

The Synoptic Problem: An Assessment and Case Study (The Cursing of the Fig Tree)

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Introduction

It has long been recognized that of the four Gospels, John's is unique in its selection and presentation of material. Eusebius records Clement of Alexandria as having noted that "John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospel, being urged by his friends, and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel."¹ Clement had previously made reference to "the Gospels containing genealogies" and "the Gospel according to Mark." These make up the "Gospel" in which "the external facts" (τὰ σωματικά) were recorded. This is an acknowledgement of the fact that the material contained in Matthew, Mark, and Luke covers much of the same ground. It is because of the amount of overlap between these three that they are referred to as the "Synoptic" Gospels, a term coined after the "synopses," or arrangements of the Gospels in parallel columns, used by eighteenth century scholars to study them.²

For centuries, the fact that Matthew, Mark, and Luke could be "seen together" (the literal meaning of "synopsis") was viewed as positive evidence for the authenticity of their accounts. Chrysostom, anticipating an objection that similar yet differing accounts of stories in the Gospels demonstrates discordance states that

...this very thing is a very great evidence of their truth. For if they had agreed in all things exactly even to time, and place, and to the very words, none of our enemies would have believed but that they had met together, and had written what they wrote by some human compact; because such entire agreement as this cometh not of simplicity. But now even that discordance which seems to exist in little matters delivers them from all suspicion, and speaks clearly in behalf of the

¹ Eusebius, Church History, 6.14.7. All quotations from the Early Church Fathers are taken from Schaff's edition, made available on <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/>.

² E. P. Sanders, The Historical Figure of Jesus (London, England: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1993), p. 66.

character of the writers. But if there be anything touching times or places, which they have related differently, this nothing injures the truth of what they have said.³

In the post-Reformation era, a new attitude toward the Scriptures took hold. While it would be inaccurate to state that critical study of the Bible was a product of the Reformation, it certainly seems as if most of the critical work has appeared since the Magisterial Reformers loosed the Scriptures from the grip of the Roman Church.⁴ Since that time, the emphasis in Synoptic studies has been more on explaining the differences than attempting to harmonize accounts. The need to explain the accounts within the Synoptics that are similar yet containing varying degrees of dissimilarity is what has become known as “The Synoptic Problem.” Attempts to resolve the Synoptic Problem seek to provide explanations that account for the phenomena of similarity and dissimilarity evident within Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

This paper will summarize the more significant solutions to the Synoptic Problem, and assess their strengths and weaknesses. It will then take the Synoptics account of Jesus cursing a fig tree and use this to evaluate popular solutions to the Synoptic Problem.

Proposed Solutions to the Synoptic Problem

³ John Chrysostom, Homily 1.6.

⁴ R. K. Harrison details this phenomenon with regard to the Old Testament in his Introduction to the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Mi.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1969; reprint, Peabody, Ma.: Prince Press, 1999), pp. 7 ff. For the philosophical background to New Testament “historical criticism” going back to Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes, see F. David Farnell, “Philosophical and Theological Bent of Historical Criticism,” in Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell (eds.), The Jesus Crisis (Grand Rapids, Mi: Kregel Publications, 1998).

The issue at the heart of the Synoptic Problem is how to account for the similarity, and in some cases complete identity, of wording observable between the synoptic writers. There are occasions where the three Gospels record an incident or saying of Jesus with almost complete agreement in wording—even down to the grammatical forms used. This can be seen, for example, in Jesus’ exhortation on the cost of discipleship found in Matthew 16:24-28, Mark 8:34-9:1, and Luke 9:23-27. A couple of verses will suffice to demonstrate:

²⁴ εἴ τις θέλει ὀπίσω μου ἐλθεῖν, ἀπαρνησάσθω ἑαυτὸν καὶ ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀκολουθεῖτω μοι. ²⁵ ὃς γὰρ ἐὰν θέλῃ τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ σῶσαι ἀπολέσει αὐτήν· ὃς δ’ ἂν ἀπολέσῃ τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ εὕρησει αὐτήν. (Matthew 16:24-25)

³⁴ εἴ τις θέλει ὀπίσω μου ἀκολουθεῖν, ἀπαρνησάσθω ἑαυτὸν καὶ ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀκολουθεῖτω μοι. ³⁵ ὃς γὰρ ἐὰν θέλῃ τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ σῶσαι ἀπολέσει αὐτήν· ὃς δ’ ἂν ἀπολέσῃ τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ καὶ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου σώσει αὐτήν. (Mark 8:34-35)

²³ εἴ τις θέλει ὀπίσω μου ἔρχεσθαι, ἀρνησάσθω ἑαυτὸν καὶ ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ καθ’ ἡμέραν καὶ ἀκολουθεῖτω μοι. ²⁴ ὃς γὰρ ἂν θέλῃ τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ σῶσαι ἀπολέσει αὐτήν· ὃς δ’ ἂν ἀπολέσῃ τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ οὗτος σώσει αὐτήν. (Luke 9:23-24)

The differences between the passages are fewer than the similarities. Matthew and Luke have two different tenses of the verb “to come,” Mark has “to follow” instead. Matthew and Mark use ἐὰν where Luke prefers ἂν with the subjunctive mood. Matthew’s account says that the one who loses his life for Jesus’ sake “will find” it, whereas Mark and Luke say he will “save” it. Mark also inserts “and the gospel” after “on behalf of me.” The rest of the passage is virtually identical in all three Gospels.

This example has already demonstrated instances where two of the Gospels agree against the third. This can also be seen in passages such as the account of the healing of the paralytic in Matthew 9:1-8, Mark 2:1-12, and Luke 5:17-26. There are also instances where two Gospels record an account that the third does not contain. A notable example of this is where Jesus laments over Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37-39, and Luke 13:34-35), where there is almost complete agreement between Matthew and Luke on the wording of Jesus' lament, and yet the whole incident is missing from Mark.

Such verbal agreement between the Synoptic Gospels has led many to conclude that at least one, if not two, of the Gospel writers used the other as a source document from which they worked. If this is the case, which Gospel came first? Who copied whom? If an existing Gospel was used as a source, were other sources used that are no longer extant? It is in answer to these questions that the two major dependency theories emerged: the "Two Gospel Hypothesis," and the "Two-/Four-Source Hypothesis."

