

*Streeter Versus Farmer: The Present State of the Synoptic Problem as Argument for a Synchronic Emphasis in Gospel Interpretation*¹

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Abstract

The dominant method for Gospel interpretation over the past several decades has been redaction criticism, which depends upon the adoption of a certain understanding of synoptic relationships in order to identify sources that lie behind our Gospels. Yet an examination of the major proposals regarding the Synoptic problem reveals that none of these offers the level of reliability necessary for the reconstruction of sources that is the presupposition for redaction criticism. This consideration leads to the conclusion that approaches to Gospel interpretation that require no reliance upon specific source theories are called for.

Keywords: Synoptic problem, redaction criticism, new redaction criticism, Gospel interpretation, synchronic reading, B. H. Streeter, William R. Farmer.

¹ Some minor portions of this article may be also found in Chapter 3 of my book, *The Gospel of the Son of God: An Introduction to Matthew* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, forthcoming). See that chapter for a more specific treatment of the implications of synoptic relationships for the interpretation of Matthew's Gospel.

The Problem

In the book I co-authored with Robert Traina, *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics*,² I insisted that the employment of critical methods (e.g., source criticism and redaction criticism) contribute to the reservoir of potential types of evidence that should be considered in the interpretation of passages. But I also insisted that insofar as the evidence gleaned from these critical methods is dependent upon scholarly reconstructions of matters that lie behind the text, and therefore matters to which we no longer have direct access, such evidence carries an element of uncertainty. Consequently, we should factor into our work of interpretation the tentativeness that necessarily attends evidence derived from these critical methods.

Over the past 75 years the critical method that has been most dominant in the interpretation of the Gospels is redaction criticism, which investigates the additions and changes that each evangelist has made to the sources that he employed in the composition of his Gospel. In principle, this type of investigation has merit, for any modification of tradition is a deliberative act on the part of the writer, and therefore a window into intentionality. In other words, it is an entrée into the author’s mind.

Yet this redaction-critical investigation necessarily presupposes that we can identify the sources to which our evangelist had access, for only if we reconstruct the source, or *Vorlage*, can we trace the editorial changes the evangelist has introduced. And the identification of sources behind each of our Gospels assumes a certain solution to the “Synoptic problem” (i.e., the problem of the literary relationship among our Gospels). The exploration of the Synoptic problem has

² David R. Bauer and Robert A. Traina, *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 228–38, 392–99.

implications for the ways in which one or more of our Gospels served as the source for the other Gospels. Redaction criticism flourished and gained prominence in Gospel studies because many scholars were convinced that the “Two-Source Hypothesis” offered a solution to the Synoptic problem. That is, Matthew and Luke used as their primary sources the Gospel of Mark, which would make it the earliest Gospel, and a hypothetical sayings-source dubbed “Q,” which contained mostly teaching material common to Matthew and Luke but absent from Mark. Consequently, almost all critical study of the Gospels in recent decades depends upon this understanding of synoptic relationships.

It is my intention to demonstrate that this level of dependence upon the Two-Source Hypothesis is problematic, and this realization should therefore lead to a tentativeness in the employment of the redaction criticism that stems from it. Such tentative employment may use redaction criticism as a *heuristic* device to discover elements in the text that we otherwise might have ignored, but will avoid drawing definitive and final interpretive conclusions on the basis of an evangelist’s putative alterations of received tradition in favor of a construal that focuses upon contextual innerworkings within the Gospel itself.

The Emergence and Destabilization of a Consensus

The history of attempts to address the Synoptic problem has been described elsewhere, and readers should consult those discussions for a more complete treatment.³ From the time of the fathers until the

³ See Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 144–61; William R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 1–198; R. T. France,

nineteenth century it was generally held that Matthew was the first Gospel written, followed by Mark and later Luke. We find this ordering in Irenaeus, Origen,⁴ and Jerome.⁵ For example, Irenaeus insisted that

Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure [i.e., death], Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also handed down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him.⁶

Yet these fathers did not address the literary relationship between the synoptic Gospels. The first to do so was Augustine; on the basis of his analysis of Gospel relationships that he conducted in the course of assembling his *Harmony of the Gospels*, he concluded:

Now those four evangelists ... are believed to have written in the order which follows: first Matthew, then Mark, thirdly Luke, lastly John.... Of these four ... only Matthew is reckoned to have written in the Hebrew language; the others in Greek.... For Matthew is understood to have taken it in hand to construct the record of the incarnation of the Lord according to the royal lineage, and to give an account of most part of his deeds and

Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 20–22, 24–46; Robert H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

⁴ Cited by Eusebius, *Hist. ecl.*, 6.25.

