longer thinking in terms of three authors independently copying a fourth, but now think in terms of three authors having some kind of direct literary dependence between them, there are at least three possible relationships

20. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

21. F. P. Badham, *St. Mark's Indebtedness to St. Matthew* (New York: E. R. Herrick and Co., 1897).

22. Ernest Dewitt Burton, *Some Principles of Literary Criticism and their Application to the Synoptic Problem*, in the *Decennial Publications*, The University of Chicago (1904).

23. B. C. Butler, *The Originality of St. Matthew* (Cambridge: University Press, 1951), Ch. 5, pp. 62-71.

24. Farmer, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

any one of which explains the phenomena of order equally well."²⁵ "To argue that one of these is the simplest explanation is to be guilty of a logical fallacy."²⁶ Butler calls it the Lachmann fallacy. Farmer prefers to call it the Wellhausen "non sequitur" since Lachmann himself never used the argument. Likewise, the three major reasons which Streeter gives for believing in the priority of Mark, being all variations of Lachmann's argument, are equally valid for believing in the priority of either Matthew or Luke so long as Mark is placed second in order.²⁷

A still more embarrassing fact is the discovery that the decisive factor in the triumph of the Marcan hypothesis was theological. As Schweitzer pointed out, scholars were attracted to the way in which this Gospel lent itself to the "a priori" view of the course of the life of Jesus which they brought with them.²⁸ "The way in which Holtzmann exhibited this characteristic view of the 'sixties' as arising naturally out of the detail of Mark, was so perfect, so artistically charming, that this view appeared henceforward to be inseparably bound up with the Marcan tradition."²⁹ It must be remembered that this all occurred at a time when the Tübingen school had dated Matthew as late as 130, with Luke after that and Mark still later. The basic controversy was over Mark. Was it, as the Tübingen critics maintained, a late and historically worthless abstraction from Matthew and Luke, or was it the earliest and most historically reliable account of Jesus? With the collapse of the theology of the Tübingen school, Mark won. Since no ecclesiastical party or theological school was existentially concerned with the establishment of the priority of Matthew, Mark held the field. The Orthodox took little interest in the debate and played no significant part in the outcome. Hence the issue was settled on a theological basis in a Liberal context. But the priority of our Mark to our Matthew was not established. It was not even debated.

25. Butler, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-71.

26. Farmer, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

28. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), pp. 203 ff.

29. Farmer, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

It was taken for granted and used as a necessary presupposition to the quest of the historical Jesus.³⁰

III

If the chief "assured result" of Gospel research--the priority of Mark--has not been proved, what is the status of the science today? That is an interesting and difficult question. Some of the same suggestions that were being made a century and a half ago are again relevant and cogent. While there are many achievements in the field of modern research, there are few if any "assured results." Though the source-hypotheses are still only hypotheses, much has been learned. Observations have been made and methods have been devised for the isolation of problems, analysis, and correlation. A basic knowledge of literary forms, a mass of statistical data, patterns of agreement and differences, relationships, linguistic details, historical matters, backgrounds, and a multitude of facts are available to help the serious student.

In many respects we are now ready for a fresh beginning of fruitful study. Some major matters have been settled by archaeology, textual criticism, and recent discoveries. Most scholars at least agree that the Gospels belong in the first century. Now not only Liberals but also Conservative Protestants and Roman Catholics are engaging in the research. Future study promises to be less partisan and more balanced with the broader dialogue. It should be harder to ignore or explain away evidences that do not follow one's theory. And some weeds should certainly have been destroyed in a century and a half of cultivating the ground.

And, indeed, the roster of names that has appeared in the past decade has been gratifying. Though from diverse backgrounds and though suggesting a variety of approaches, each scholar deserves a hearing.

Vaganay, a Catholic in France, sets forth as a "working hypothesis" a seven-point progression that takes the gospel from oral tradition, to written essay, to an Aramaic Gospel of the Apostle Matthew and its Greek translation, to a second source supplementary to Matthew, to Mark, to our canonical

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 41.

Greek Matthew, to Luke.³¹ Though the results are not satisfactory to either the adherents of the Marcan hypothesis or to some of his fellow-churchmen, he says much that is worth considering.

Pierson Parker, an Anglican in America, writing on *The Gospel Before Mark*,³² posits an early Jewish Christian Gospel written several years before our Mark. He holds that this document, K, enormously simplifies the synoptic problem by furnishing a source which Mark and Matthew use in different ways.