The Two Gospel Hypothesis was formulated by J. J. Griesbach, who in 1774 had developed the first synopsis of the Gospels that presented the accounts side-by-side for easy comparison.⁵ According to this theory, Matthew's Gospel was the first to be written, followed by Luke who utilized material from Matthew as well as new material into his Gospel. Mark then used Matthew and Luke, copying with precision where they agreed, and choosing one over the other where they differed.⁶ Those who hold to this

⁵ E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, Studying the Synoptic Gospels (London, England: SCM Press, 1989), p. 51. Dr. Henry Owen may be credited with first formulating this view in his book Observations on the Four Gospels in 1764. However, it was Griesbach's work that became the standard expression of the position (Grant R. Osborne and Matthew C. Williams, "Markan Priority Response to Chapter Three," in Robert L. Thomas (ed.) Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels (Grand Rapids, Mi: Kregel Publications, 2002), p. 317.

theory point not only to verbal similarities between the Gospels, but also similarities in sequence where Mark appears to follow either Matthew's order of events, or Luke's, or both where appropriate.⁷ While there were undoubtedly other written and oral sources available to the Gospel writers (Luke 1:1-4 indicates this), Two-Gospel advocates believe that the verbal correspondence between the Gospels is too close to be accounted for in any other way than literary dependence.⁸

There are other arguments put forward to support this thesis, including the fact that the earliest accounts of the composition of the Gospels seem to present Matthew as the first to be written (e.g., Clement of Alexandria provides the earliest statement on the order of the Gospels saying that the Gospels containing genealogies came first⁹), and that this view best explains the phenomena of the text (e.g., the agreement of Matthew and Luke against Mark, the ordering of events in Mark, etc.). However, as Farmer insists, it is not so much that any one argument in favor of this position is critical, but it is the cumulative effect of all the arguments that he finds persuasive:

[T]he cogency of this argument depends upon a web of evidence structured by innumerable arguments, some of which touch only the most minute points, but which, nevertheless, taken together with all the rest, constitute a supportive basis that will bear the weight of the conclusion: it is historically probable that Mark was written after Matthew and Luke and was dependent upon both. The

⁶ Ibid., p. 62.

⁷ John H. Niemelä, "The Case for the Two-Gospel View of Gospel Origins," in Robert L. Thomas (ed.), Three Views, p. 188.

⁸ William R. Farmer, "The Case for the Two-Gospel Hypothesis," in David Alan Black and David R. Beck (eds.), Rethinking the Synoptic Problem (Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Academic, 2001), p. 100.

⁹ Ibid., p. 122. Note that Papias' famous statement quoted by Eusebius in his Church History (3.39) has more to say about authorship than sequence of the Gospels. See below regarding the Independence View.

destruction of one or more of the strands of evidence that have been woven into this web would not destroy the web.¹⁰

Griesbach's view was the dominant theory for about one hundred years, whereupon it was supplanted by the Two-/Four-Source Hypothesis.¹¹

The view referred to here as the "Two-/Four-Source Hypothesis" is really an amalgam of views that hold to certain core principles, the main one being what is known as "Markan Priority," or the idea that Mark's Gospel was in fact the first to be written, with Matthew and Luke drawing from and elaborating on Mark's work. It is in this latter part—the way in which Matthew and Luke utilized Mark and perhaps other sources—that the variant positions arise. This view arose out of the Synoptic investigations of German scholars, culminating in the work of the so-called "Oxford School" in England, and primarily in B. H. Streeter's classic volume, The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins Treating of the Manuscript Tradition, Sources, Authorship, and Dates, in 1925.¹² While Streeter's arguments have been improved upon since 1925, his basic position (also known as the "Oxford Hypothesis") is still foundational to the Two-/Four-Source Hypothesis today.¹³

Advocates of Markan Priority list a number of reasons for holding to this view. Among the most popular are the fact that Mark's Greek is rough, and in parallel passages

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 101.

¹¹ Sanders and Davies, p. 63.

¹² Grant R. Osborne and Matthew C. Williams, "The Case for the Markan Priority View of Gospel Origins," in Robert L. Thomas (ed.), Three Views, p. 21.

¹³ Scot McKnight, "A Generation Who Knew Not Streeter: The Case for Markan Priority," in Black and Beck (eds.), Rethinking the Synoptic Problem, pp. 67-68.

Matthew and Luke appear to smooth out Mark's grammar.¹⁴ Also, Matthew and Luke rarely agree against Mark; in parallel passages, usually Mark and Matthew agree against Luke, or Mark and Luke agree against Matthew.¹⁵ Indeed, with few exceptions, Matthew and Luke only agree when they are also agreeing with Mark. This fact further suggests that Matthew and Luke did not know each other, since on the majority of occasions when they agree it seems it is because they are both agreeing with Mark.¹⁶ The order of material presented in Matthew and Luke appears to follow Mark, and when one Gospel deviates from Mark's order, the other seems to follow it.¹⁷ Mark also appears to contain more Aramaisms than Matthew and Luke suggesting that Mark's Greek comes very close to the source of the sayings in their original language.¹⁸

It was mentioned that passages where Matthew and Luke agree against Mark are rare, however they do exist. These, along with passages in Matthew and Luke that have no Markan parallel, present some of the biggest challenges to the Markan Priority view. While various solutions to this have been proposed over the years, the most popular postulate the existence of additional sources along with Mark that were used by Matthew and Luke. Particular attention has been paid to a hypothetical source named "Q" after the German word *Quelle* meaning "source."¹⁹ According to Darrell Bock, there are two main

¹⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, "The Synoptic Problem: Where We Stand at the Start of a New Century," in Black and Beck (eds.), Rethinking the Synoptic Problem, p. 20.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Sanders and Davies, p. 62.

¹⁷ Osborne and Williams, "The Case for the Markan Priority View of Gospel Origins," p. 36.