⁵ Jerome, *Preface to the Four Gospels*. Clement of Alexandria is an exception in that he adopted the order Matthew-Luke-Mark, which anticipates the Griesbach Hypothesis, discussed below. Yet Clement describes only the order of the Gospels, not their literary interdependence. Clement's statements are recorded by Eusebius, *H.E.* VI 14:5–7.

⁶ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.1.1.

words as they stood in relation to this present life of humans. Mark follows him closely, and looks like his attendant and epitomizer.⁷

Thus, Irenaeus and Augustine explicitly mention that Matthew was written in Hebrew, by which they presumably mean Aramaic. Here they are following the tradition of Papias to the effect that Matthew composed his Gospel in “the Hebrew dialect.” Indeed, throughout this period almost everyone believed that Matthew was the first Gospel to be written; that it was produced by the Apostle Matthew and had as its source reminiscences from his first-hand experience of the ministry of Jesus; and that it was composed in Hebrew/Aramaic.

The notion that the first Gospel to be composed came from Matthew and was written in Aramaic eventually gave rise to the hypothesis put forward by G. E. Lessing and J. G. Eichhorn that a now-lost Aramaic Gospel of Matthew (which they believed Papias was referencing) is the ultimate source of all four of our canonical Gospels, including our (Greek) Gospel of Matthew. This view (the “Primitive Gospel Hypothesis”) began to take hold in the beginning of the nineteenth century,⁸ along with the “Griesbach Hypothesis,” which held that Matthew was the first Gospel produced, followed by Luke, which was dependent upon Matthew, with Mark “abbreviating” both Matthew and Luke.⁹

⁷ Augustine, *Cons.*, 1.3–4. Augustine goes on to say, “For in his [Mark’s] narrative he gives nothing in concert with John apart from the others: by himself separately he has little to record; in conjunction with Luke, as distinguished from the rest, he has still less; but in concord with Matthew, he has a very large number of passages. Much, too, he narrates in words almost numerically and identically the same as those used by Matthew, where the agreement is either with that evangelist alone, or with him in connection with the rest.”

⁸ Farmer, *Synoptic Problem*, 1–35.

⁹ Griesbach published his views regarding the Synoptic problem in 1783–1790.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the consensus regarding the Synoptic problem had begun to break down.¹⁰ This situation was soon addressed by a series of studies that argued for the priority of Mark.¹¹ But it was through the work of Christian Hermann Weiss in 1838¹² and especially the monumental study by Heinrich Julius Holtzmann in 1863¹³ that the Two-Source Hypothesis was forged. With the notion of the priority of the Gospel of Mark, these scholars combined the idea of a sayings source¹⁴ that were both used by Matthew and Luke to form their Gospels. Although Matthean priority continued to be argued by a few scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, notably Theodor Zahn,¹⁵ Marie-Joseph

¹⁰ Farmer cites Holtzmann to the effect that “the only consensus [Holtzmann] could find was the notion that all the Synoptic Gospels go back to a common *Grundschrift*” (*Synoptic Problem*, 36).

¹¹ These include the studies by Gottlob Christian Storr, *Über den Zweck der evangelischen Geschichte und der Briefe Johannes* (Tübingen: Heerbrandt, 1786); Karl Lachmann, “De ordine narrationum in evangelii synopticis,” *TSK* (1835): 570–90. For a partial English translation, see N. H. Palmer, “Lachmann’s Argument,” *NTS* 13 (1967): 368–78. However, Lachmann did not explicitly urge Markan priority but prepared the way for it (cf. Farmer, *Synoptic Problem*, 16). Christian Gottlob Wilke actually argued for the order Mark-Luke-Matthew (“Matthean Posteriority”). See Christian Gottlob Wilke, *Der Urevangelist, oder exegetisch kritische Untersuchung über das Verwandtschaftsverhältnis der drei ersten Evangelien* (Dresden: Gerhard Fleischer, 1838).

¹² Christian Hermann Weiss, *Die evangelische Geschichte*, 3 Bände (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1838).

¹³ Heinrich Julius Holtzmann, *Die synoptischen Evangelien: ihr Ursprung und geschichtlicher Charakter* (Leipzig: Wilhelm Enselmann, 1863). On Holtzmann, see Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems*, 151–56; Farmer, *Synoptic Problem*, 36–47. France claims that Paul Wernle was largely responsible for the broad acceptance of the Two-Source Hypothesis at the end of the nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth century. See France, *Matthew*, 21; Paul Wernle, *Die synoptische Frage* (Leipzig: Mohr, 1899).