B. C. Butler, a Roman Catholic in England, writes a pointed critique of the Two-Document Hypothesis.³³ Matthew is, in his system, a source of both Mark and Luke. Q becomes unnecessary. He shows that Mark claims to be abridging sources at the very points where Mark is a briefer account of material reported in Matthew. Examples are given of Mark's compressing two parables into one, giving the gist of Matthew's doublets in terse prose, and otherwise abbreviating the longer sources.

We have referred to Dr. Ludlum's articles³⁴ and mimeographed notes.³⁵ He points out that the Marcan hypothesis was assumed rather than proved and complains that too much of biblical research has been less concerned with broad coverage of truth than with vanquishing foes. Accordingly, he attempts a comprehensive, scientific study of the data and demonstrates that the extent and manner of agreement between Matthew and Mark have been grossly misunderstood. Though there are 1,877 places in which there is exact agreement, the agreeing sections are often only a word or two in length. In only forty instances are there as many as ten words involved. Most of these are quotations or easily remembered statements. He draws a parallel between these concordances and those of two independent translations of Judges from the Hebrew into the Septuagint Greek.

31. L. Vaganay, *Le Problème Synoptique, Une Hypothèse de Travail* (Paris: Tournai, 1954).

32. Pierson Parker, *The Gospel Before Mark* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953).

33. Butler, *op. cit.*

34. Ludlum, *op. cit.*, pp. 6, 7.

35. John H. Ludlum, *A New Comprehensive Approach to the Gospels* (Englewood, New Jersey, 1955).

These, published together by Rahlfs, exhibit twice the concordances found in Matthew and Mark but are still independent versions. On the basis of this and a mass of other data, he concludes that an Aramaic original of Matthew, a Latin original of Mark, and a Greek original of Luke, offer possibilities of resolving many of the difficult questions in perfect harmony with the external evidence. In many respects Dr. Ludlum's work is the most incisive and exhaustive of which the present writer has knowledge. It is hoped that he will bring more of it into order for publication.

In a less revolutionary vein, Krister Stendahl studies Old Testament quotations in Matthew and concludes that the author of that Gospel took quotations from Mark.³⁶ N. A. Dahl studies the Passion narratives and concludes that Matthew reworked Mark's accounts.³⁷ Ladd offers an answer to Ludlum's articles in *Christianity Today*³⁸ and, in turn, is answered by further articles.³⁹ Blair writes with glowing appreciation of Matthew's comparative interest and value, though he concedes the Marcan priority in time.⁴⁰

The important thing to observe is that scholarship has been broadening to face the problems more realistically. In the days ahead there should be sufficient dialogue to come much nearer to the truth. There are indications that the truth, when found, may be quite upsetting to "assured results." In any case, history has demonstrated again and again that God's Word thrives on truth and light. Bible-believing Christians need have no fear as to the validity of the Gospel records nor of the Gospel which they contain. Though study is not expected to change the basis of faith, we will all be pleased to learn more about the manner in which the Spirit of God moved to produce the Gospel records. And if the history of the past century in other phases

36. Krister Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew* (Uppsala: C. W. K. Gleerup, Lund, 1954), p. 155.

37. N. A. Dahl, "Die Passionsgeschichte bei Matthäus," *New Testament Studies*, II (1955-56), 17-32.

38. Ladd, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-16.

39. John H. Ludlum, Jr., "Are We Sure of Mark's Priority?" *Christianity Today*, Vol. III, No. 24 (Sept. 14, 1959), pp. 11-14; Vol. III, No. 25 (Sept. 28, 1959), pp. 9, 10.

40. Edward P. Blair, *Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), pp. 15-26.

of biblical study is any indication, the trend of solid discovery will confirm faith.

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This treatise must not close without a tribute to a tower of learning and of faith at Asbury Theological Seminary. Throughout most of the forty years of the Seminary's existence, Dr. William D. Turkington has been a favorite professor. From his chair of New Testament Interpretation, he has taught two generations to examine the facts and to cherish the truth. Staunch in his personal devotion and rugged in his commitment to truth, he has made every class period an attempt to broaden the intellectual horizons and deepen the dedication of his students. Though cautious of fads and of easy answers in matters of biblical research, he has known what was being done in his field and has equipped his students with a wealth of source materials for their own study and conclusions. When, as in the Synoptic Problem, he has disagreed with popular solutions, he has done so intelligently and without rancor. In large measure, the Asbury image of a dedicated Christian scholar is embodied in her beloved Dean to whom this issue of *The Asbury Seminarian* is dedicated.