¹⁸ Blomberg, "The Synoptic Problem," pp. 22-23.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

pillars that support the existence of Q: the probability that Matthew and Luke did not know each other's Gospels, and the theory that common Matthean and Lukan material share a source.²⁰ He notes the way in which the two Gospels relate the same events in different ways without any hint of borrowing details that might betray a knowledge of the other account (e.g., the birth narratives and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew) or Plain (Luke). Also the fact that Luke misses seemingly significant details, like the longer form of the Lord's Prayer or the full list of Beatitudes which are both in Matthew. If Luke had Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount before him, one would think these would be among the items he would incorporate.²¹ However, it appears that both Matthew and Luke have knowledge of both the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes.

Craig Blomberg finds an analogy to Q in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, which is essentially a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus. He believes that the existence of such a collection demonstrates that it would not be unreasonable to suppose other such collections existed, and that Q might be one such work. "It would be surprising if early Christians never created a compendium of 'the best of Jesus.'"²² He argues further that if Matthew and Luke did use most or all of Q, it should not surprise the modern scholar that Q no longer exists since it was not considered inspired, and its contents are represented within works that were.²³

²⁰ Darrell L. Bock, "Questions About Q," in Black and Beck (eds.), Rethinking, p. 47.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 47-49.

²² Blomberg, "The Synoptic Problem," p. 29.

²³ Ibid.

Postulating the existence of a Q document as a source for non-Markan material certainly helps the Markan Priority case; but it does not answer every objection. One scenario that seriously undercuts Markan Priority and the need for Q is when Matthew and Luke agree with each other against Mark. In such situations, Matthew and Luke are showing not only independence from Mark, but suggesting that they know each other's work. If that is true, then there is no need for Q, and no need for Luke or Matthew to depend on Mark as a source.²⁴ While such agreements could be explained by Matthew and Luke independently modifying Mark's text in exactly the same way, such coincidence does not fit every case.²⁵ It is situations such as this that led some to develop the Two-Source Hypothesis (Mark and Q) even further, adding more hypothetical sources. Some theories involve the inclusion of another Mark, either an earlier edition of Mark used by Matthew and Luke in addition to Q ("proto-Mark") or a later edition of Mark used by the two other Gospel writers ("deutero-Mark").²⁶ In his Four-Source Hypothesis, Streeter invoked two theoretical sources, M and L, in addition to Mark and Q. These represent documentary sources for material unique to Matthew ("M") and material unique to Luke ("L").²⁷

²⁴ Sanders and Davies, p. 67.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 72. Sanders and Davies give the example of Mark's use of the word κράββατον in the story of the healing of the paralytic (Matthew 9:1-8; Mark 2:1:12; Luke 5:17-26). Matthew and Luke appear to prefer the word κλίνη (or κλινίδιον, a diminutive form of κλίνη which Luke uses in verse 24). Advocates of the Two-Source Hypothesis would need to explain how Matthew and Luke independently insert κλίνη where Mark has no equivalent (Matthew 9:2 and Luke 5:18) and coincidentally have no equivalent where Mark uses κράββατον (Mark 2:9). Further, where Mark uses κράββατον in 2:12, both Matthew and Luke appear to change this to κλίνη (Luke uses κλινίδιον). Sanders and Davies argue that coincidence may answer such changes occasionally, but this many times within the same pericope within a few verses might be asking too much of coincidence.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

The attempt to identify sources behind the Gospel accounts is known as Source Criticism, and is an integral aspect of the Two-/Four-Source Hypothesis. Allied to this are the methodologies known as Form Criticism, and Redaction Criticism. Form Criticism seeks to isolate pericopes from their context in the Gospel narratives, identify their “form,” and then having studied the use of this form in other literature and elsewhere in the Synoptics, attempts to discern the original context of the pericope in the life of the church. Form critics hope this approach will first provide information about the history of the community from which the material came, and second that it will in turn provide authentic information about Jesus.²⁸ Examples of “forms” include miracle stories, parables, “controversy dialogs” in which Jesus responds to a challenge put to Him by an opponent, or “didactic dialogs” in which Jesus taught on a particular topic. Possible origins of these pericopes would be the need to have an apologetic from the lips of Christ regarding a particular practice, which would give rise to the “controversy dialogs,” or the need to instruct the church regarding particular practices.²⁹ Certain basic forms were thought to be identifiable, however as Sanders and Davies admit, form critics could not agree among themselves regarding the identification of forms.³⁰

Redaction Criticism tries to discern the theological and pastoral concerns that lie behind the way in which passages in the Gospels are utilized. It is assumed that the Gospel accounts are the work of an editor, or redactor, who has shaped the material to suit the need of the community for which his work is intended. By uncovering the issues

²⁷ Osborne and Williams, “The Case for the Markan Priority View of Gospel Origins,” p. 74.

²⁸ Sanders and Davies, p. 123.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

behind the accounts, one can learn more about that particular church at that moment in history. As Sanders and Davies put it, “Form criticism highlights what is general and typical in the history of tradition, redaction criticism what is specific—to a time, a place and an individual.”³¹

It would be profitable at this point to note some underlying assumptions that need to be stated if they are not clear already with regard to the Markan Priority view. First, there appears to be a reluctance to consider Matthew and Luke as more than redactors—editors of sources, or compilers of stories, as opposed to authoritative sources in their own right. The traditional ascriptions of the Gospels were to two eyewitnesses (Matthew and John), and two who were close to eyewitnesses and could draw from first-hand accounts (Mark from Peter, and Luke from Paul). Non-Christian scholars are far more ready to dispense with such views and regard the Gospels as products of later Christian communities.³² Evangelical scholars are less willing to take that view, and try to balance the evidence for Markan Priority with a high view of the integrity of the Gospel accounts.³³ However, as this author will argue below, those that originally formulated this viewpoint did not do so from evangelical presuppositions, so one is fighting against the natural thrust of the argument to maintain an evangelical spin on the evidence this view sets forth.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 135-136.

³¹ Ibid., p. 203.