¹⁴ Farmer traces the notion of a sayings source ultimately to Schleiermacher from whom certain later scholars developed the idea (*Synoptic Problem*, 15). Holtzmann originally labelled this source Λ. Johannes Weiss is usually credited with designating it “Q,” the first letter in the German word, *Quelle*, for “source.”

¹⁵ Theodor Zahn, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Deichert, 1897), 2:322–34; ET, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark,

Lagrange,¹⁶ and Adolf Schlatter,¹⁷ the Two-Source Hypothesis became the new orthodoxy.¹⁸

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Major Proposals

It was Burnet Hillman Streeter who in 1924 put forward the fullest and most convincing argument for the Two-Source Hypothesis, or more precisely the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis, since he identified an additional two (less prominent) sources: “M” (Matthew’s special material) and “L” (Luke’s special material).¹⁹ His work remains the classic expression of this dominant view regarding Gospel origins. The following are Streeter’s main arguments.

1. *The Argument from Content.* Matthew contains 90% of Mark, with very similar language in details; while Luke contains a little more than 50% of Mark.
2. *The Argument from Wording.* In a typical section which occurs in all three Gospels, most of the words in Mark are found in Matthew and Luke, either in one or the other or in both together.

1909), 2:601–17; *Das Evangelium des Matthäus*, 4th ed. (Leipzig: Deichertsche, 1922), 1–32.

¹⁶ Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *Évangile selon saint Matthieu*, 7th ed. (Paris: Gabalda, 1948).

¹⁷ Adolf Schlatter, *Das Evangelist Matthäus: seine Sprache, sein Ziel, seine Selbständigkeit: ein Kommentar zum ersten Evangelium* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1948). Zahn and Schlatter argued that Aramaic Matthew was the earliest Gospel, which was adopted by Mark as his source; our Greek Gospel of Matthew, then, was based upon both Aramaic Matthew and Greek Mark.

¹⁸ For the history of the Two-Source Hypothesis, see H.-H. Stoldt, *History and Criticism of the Marcan Hypothesis* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980).

¹⁹ Burnett Hillman Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study in Origins* (London: Macmillan, 1924), 151–98.

3. *The Argument from Order.* The order of Mark is generally the same as that which we find in Matthew and Luke. Where Matthew departs from the Markan order, Luke maintains it, and where Luke departs from the Markan order, Matthew maintains it.
4. *The Argument from Modifications.* Matthew and Luke contain modifications to Mark that reflect what Matthew and Luke might well consider to be improvements or corrections to Mark. Specifically, they omit or “tone down” certain phrases in Mark that readers might consider to be too negative towards the disciples or problematic in relation to Jesus, such as the change from Mark’s “And he could do no deed of power there” (6:5) to Matthew’s “And he did not do many deeds of power there” (13:58); or the change from Mark’s “Why do you call me good?” (9:18) to Matthew’s “Why do you ask me about what is good?” (19:17). According to Streeter, the Gospel of Matthew expresses a higher Christology; thus, Jesus is addressed as “Lord” (κύριε) but once in Mark 7:28 (and that by the Syrophenician woman), while he is addressed with this honorific title 19 times in Matthew, and always by disciples or persons of faith. Moreover, Mark’s account betokens the vivid, picturesque, and redundant character of verbal storytelling, suggesting “rapid dictation by word of mouth,” while the differences from Mark found in Matthew and Luke suggest the process of literary refinement of Mark. So, when Matthew and Mark share the same story, Matthew will often describe the event more succinctly, avoiding the redundancies of the Markan passage. This simplification and shortening of individual passages in comparison with Mark is typical of Matthew throughout, so that, contrary to Augustine’s claim, Mark is not an “abbreviator” of Matthew; if anything, Matthew is the

abbreviator of Mark. Finally, Matthew avoids or improves several grammatically awkward expressions found in Mark.

5. *The Argument from Combination.* The combination of Markan and non-Markan material in Matthew and Luke makes best sense if we posit that Matthew and Luke used Mark. Matthew seems to have used Mark's narrative as the framework into which he added non-Markan material, on the basis of the principle of joining like with like. In other words, Matthew apparently added non-Markan material at places that would be appropriate to the content of the Markan passage.
6. *The Argument of a Sayings-Source.* The non-Markan material found in Matthew and Luke is best explained by their separate and independent use of a written source, usually called "Q," which contained mostly sayings, or teachings, of Jesus, along with a few brief narratives. The similarity in wording excludes the possibility that Q was oral rather than written tradition when Mark and Luke appropriated it.