³² See *ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

³³ Craig Blomberg, for example, suggests that the M document could actually simply refer to “Memory”—i.e., Matthew’s own unique recollections of events. It is, of course, good that one who claims an evangelical stance would recognize that Matthew could be an eyewitness to the stories unique to his account. However the fact that Blomberg says “if Matthew was written by the apostle by that name” comes

This view also assumes the presence of redaction activity within the Gospels, sees doctrinal development between the Gospels, and assumes the background to the Gospels has more to do with the “life situation” (*sitz im leben*) of the later church than the actual historical circumstances at the time of Christ. These assumptions tend to lead Two- and Four-Source theorists to date the Gospels as late as possible. Keener, for example, can do no better than to say that the Apostle was “at least associated with the some stage of the production of this Gospel or the tradition on which it depends.” Since he cannot place the writing of the Gospel in the hands of the Apostle himself, he is able to propose a late 70’s date based on perceived church situations reflected in the Gospel narrative (e.g., the engagement with Pharisaism and rabbinic Judaism which only came to prominence after 70 A.D.).³⁴

The majority of New Testament scholars today favor one of these views (or a variation of them), all of which are based on the premise of dependency between one or more of the Gospel writers. There is another perspective, however, that rejects the notion of dependency: the Independence View.

As suggested by the name, the Independence View regards each of the three Synoptic Gospels as having been written independently of one another. Historically, this view—or a variation of it—was the dominant view until the eighteenth century and the rise of the dependency positions. The Independence View gives a lot of weight to the testimonies of Papias, Clement, and other early church writers to the authorship of the

across as an unnecessary concession to an unverifiable viewpoint contradicted by the testimony of early church writers (as will be argued later). See Blomberg, “The Synoptic Problem,” p. 29.

³⁴ Craig S. Keener, Matthew (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), pp. 32-33.

Gospels. It particularly sees from these writers evidence for the order in which the Gospels were written. Irenaeus testifies 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, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand 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. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.³⁵

Irenaeus, writing around 185, clearly sets forth here the traditional view of the identity of the Gospel writers. He also hints at, but does not clearly state, the order in which these works were written. It is possible that he did not have a particular order in mind, although the reference to John clearly indicates that his was subsequent to the others. At the most, one can say that either Irenaeus viewed this as the order of the Gospels, or he saw the Synoptics as being written around the same time, with John being written a little while after. Of course, Irenaeus' point in this passage is not to set forth the order of the Gospels, but to assert the fact that the testimony of the gospel message contained in each book comes from the preaching and teaching of the Apostles who were gifted to preach such a message. Irenaeus is refuting the claim of heretics who seek to "improve" upon the writings of the Apostles. The Twelve were empowered by God to preach the fullness of truth, and this is what was set forth in the Gospels: Matthew wrote his own account while Mark recorded that which Peter had preached in Rome. Luke did

³⁵ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 3.1.

the same with Paul's preaching, and John wrote in Ephesus as one who had rested upon Christ's breast, stressing the intimacy of this Apostle to the Subject of his work.

The earlier account of Papias (c. 100), recorded by the church historian Eusebius, supports Irenaeus' assertions regarding the authorship of the Gospels:

And the presbyter said this. Mark having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatsoever he remembered. It was not, however, in exact order that he related the sayings or deeds of Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor accompanied Him. But afterwards, as I said, he accompanied Peter, who accommodated his instructions to the necessities [of his hearers], but with no intention of giving a regular narrative of the Lord's sayings. Wherefore Mark made no mistake in thus writing some things as he remembered them. For of one thing he took especial care, not to omit anything he had heard, and not to put anything fictitious into the statements. [This is what is related by Papias regarding Mark; but with regard to Matthew he has made the following statements]: Matthew put together the oracles [of the Lord] in the Hebrew language, and each one interpreted them as best he could.³⁶

Papias confirms that Mark wrote what he remembered of Peter's preaching and teaching, and Matthew originally wrote in Hebrew "the oracles," or the λόγια, of the Lord.

There are some points about Papias' statement that are of interest. First, he is sure to state that Mark was writing from Peter's memory things that Christ had said or done, but was not concerned about making certain it was an ordered account (cf. Luke 1:3, where the concern of Luke was to write ἀκριβῶς καθεξῆς σοι γράψαι, "to write for you carefully successively [i.e., in order]."). Second, not only that Matthew wrote in the Hebrew language, but that he wrote λόγια. Various theories exist with regard to this statement:³⁷ that it refers to an independent "sayings" collection (like the Gospel of Thomas), which would, of course, support the existence of a "Q" document. Another

³⁶ Papias, Fragments, VI, quoted in Eusebius, Church History, 3.39.

theory is that this refers to a collection of Old Testament proof texts compiled by Matthew for use in apologetic encounters. Some regard Papias statement regarding Matthew as simply incorrect: there was no Hebrew version, and Papias was perhaps thinking of something else written by Matthew that is no longer extant. Others believe Papias is referring to the canonical Greek Matthew, understanding Ἐβραϊδί διαλέκτω to mean “in the Hebrew style,” as opposed to “in the Hebrew language,” meaning perhaps a Semitic way of presenting Christ’s Messiahship. The view that is favored by Thomas and Farnell, perhaps two of the more vocal proponents of the Independence View today, is that this refers to an early edition of Matthew’s Gospel. According to Thomas and Farnell, Matthew composed an Aramaic version of his Gospel first, and this became the model for his Greek version which he composed soon after, incorporating most if not all of his earlier work translated into Greek.

Reference was made earlier to Clement of Alexandria who stated that the Gospels with genealogies were composed first.³⁸ This earliest reference to a sequence of writing is interesting because it places Mark third in line, and also because it does not explicitly state whether Matthew or Luke was first. Indeed, all one can be sure of from Clement’s testimony is that Mark was third and John fourth. Again, he supports the idea of Mark writing according to Peter’s preaching.

It is notable that while each of these, and other, early church writers speak of the circumstances around the composition of each of the Gospels, not one even hints at there being any collusion between Gospel writers. They speak of the Gospels as if they were

³⁷ The following is from Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, “The Synoptic Gospels in the Ancient Church,” in Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell (eds.), *The Jesus Crisis*, pp. 39-46.

written independently of each other. The only possible exception to this is Augustine, who in his work The Harmony of the Gospels seems to indicate that the Gospel writers knew each other's work:

Of these four, it is true, only Matthew is reckoned to have written in the Hebrew language; the others in Greek. And however they may appear to have kept each of them a certain order of narration proper to himself, this certainly is not to be taken as if each individual writer chose to write in ignorance of what his predecessor had done, or left out as matters about which there was no information things which another nevertheless is discovered to have recorded. But the fact is, that just as they received each of them the gift of inspiration, they abstained from adding to their several labours any superfluous conjoint compositions.³⁹

While Augustine appears to be saying that each writer did not write “in ignorance of what his predecessor had done,” implying literary dependence, Thomas and Farnell argue that the passage is in fact supporting literary *independence*:

A careful review of Augustine's words cited above, however, reveals that he said that the three wrote by virtue of “the gift of inspiration” and “abstained from adding to their several labors any superfluous conjoint compositions.” In other words, they did not copy the works of an earlier writer, which action would have made someone's work superfluous. They rather worked independently under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁰

They admit that Augustine's later words that Mark followed Matthew closely “and looks like his attendant and supervisor” are a puzzling in this regard, however Augustine could simply be noting what appeared to be the case, not what actually was the situation.

Thomas and Farnell think Augustine meant Mark followed Matthew with regard to

³⁸ Eusebius, Church History, 6.14.

³⁹ Augustine, The Harmony of the Gospels, 1.2.4.

choice of subject matter, or that he was a friend of Matthew's, neither of which requires literary dependence.⁴¹ Augustine goes on to note the fact that there is not much within Mark that is unique to that Gospel, but this alone does not prove literary dependence, and Augustine does not appear to be making that case.

The fact that an Independence position can be seen as the assumed position of the church from the earliest times up until the Enlightenment is of significance to Independence advocates. Indeed, the fact that later dependence theories grew up within the environment of skeptical, post-Enlightenment historical criticism is a strike against such theories. Independence theorists point out that dependence views were originally set forth in an atmosphere of hostility to the Christian faith and Biblical inerrancy.⁴² Indeed, for the evangelical, one of the main advantages of the Independence View set forth by its advocates is that it is most consistent with evangelical presuppositions of Biblical inerrancy, and early dating of the Gospels. There are many evangelicals that hold to dependency views (particularly that of Markan Priority and the various critical methods that go with it) and claim to maintain a high view of Scripture,⁴³ yet it is this very influence of the historical-critical method in evangelical scholarship that prompted Thomas and Farnell to write The Jesus Crisis. According to them, this "crisis" has

⁴⁰ Thomas and Farnell, "The Synoptic Gospels in the Ancient Church," p. 62.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 63.

⁴² F. David Farnell, "The Case for the Independence View of Gospel Origins," in Robert L. Thomas (ed.), Three Views, pp. 251-255.

⁴³ Farnell names a number of them in his above-cited article, for example George Ladd, and Scot McKnight. Grant R. Osborne and Matthew C. Williams contribute the Two-/Four-Source position paper in the same book, and Craig L. Blomberg and Darrell L. Bock identify themselves with the historical-critical method in their contributions to Black and Beck (eds.), Rethinking the Synoptic Problem.

transpired because “evangelicals, the expected defenders of ‘Gospel truth,’ have yielded important ground to enemies of the truth.”⁴⁴

How does the Independence View explain the phenomena of the Synoptic Gospels? Simply stated, by proposing that the Gospels were based on eyewitness accounts that formed a body of tradition upon which that they drew, which explains how there can be similar accounts of events but with different wording. The Independence View also accounts for the activity of the Holy Spirit to aid the memories of the inspired writers to record not only that which the Lord wanted to be recorded, but to recall exactly what was said. Memorization of material in the first century was far superior to that which is practiced today, and with divine assistance it was even more so. It is possible that there were also brief written accounts that were used to accompany the oral testimony of witnesses, perhaps even notes taken by those who followed Jesus. These would also help to explain verbal similarities. Similarity in the sequence of Gospel material can be explained by the fact of historical sequence—that is, the events recorded tend to follow the sequence of events as they actually happened historically. It is only natural to expect, therefore, that these accounts would be recorded in the same sequence by different authors. It cannot be denied, either, that Matthew, Mark, and Luke probably knew each other and had perhaps even exchanged information and contacts at some point.⁴⁵

An Assessment of the Views

⁴⁴ Thomas and Farnell, The Jesus Crisis, p. 27.

The most compelling evidence in favor of a dependency view is the fact that a number of Synoptic accounts show striking verbal agreement between two or more of the Gospels. As noted above, the foundational principle of the dependence positions is that such agreement needs to be explained, and the level of verbal agreement naturally lends itself to the idea that the Gospel writers used each other's work.

On the other hand, the Independence View would highlight the striking differences between the Synoptics, that if, for example, Matthew was using Mark, why would he leave out certain details, or why would Matthew and Luke contain material that Mark did not have? There are a number of issues pertaining not only to the fact of the Synoptic parallels, but also to the nature of writing and transmission of the Gospels raised by the various theories discussed above that need to be addressed.

The fact of verbal similarity between the Synoptics cannot simply be dismissed. Whichever view one adopts, it must be able to account for not only similarity in language, but also the fact that the exact same wording is used by at least two Gospel writers on a number of occasions.⁴⁶ Clearly, the dependence views attribute this similarity to one Gospel writer copying from another. William Farmer believes one cannot deny the premise that "Mark throughout almost the whole extent of his Gospel appears to be working closely with texts of Matthew and Luke before him."⁴⁷ But how realistic is this scenario? Scot McKnight points to studies that have been done that

⁴⁵ The preceding was drawn from Farnell, "The Case for the Independence View of Gospel Origins," pp. 273-291.