Streeter himself recognized that the first three arguments belong together, in that they point to Mark as the middle entity, standing between Matthew and Luke. Streeter summarized their significance thusly: "This conjunction and alternation of Matthew and Luke in their agreement with Mark as regards (a) content, (b) wording, (c) order, is only explicable if they are incorporating a source identical, or all but identical, with Mark."²⁰ Many recent scholars have noted that this claim is problematic in that the fact that Mark stands as the common denominator between Matthew and Luke may be explained by positing that Mark used both Matthew and Luke (the Griesbach Hypothesis). Indeed, some scholars have dubbed Streeter's conclusion the "Lachmann fallacy" (Lachmann being the first to suggest Mark's priority on the basis of the argument from order). Thus, these first

²⁰ Streeter, *Four Gospels*, 151.

three arguments indicate that Matthew and Luke may have used Mark as a source, but they do not prove it, since considerations of content, wording, and order may indicate Mark's employment of Matthew and Luke.²¹

The argument from modifications also contains some difficulties. One could take issue with Streeter's claim that Matthew edited Mark so as to describe the disciples in a less negative light. It is true that Mark presents James and John asking for the most prominent seats in the kingdom (Mark 10:35), while Matthew describes their mother making the request on their behalf (20:20–21); but in 20:22–23 the Matthean Jesus responds to the mother's request by saying *to the brothers*, "you do not know what you [plural] are asking." It is unclear that the brothers' making the request through their mother leads the reader to have a more positive assessment of them.²² And while Matthew omits the Markan reference to the disciples' hearts being hardened when Jesus enters the boat having walked on the water (Mark 6:52), the Matthean form of that story contains the account of Peter sinking into the water when Jesus commands Peter to come to him, with Jesus calling him a man "of little faith" (14:29–31). And at the very end of Matthew, as Jesus is about to commission the disciples to their global mission, when they saw the resurrected Jesus, "some doubted" (28:17).

The passages just cited are of course only a handful of the many references to the disciples in Mark and Matthew; and it would be

²¹ Benjamin C. Butler first named the "Lachmann Fallacy." See Benjamin C. Butler, *The Originality of St. Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 53. For discussion of the Lachmann Fallacy, with some defense of Lachmann's arguments for the priority of Mark, see Stein, *Synoptic Problem*, 69–70.

²² John Nolland insists that the mother of the sons of Zebedee is here reflecting the typical attempt of women to exercise their own power through their "continuing influence over their adult sons." He concludes that "Matthew is not moving the responsibility from the sons to their mother ('with her sons' ensures their complicity in this), but allowing the woman's stake in this also to come to the fore." See John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 819.

inappropriate to draw conclusions from a small sampling. But the point stands that at least several of the differences between the Markan and Matthean presentations of the disciples can be explained in other ways than a simple enhancement strategy on the part of Matthew. In some cases the disciples are presented more positively in Matthew than in Mark, but in other instances Matthew may describe them just as negatively. Moreover, is it not possible that a later writer might, for his own reasons, wish to introduce a more negative portrayal of the disciples? In other words, can we simply assume a positive trajectory of the presentation of the disciples through the Gospel tradition?

The situation is similar when we examine the claim that Matthew and Luke present a less problematic and more exalted Christology. Again, can we assume a trajectory at every stage in the Gospel tradition from a “low” to a “high” Christology? By all accounts the epistles of Paul predate any of our Gospels, and yet it would be difficult to imagine a higher Christology than we find in passages such as Phil 2:5–11. Nor could we think of a more exalted Christology than what we find in Matt 11:25–27//Luke 10:21–22, which, according to Streeter’s own hypothesis, belongs to Q, the earliest strata of the Gospel tradition we possess.

Moreover, the two examples Streeter cited for a more exalted Christology in Matthew could be explained on other grounds. The change from Mark 6:5 to Matt 13:58 is not as dramatic as Streeter suggested; for Mark follows “He could do no deed of power there” with “except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and he cured them.” Consequently, the sense of Matt 13:58 substantially agrees with Mark 6:5. In the case of Mark 9:18/Matt 19:17, we note that Mark writes, “Why do you call me good?” because the rich young man had addressed Jesus as “Good teacher,” while in Matthew the young man asks, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to inherit eternal life?” Consequently, Mark 9:18 accords with the question of Mark 9:17, while Matt 13:58 accords with the form of the question in Matt 19:16. Of

course, one could posit that Matthew has changed both the question and the answer to avoid what some readers of Mark may have considered the christologically problematic character of Jesus' answer in Mark 9:18. But the Matthean form of 19:17 actually makes better sense of the flow of the narrative; the issue is not the goodness of the teacher but the goodness of the deeds that lead to eternal life.