⁴⁶ For example, Matthew 3:8-9 and Luke 3:8; Matthew 7:3 and Luke 8:41; Matthew 12:43 and Luke 11:24;

⁴⁷ William R. Farmer, "The Case for the Two-Gospel Hypothesis," in Black and Beck (eds.), Rethinking, p. 100

describe not only how ancients would have written books, but also how they would have utilized sources. He sums up their findings by stating that the ancient writer would read his sources, and then determine the one he will use as his main source with supplementation from the others. In practical terms, this would be done by the writer reading a passage from his source, setting it down, and re-writing from memory what he had just read. McKnight sees evidence of this methodology in the use of Mark by Matthew.⁴⁸ Bruce Metzger notes with regard to copying manuscripts that it was a tiring process, since in those days scribes did not sit at desks while writing.

Both literary and artistic evidence suggests that until the early Middle Ages it was customary for scribes either to stand (while making brief notes), or to sit on a stool or a bench (or even the ground), holding their scroll or codex on their knees. It goes without saying that such a posture was more tiring than sitting at a desk or writing-table—though the latter must have been tiring enough to scribes occupied six hours a day month after month.⁴⁹

John Wenham adds to this picture by describing how the ancient scribe would have copied multiple manuscripts:

To consult more than one scroll an author would presumably have had to spread them out on such a table or the floor and either crawl around on hands and knees or else repeatedly crouch down and stand up again, looking at first one and then another. He could either make notes or commit what he read to memory before writing the matter up on a sheet of papyrus or vellum, or, possibly, sitting down and transferring it direct to his new scroll. Finding the place, unless he was prepared seriously to deface his scrolls, would be difficult... In a community

⁴⁸ Scot McKnight, "A Generation Who Knew Not Streeter: The Case for Markan Priority," in Black and Beck (eds.), *Rethinking*, p. 74.

⁴⁹ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* 3rd ed. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 16-17.

where most had small, dark, crowded homes, finding a room suitable for the task, and reasonably free from distractions, would not be easy.⁵⁰

A point that needs to be raised in discussions of the composition of the Synoptics is the fact that the period in which these Gospels were composed—whether one holds to a late or an early dating—was well within the time frame when the church was not a *religio licita*. In other words, Christians lived under threat of persecution. If one adds this pressure to the task of not only copying manuscripts, but editing and re-working texts (as the dependency theories suggest), it becomes less credible that this kind of activity took place. One might argue that Luke 1:1-4 testifies to the fact that a Christian was able to pool sources to compile a Gospel, but this assumes a particular view of Luke's use of sources as described in that passage. It is certainly the case that Luke may have used written sources as well as oral sources, but there is no reason to suggest that he drew heavily from any one of them, depended on any of them, or that any of them was one of the other two Synoptic Gospels. It is equally possible he talked to eyewitnesses, consulted various written sources, and then wrote his work based on all the information he had gleaned.⁵¹

It is interesting to note that many of the cases where precise verbal similarity occurs between the Gospels are on occasions where Jesus speaks. Osborne and Williams provide two notable examples of this: Matthew 11:21-23a alongside Luke 10:13-15 (“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you Bethsaida!”), and Matthew 3:7b-10 alongside Luke

⁵⁰ John Wenham, Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem (London, England: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991), p. 205.

⁵¹ See Paul W. Felix, “Literary Dependence and Luke's Prologue,” in Thomas and Farnell (eds.), The Jesus Crisis, pp. 271-288, particularly pp. 281-283.

3:7b-9 (“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”).

They assign these passages to Q, convinced their similarity must be due to the Evangelists using a common written source.⁵² Yet if one considers the impact these sayings would have had on their original audience, coming from the lips of Jesus with the power and authority His proclamations were known to have (Mark 1:22), how could they be anything but memorable? Many of Jesus’ sayings could be regarded as memorable in the same way. The more people that would have heard the sayings, the more likelihood they would have been passed on with accuracy. Osborne and Williams suggest the Holy Spirit could have guided the Evangelists to use available Gospels as sources.⁵³ But the Holy Spirit could just as easily have superintended the hearing of Jesus’ words and ensured their accurate transmission within the Gospel accounts.⁵⁴

Not all of the accounts are *verbatim* the same. A theory of Synoptic origins must account for these differences as well as the similarities. Dependence theories tend to treat these differences as changes made by one Gospel writer for one reason or another. This is particularly the case with the Markan Priority views, where it is usually Matthew making changes to Mark’s Gospel for stylistic reasons, or to resolve apparent difficulties.⁵⁵ Indeed, one of the reasons given in support of Markan priority is that his Gospel contains difficult sayings that later writers had to resolve. For example, in Mark

⁵² Osborne and Williams, “The Case for the Markan Priority View of Gospel Origins,” in Robert L. Thomas (ed.), Three Views, pp. 69-70. They note that one could argue for the two Gospel writers drawing from an oral tradition since these are sayings of Jesus, but they are clearly not convinced this would happen.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵⁴ See Farnell, “The Case for the Independence View of Gospel Origins,” in Robert L. Thomas (ed.), Three Views, p. 292.

6:5, the text says that Jesus “could do no miracle there except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them.” The apparent impotence of the Lord in the face of the unbelief of those from His home town must have disturbed Matthew since he seems to have changed this to “He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief” (Matthew 13:58). Another passage that appears to have been changed to alleviate potential theological issues is Mark 10:17-18, where the Rich Young Ruler approaches Jesus, calling Him “Good Teacher.” Jesus’ response is “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.” Is Jesus denying His sinlessness? Matthew’s version of the story has the Rich Young Ruler simply refer to Jesus as “Teacher” and ask what good thing he must do to attain eternal life. Jesus responds by saying “Why are you asking me about what is good?” Whether or not Mark intended to stir theological controversy, it looks as if Matthew stepped in and resolved the “difficulty.”

There are some very important issues associated with this approach to the Gospel accounts. First, Markan Priority regards Mark’s style as evidence that Mark was written first. Not only is this seen in the fact that it contains “difficult” sayings that needed to be resolved, but in Mark’s inelegant use of the Greek language. One example of this is in the story of the healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:1-12; Matthew 9:1-8; Luke 5:17-26). Mark uses the term κράββατον for the pallet upon which the paralytic was carried. Matthew and Luke both prefer κλίνη or κλινίδιον, a more sophisticated term to use.⁵⁶ Another example is in Mark 1:32, the story of the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law. Mark says Ὁψίας δὲ γενομένης, ὅτε ἔδου ὁ ἥλιος, “when evening came, when the sun had

⁵⁵ Osborne and Williams, “The Case for the Markan Priority View of Gospel Origins,” p. 42.