But these differences between Mark and Matthew that I have just described do point to the fact that Matthean passages often reflect an improvement of sense and an enhanced clarity over against the Markan parallels (which is true of Luke as well). And Streeter's claim that the Greek of Matthew and Luke is more polished and reflects a decided improvement over the quality of Greek constructions in Mark is legitimate. This observation was first made in detail by John C. Hawkins,²³ and it has been developed and confirmed many times over the past century.²⁴ This is perhaps the strongest argument for Streeter's position. It is much easier to imagine Matthew and Luke improving the Greek style of their Markan source than to conceive Mark introducing less felicitous and more awkward forms into his Matthean and Lukan sources.

Another consideration that has been used in support of the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis is the argument from redaction. In short, redaction criticism which has been based on the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis has been able to discern a consistent redactional strategy in Matthew and Luke that is quite compelling.²⁵ Now it is right

²³ John C. Hawkins, *Horae Synopticae: Contributions to the Study of the Synoptic Problem* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1899).

²⁴ E.g., see Willoughby C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Matthew*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), xiii–xxxii; Nigel Turner, *Style*, vol. 4 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, by James Hope Moulton, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908–1976), 38–41; Stein, *Synoptic Problem*, 81–83.

²⁵ James M. Robinson, “On the Gattung of Mark (and John),” in *Jesus and Man's Hope I*, ed. Donald G. Miller and Dikran Y. Hadidian (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1970), 101–102; Donald P. Senior, *The Passion Narrative*

to point out that this argument that appeals to the ability to reconstruct a compelling editorial strategy on the basis of the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis must be qualified by the consideration that most redaction-critical work has assumed the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis, and that it is possible that if more redaction-critical study were conducted on the basis of another source theory that such redaction-critical study may support the alternative source theory. But, in fact, some attempts have been made to explain Lukan and Markan redaction of Matthew on the basis of the Griesbach Hypothesis, and the results have not been particularly persuasive.²⁶

Streeter rightly recognized that the priority of Mark requires the postulating of something like the document Q, unless one accepts the notion that Luke used both Mark and Matthew. Of course, it is possible to insist that Luke did in fact edit both Matthew and Mark, as Austin Farrer, Michael D. Goulder, and several others have argued.²⁷ The major difficulty with Q is that its existence must remain hypothetical; it is a scholarly construct on the basis of the agreements of much non-Markan material that is common to Matthew and Luke.²⁸ But it is a scholarly construct that is plausible. For those who argue that Luke used Mark and Matthew have been unable to explain satisfactorily why Luke would have disassembled the unified blocks of sayings material in Matthew only to distribute it apparently somewhat randomly throughout his Gospel. And Graham N. Stanton trenchantly

according to Matthew: A Redaction-Critical Study, BETL 39 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1982).

²⁶ Notably Bernard Orchard, *Matthew, Luke & Mark*, vol. 1 of *The Griesbach Solution to the Synoptic Question* (Manchester: Koinonia, 1976); Farmer, *Synoptic Problem*, 233–83. Cf. Stein, *Synoptic Problem*, 76–81.

²⁷ Austin Farrer, “On Dispensing with Q,” in D. E. Nineham, ed., *Studies in the Gospels* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), 55–88; Michael D. Goulder, “On Putting Q to the Test,” *NTS* 24 (1977/8): 218–34; idem, *Midrash and Lektion in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974), 452–71; Mark Goodacre, *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002).

²⁸ For a strong defense of Q, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Priority of Mark and the ‘Q’ Source in Luke,” in Miller and Hadidian, *Jesus and Man’s Hope*, 131–70.

asks: “if Luke has used Matthew, why is it so difficult to find traces in Luke of Matthew’s expansion, abbreviations or modifications of Mark’s content and order?”²⁹ Thus, the existence of Q must remain an open question but the weight of all the relevant considerations leans slightly in its favor.³⁰

Before leaving this discussion of the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis we should note that a possible objection to the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis is that a number of minor agreements exist between Matthew and Luke over against Mark. These minor agreements have caused pause regarding the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis from the beginning and have led advocates of that hypothesis to attempt an explanation. Streeter insists that most of these minor agreements can be accounted for by material that Mark and Luke shared from Q, or by the coincidence of independent improvement by both Matthew and Luke in line with the general editorial practices of these two evangelists, or by the coincidence of their common omission of Mark’s verbosity, which again was typical of their redactional practice in relation to Mark. But some minor agreements cannot be thus explained. Regarding them, some have postulated that Matthew and Luke used an earlier version of Mark as the basis for their editorial work (an “Ur-Markus”). But Streeter rejected this notion, since in those passages where we find these minor agreements “the *existing text of Mark seems the more primitive and original.*”³¹ Others have argued that Matthew and Luke used a later recension of Mark, which has subsequently been lost. But Streeter preferred the text-critical explanation, namely that a careful analysis of the manuscript tradition indicates that these minor agreements have been introduced into the

²⁹ Graham N. Stanton, “The Origin and Purpose of Matthew’s Gospel: Matthean Scholarship from 1945 to 1980,” *ANRW* 25.3:1902.

³⁰ Stein, *Synoptic Problem*, 89–112.

³¹ Streeter, *Four Gospels*, 180, italics his.

text by way of scribal attempts to assimilate the wording of Matthew to Luke or of Luke to Matthew.³²

Into the consensus of the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis two alternative theories have been put forth. In fact, these theories represent the re-emergence of earlier hypotheses. Some scholars, notably John Chapman and Benjamin C. Butler,³³ have attempted to revive the Augustinian Hypothesis (Matthew-Mark-Luke). Yet this view has gained almost no support.³⁴ But the re-emergence of the Griesbach Hypothesis, particularly under the tireless efforts of William R. Farmer, has created a major re-examination of the Synoptic problem.³⁵ Farmer has offered the following major arguments for the Griesbach Hypothesis:

1. *The combination of agreement and disagreement regarding the order and content of the material in the Synoptic Gospels is best explained by Mark's editing of Matthew and Luke.* Yet, while it is true that the order and content of the Synoptics *is explicable* on the basis of the Griesbach Hypothesis, in the judgment of most scholars Farmer does not succeed in demonstrating that the Griesbach Hypothesis *better accounts for* the content and order we find in the Synoptics.
2. *We can best account for the minor agreements of Matthew and Luke over against Mark by postulating that Mark knew Matthew and Luke, and that Mark for his own purpose sometimes chose not to follow Matthew and Luke, but to chart his own path.* Yet, while Farmer's

³² Streeter, *Four Gospels*, 295–331.

³³ John Chapman, *Matthew, Mark and Luke: A Study in the Order and Interrelation of the Synoptic Gospels* (London: Longmans, Green, 1937); Benjamin C. Butler, *The Originality of St. Matthew*; John Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark, and Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

³⁴ For arguments against the Augustinian Hypothesis, see Farmer, *Synoptic Problem*, 211–32.

³⁵ See especially Farmer, *Synoptic Problem*, 199–232; Stoldt, *History and Criticism*; Orchard, *Matthew, Luke & Mark*.

explanation is plausible in principle, an examination of the specific passages involved makes it difficult to understand why Mark would have deviated from the two sources at his disposal when he did and in the ways he did. Moreover, while Streeter’s careful explanations for these minor agreements is not certain, they are satisfactory at least to those who otherwise grant the possibility of the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis.

3. *The correlation that exists in the Synoptic Gospels between order and wording is best explained by Mark’s use of Matthew and Luke.* Here Farmer points to the observation that, in general, when Matthew and Mark agree in order over against Luke the wording seems to be close; and when Luke and Mark agree in order over against Matthew the wording between them seems to be close. Yet Farmer grants that this phenomenon is more conspicuous in the first half of Mark than in the second half, and that exceptions to this rule exist. In fact, Farmer sees these exceptions as pointing to the kind of “ambiguity” that one would expect on the hypothesis that Mark was using Matthew and Luke. Farmer thus turns a possible objection into a virtue; this move might make sense for someone who is otherwise persuaded of the Griesbach Hypothesis, but probably not for many others.
4. *The redactional process Mark would have pursued in his use of Matthew and Luke is understandable.* Farmer offers a “history of the redaction of the synoptic tradition in Mark,” examining several passages in order to identify the rationale for Mark’s redactional activity.³⁶ It is beyond the scope of the present article to discuss the detailed explanations offered by Farmer on several synoptic passages.³⁷ Farmer describes here why

³⁶ Farmer, *Synoptic Problem*, 233–83.

³⁷ James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 49, identifies at least one form of Markan “expansion” as a rhetorically effective “two-step progression.” This indicates that

Mark might have made the changes he has introduced to his Matthean and Lukan sources, yet Farmer presents no overarching theological or pastoral agenda on Mark's part that forms a pattern for Farmer's suggested Markan redactional strategy. In some passages, the Griesbach explanation seems preferable, but in at least as many other passages, the Two(Four)-Source explanation is more compelling. At best Farmer indicates that such Markan redaction of his sources is possible.