⁵⁶ Sanders and Davies, p. 72.

set,” which as appears to be a redundancy. Matthew seems to take the former part of the phrase, Ὀψίας δὲ γενομένης (8:16), while Luke takes the latter part, Δύνοντος δὲ τοῦ ἡλίου (4:40). Osborne and Williams point out that Mark has many such “redundancies” that they could be regarded as part of his style.⁵⁷

With regard to the “difficult” issues, the notion that these demonstrate the antiquity of a text is an idea borrowed from Textual Criticism. One of the axioms of Textual Criticism is that when trying to determine which of a number of potential readings is original, usually the more “difficult” will be earlier since copyists are more likely to want to resolve problems in a text, not create them. In Synoptic studies, this translates over to the thought that a redactor would be more likely to resolve theological difficulties with a source, not introduce new ones. Hence, the document with the more glaring controversies is more likely to be original.⁵⁸

The problem with utilizing Text Critical principles to help solve the Synoptic Problem is that they are not dealing with the same kinds of data. With Textual Criticism, the critic is sifting through manuscripts to determine the original reading of a text. The Historical Critic is sifting through the documents at the end of the Text Critical process and determining which of the stories within those documents are secondary. The assumption of the Textual Critic⁵⁹ is that one of the potential readings is the original, and the object of the exercise is to identify it. The assumption of the Historical Critic is that

⁵⁷ Osborne and Williams, “The Case for the Markan Priority View of Gospel Origins,” p. 66.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 50-51.

⁵⁹ Bart Ehrman et al. notwithstanding.

the Gospel accounts contain errors and the object of the exercise is to find which account is the one from which the others drew their material.⁶⁰

Moreover, Textual Criticism can safely assume the documents in question are all scribal copies from other, perhaps earlier, documents. The Historical Critic is assuming this point when utilizing Text Critical principles to Synoptic study, when this point cannot be safely assumed. Matthew and Luke could have obtained their material from any number of sources, including personal eyewitness testimony (at least in Matthew's case). No matter how firmly one holds to dependency, one has to admit there is a greater possibility that the Gospels were composed independently than all the extant Greek New Testament manuscripts were written independently. The former is possible; the latter is not.

An issue with the Text Critical approach (which Textual Critics need to deal with, also) is the subjective nature of the term "difficult." Simply because a saying or an incident appears "difficult" for the modern reader, one should not assume that it was also difficult for the first century reader. Indeed, generations of Christians have been able to reconcile "difficult" passages of Scripture without resorting to Historical-Critical methodologies.

Changes of wording, especially when the words of Jesus are not being related, can simply be put down to a matter of style. Matthew and Luke's use of κλίνη/κλινίδιον does not require that they changed Mark's κράββατον; they may have both chosen to use the word they felt most appropriate. The fact they chose the same word may say more about

⁶⁰ F. David Farnell critiques the use of Textual Criticism in his "Independence Response to Chapter One," in Robert L. Thomas, Three Views, p. 120-121.

the fact they both shared a broader Greek vocabulary than Mark; or perhaps Mark's choice of word reflects the coarse Greek of a Galilean fisherman—a source that maybe neither Matthew nor Luke used. Also, Mark's style may well have been to use redundancies; this was neither Matthew nor Luke's style so one should not expect them to utilize redundancies regardless of whether or not they were copying Mark.

Consideration must also be given to the fact that there are far fewer points of verbatim agreement between even two of the Gospels than there are points of disagreement.⁶¹ The Historical Critic would view these areas of disagreement as points at which one Gospel writer decided to change what was said, or to insert material by way of improvement or explanation, or to remove something he deemed unnecessary.⁶² It is one of the advantages of an Independence position that such conclusions become unnecessary. Without doubt, the Gospel writers used sources, and so it is not inconceivable that similarities with accounts arose out of the fact that Gospel writers may have utilized the same source at some point (for example, while Peter appears to have been Mark's main source, it is not unreasonable to think that Matthew might have talked with Peter as well as drawing from his own personal experience). As previously noted

⁶¹ See Thomas R. Edgar, "Source Criticism: The Two-Source Theory," in Thomas and Farnell (eds.), *The Jesus Crisis*, pp. 139-40. Edgar makes the very important distinction between "exact agreement" and "vague generalities." It seems obvious to this writer that one can only truly claim collusion if the passages in question utilize the same vocabulary, grammatical forms, and word order. Otherwise, similarity could just as easily be explained by recalling oral sources from memory.

⁶² Osborne and Williams give examples of where Matthew "improved" Mark by changing, for example, the action of the paralytic so it matches with Jesus' command (Matthew 9:2-7 and Mark 2:2-13), or where Matthew "added" a phrase to Mark's narrative in Mark 12:27 to indicate the surprise of the crowd (Matthew 22:33). See Osborne and Williams, "The Case for the Markan Priority View of Gospel Origins," pp. 53-58. Matthew 8:16 and Luke 4:40 have already been cited as examples where supposedly "unnecessary" words were "removed" from Mark 1:32.

many of Jesus' sayings were memorable and lent themselves to easy memorization as a result of their vivid and, perhaps to the people of that time, off-beat character.

One must also remember that Jesus was an itinerate preacher whose ministry lasted about three years. The Gospels provide a snapshot of that ministry condensed into four relatively short volumes. It is only reasonable to expect that during His three year ministry He would have related similar stories and sayings to different groups of people in different contexts. Jesus Himself might have adapted His own sayings and stories to accommodate the audience at that time. Hence, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-8) and the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17-49) could have been two separate discourses delivered on different occasions, but relating similar material.