5. *The Griesbach Hypothesis makes sense of the agreements between Matthew and Luke without the necessity of positing another source (Q).* Farmer is correct that a major drawback of the Two(Four)-Source Theory is the requirement of appealing to another (and otherwise unknown) source. The principle of Occam's Razor (the simplest explanation is, everything else being equal, the best) would seem to favor the Griesbach Hypothesis at this point. On the other hand, it may be simpler, or at least more compelling, to explain the manner in which Luke incorporated non-Markan sayings material on the basis of the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis than the Griesbach Hypothesis.
6. *Literary-historical and form-critical considerations indicate that Matthew is more primitive, closer to the original events, than Mark.* Here Farmer points out that Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels, and that Mark bears signs of adaptation to a more Gentile audience; this would suggest that Matthew represents an earlier stage of the Gospel tradition than Mark, since the general trajectory of earliest Christianity is away from a Jewish-centered orientation towards one that was progressively more Gentile-centered. Those who adopt the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis must argue that Matthew represents a "re-Judaizing" of the Gospel

rhetorical intentionality might be claimed for some features that advocates of the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis have described as unnecessary and redundant details.

tradition,³⁸ which of course contradicts the general direction of the trajectory. This is a strong point on the part of Farmer; and while it doesn't "prove" the Griesbach Hypothesis, it does point to a weakness in the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis.

This juxtaposing of the main arguments for these two major views regarding Gospel origins indicates that each of these proposals has strengths and weaknesses. This situation has prompted other theories regarding Gospel origins. For example, some scholars have rejected the notion of simple stages of literary dependence among the canonical Gospels in which later canonical Gospels are directly dependent upon an earlier one(s) in favor of complex and reciprocal sharing among the canonical Gospels or in favor of the view that each evangelist made use of a number of written and oral traditions (perhaps in addition to one or more of the canonical Gospels), some of which are no longer available to us. We might refer to this cluster of proposals as the Multiple Interaction Hypothesis. Some scholars who adopt this view posit elaborate and complex interconnections among our canonical Gospels or between now extinct sources and our canonical Gospels; but others simply insist that some such process is likely responsible for our Gospels even though we cannot now describe the specific form it may have taken.³⁹

³⁸ An excellent example of this move is found in Georg Strecker, *Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit: Untersuchung zur Theologie des Matthäus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971), 86–118.

³⁹ Antonio Gaboury, *La structure des Évangiles synoptiques* (Paris: Desclée, 1970), discussed and critiqued in Stephen Hultgren, *Narrative Elements in the Double Tradition: A Study of Their Place within the Framework of the Gospel Narrative* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 138–69; Pierre Benoit and M.-E Boismard, *Synopses des quatre Évangiles en français*, vol. 2 (Paris: Cerf, 1972); John M. Rist, *On the Independence of Matthew and Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Bo Reicke, *The Roots of the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1, ConcC* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 21; E. P. Sanders, *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London: SCM, 1989), 51–119.

But these proposals are even more complicated and speculative than the Two(Four)-Source or the Griesbach Hypothesis. And in many cases, they fail to take seriously into account the close similarities in both order and wording among the canonical Gospels. Yet the Multiple Interaction Hypothesis, while not entirely compelling, is a viable alternative to the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis and the Griesbach Hypothesis. In addition, Robert MacEwan has recently urged a consideration of Matthean posteriority, which is the view that Matthew made use of Mark and Luke in the production of his Gospel.⁴⁰ Yet even he does not argue that this is the best solution, but only that it deserves attention.

The present state of the scholarly discussion on this matter is somewhat fluid. The major contenders are the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis and to a lesser extent the Griesbach Hypothesis. In my judgment, the fundamental issue in deciding between these two proposals is the consideration that it is very difficult to account for Mark's redaction of Matthew and Luke on the basis of the Griesbach Hypothesis. In the final analysis, it is unclear what kind of community situation or theological, pastoral, or literary purpose would have led Mark to create his Gospel out of Matthew and Luke. For example, when one considers the verbosity of Mark's Gospel, it is difficult to understand why, on the theory of Matthean priority, Mark would have enlarged individual passages that he found in Matthew with the addition of unnecessary details only to omit so much of Jesus's teaching material in Matthew, for instance, neglecting to include practically the whole of the Sermon on the Mount, even though Mark

⁴⁰ Robert MacEwan, *Matthean Posteriority: An Exploration of Matthew's Use of Mark and Luke as a Solution to the Synoptic Problem*, LNTS 501 (London: T&T Clark, 2015). A form of Matthean Posteriority was proposed by some earlier scholars, e.g., Ernst von Dobschütz, "Matthew as Rabbi and Catechist," trans. Robert Morgan in *The Interpretation of Matthew*, ed. Graham Stanton (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 26; George Kennedy, cited in W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew*, ICC, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988–1997), I:14.

describes Jesus as a teacher and makes mention of his teaching activity more than does Matthew, and includes some blocks of teaching (e.g., Mark 4:1–34; 13:3–37). On the other hand, the extensive redaction-critical study that has been conducted on the basis of the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis has demonstrated the reasonableness of such redactional activity on the part of Matthew and Luke on their Markan *Vorlage*. But reasonableness is not certainty. And significant arguments exist against the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis.

In my judgment, the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis is more likely than the competing proposals; but we can no longer think of it as an “assured result” of NT criticism. Unless additional evidence surfaces or revolutionary new ways of construing the evidence emerge, the scholarly pursuit of Gospel origins has reached an impasse. Further endeavor will likely yield little in the way of new insights.

Consequences for the Method of Gospel Interpretation

Redaction criticism of the Gospels emerged from a double conviction, viz., that we can identify with a probability approaching functional certainty the literary sources behind our Gospels so as to make firm judgments regarding the redactional moves of the evangelists with a view towards making those moves the definitive basis for Gospel interpretation; and that an analytical comparison of synoptic parallels has significant value for the interpretation of Gospel passages. A critical examination of the history of investigation into the Synoptic problem, which I have offered in brief fashion above, renders the first member of that double conviction dubious. All redaction-critical work must include at least an implicit caveat that reads, in essence: “Assuming the Two-Source Hypothesis (or the Markan-priority-non Q Hypothesis, or the Griesbach Hypothesis, etc.)....” Interpreters who employ such redaction criticism, based as it is on the

espousal of certain source theories, should acknowledge the tentativeness of any interpretation derived therefrom. It does not exactly negate such an interpretative conclusion, but it does render it contingent and conditional. But a gnawing suspicion arises from deep within that the data, or grist, of our interpretation should be more reliable and stable. In the final analysis, therefore, the focus of our interpretation must be that which we actually possess, which exists without question or any doubt, viz., the Gospel texts themselves. We are left with the necessity of a close reading of the Gospel passages in their book contexts. This is ultimately the only reliable vehicle for the communicative intentions of the Gospel authors.

But what of the second member of the double conviction lying behind redaction criticism, the impulse to consider the other Synoptic Gospels for the interpretation of a particular Gospel under consideration? This is a legitimate impulse, arising from the relationship that exists among our Gospels. The very combination of continuity (the same general story, with many of the same particulars) and discontinuity (the multiple differences in specifics) invites us to consider how this coalescence of similarities and differences offers insight into the meaning of Gospel passages.

But we can engage in this kind of fruitful analysis without dependence upon a specific theory of synoptic relationships. It involves interpreting a Gospel passage (in part) by examining how it differs, both in substance, style, and context, from its parallels in the other Gospels with a view toward allowing the unique features of our passage to point to distinctive or emphasized aspects of the message that our evangelist wished to communicate. Thus, for example, Matthew could have reported the ministry of John the Baptist in the same way that Mark, Luke, or even John did; but he chose to describe it with his own distinctive features, and these distinctive features may clarify the meaning of the Matthean passage and may alert us to Matthean emphases. An additional advantage of this approach over

against redaction criticism that is based upon the Two(Four)-Source Hypothesis is that it can be confidently applied to Mark; those who accepted Markan priority have always had difficulty applying redaction criticism to this Gospel, since we have no extant sources for it.⁴¹

Indeed, a movement in this methodological direction is already beginning to emerge. It is sometimes referred to by the imprecise and misleading moniker “new redaction criticism.”⁴² But whatever one wishes to call it, this approach is arguably more inductive than traditional redaction criticism, in that it is based upon a more reliable gathering of evidence.

⁴¹ This fact has not prevented scholars from attempting to employ redaction criticism with Mark. They have found it necessary, of course, to reconstruct the source material that Mark presumably had at his disposal. One of the most serious and careful attempts to interpret Mark on the basis of reconstructed sources is William L. Lane, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

⁴² Goodacre, *Case Against Q*, 108; Joel B. Green, “Narrative and New Testament Interpretation: Reflections on the State of the Art,” *LTQ* 39 (2004): 162–63; Roland Meynet, *Le fait synoptique reconsidéré*, *Retorica Biblica e Semitica*, 7 (Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2014). An example of the practice of this “new redaction criticism,” without so naming it, is R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). Of course, “composition criticism,” a later stage in the development of redaction criticism, anticipated to some extent this movement, in that composition critics considered not only editorial changes that the evangelists presumably made to their sources, but also the total authorial performance of the evangelists. Nevertheless, composition criticism was still dependent upon source theories. See William G. Thompson, *Matthew’s Advice to a Divided Community Mt. 17,22–18,35*, AnBib 44 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970), which is generally considered to be the first attempt at composition criticism.