When the Gospel writers record the words used by Jesus, or others, the fact that the wording is not always the same could be due to the fact that each Gospel writer is recording different parts of the conversation. This is where the Evangelical Christian should prefer the age-old technique of harmonization over the modern, skeptical assumption of redaction. Instead of seeing Matthew's version of the Rich Young Ruler story as a correction of Mark's, it is possible to view Matthew and Mark as containing two parts of the same conversation that can be harmonized into a single whole:

[A] more probable explanation is that when the ruler rushed up to Jesus and knelt, he stated his question more than once, a possibility that Mark hints at by his use of the imperfect tense for the Greek verb introducing the question... Coming with haste, the ruler may have started the conversation as follows: "Teacher, good teacher, by doing what will I inherit eternal life? I mean, what should I do in order to inherit eternal life?"⁶³

⁶³ Kelly Osborne, "Impact of Historical Criticism on Gospel Interpretation," in Thomas and Farnell (eds.), The Jesus Crisis, p. 297.

Such a solution may, at first, seem contrived, but it does have a foundation in both the way people speak, and the way speech is often reported (i.e., either portions of what someone said is related, or the most salient parts of that speech). As for Jesus' response, Kelly Osborne follows the same methodology in stating that "of the two questions with which Jesus responded to him, 'why do you ask me about the good?' and 'why do you call me good?' Matthew records only the first while Mark and Luke give only the second."⁶⁴

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this survey of solutions to the Synoptic Problem is the fact that there are many advocates of the Historical-Critical position (which mainly encompasses the Markan Priority or Two-/Four-Source Hypothesis view) who claim also to be Evangelical Christians with a high view of Scripture:

Bock, along with the writers of the other two chapters in this volume, do not accept the liberal presuppositions of the dependency theory. Such writers hold to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who oversaw the entire writing process such as to ensure the accuracy of the final product.⁶⁵

It is all very well to make statements such as this, but the real test comes when the scholar puts his perspective into practice. In other words, is this high view of Scripture and the superintendence of the Holy Spirit over the accuracy of the Evangelists' work evident in the conclusions these scholars reach? Osborne and Williams claim that the environment within which the tools were developed does not matter, it is how those tools

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 299.

are used that counts. Yet this is, frankly, a very naïve approach. One can use a flat-head screwdriver for a number of different purposes, but the one for which it was designed is the one it does best. The arguments behind the Historical-Critical approach were developed by skeptics to support an anti-supernaturalistic view of Scripture, reducing it to a fallible work, and undermining its authority.⁶⁶

Osborne and Williams assert that the Gospels (note the plural—all four Gospels) were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and utilized sources according to His guidance.⁶⁷ Yet in a previous section, they list a number of passages where they believe Matthew “corrected,” “simplified,” or for some reason “changed” the text of Mark’s Gospel. If Mark’s Gospel was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, why would Matthew make changes? Is Matthew presuming to “correct” a work that is inspired of God? If so, the implication of that would be that God inspired Mark to write error that He later needed to inspire Matthew to correct.

Craig Blomberg accounts for variations in the words ascribed to Jesus and others in the Gospel narratives as due to the Evangelists’ freedom to paraphrase:

[T]he freedom to paraphrase which the evangelists exhibit may not be consistent with modern preoccupations with word-for-word citation but it certainly does not distort the truth of the gospel narratives. Even today in informal conversation substantial paraphrases of another’s speech are accepted as faithful to its original meaning, so there is no reason to object to the fact that the ancient world permitted a similar flexibility with more formal reports. At any rate the overall

⁶⁵ Osborne and Williams, “Markan Priority Response to Chapter Three,” in Thomas (ed.), Three Views, p. 314.

⁶⁶ See F. David Farnell, “Philosophical and Theological Bent of Historical Criticism,” in Thomas and Farnell (eds.), The Jesus Crisis, pp. 85-131.

⁶⁷ Osborne and Williams, “The Case for the Markan Priority View of Gospel Origins,” p. 75.

historicity of the gospel events is hardly called into question by these minor variations in wording.⁶⁸

The problem with Blomberg's assessment is that, according to Evangelicals, the Gospels are inerrant, and inspired. If Mark says Jesus said "why do you call me good?" then Matthew is not merely paraphrasing when he says that Jesus said "why do you ask me about what is good?" Either one of these is in error, or they must be harmonized. Certainly, if Mark's account of Jesus' questioning prior to His crucifixion was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, by what authority would Luke have "rewritten" Mark to distinguish more clearly the issues at stake in the interrogation"?⁶⁹ Luke might well have written his own independent account based on his own research. But the idea that God the Holy Spirit would inspire one Gospel writer to change the work He inspired another Gospel writer to compose seems to contradict concepts of God's sovereignty, immutability, and infallibility. Norman Geisler has expressed his concern for the influence of anti-Christian presuppositions within Christian scholarship:

It has been my experience in evangelical circles that godly scholars, unaware of the nature and implications of their scholarly research, sometimes absorb into their thinking philosophical presuppositions that are antithetical to the historical Christian position on Scripture. The results of their accepting unchristian assumptions show up only gradually in their own teaching and writing. Often these results are discovered first by students and then later by other scholars. Tragically, the person who has unwittingly bought into these presuppositions is often the last to realize it. When the fact does come to his awareness, there is the perennial temptation, not always resisted, to rewrite evangelical history to fit his new beliefs about Scripture.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Craig L. Blomberg, The Historical Reliability of the Gospels (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1987), pp. 126-127.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

One final issue to address, though there are many more that could be addressed, is that of *ipsissima vox* versus *ipsissima verba*. In other words, do the Gospels record the very voice of Christ (or anyone else, for that matter), or do the Gospel writers relate the very words of Christ? Do the speeches in the Gospel provide a sense of what was said, or do they document the actual words used? While this is an issue of great relevance to the doctrine of inerrancy, it clearly has significance for the Synoptic issue too. Indeed, it is to this very issue that Blomberg alluded in the above quotation. In essence, from the perspective of a number of Evangelicals, it does not matter that the Gospel writers may have altered Christ's words to fit their circumstance as long as the general thrust and the main idea of what He was saying is retained.⁷¹

Defenders of the compatibility of the *ipsissima vox* with a high view of Scripture usually appeal to arguments such as historical precedent, translation from Aramaic to Greek, and the fact that Jesus' speeches were probably originally longer than those recorded in the Gospels.⁷² With regard to historical precedent, advocates quote the Greek historian Thucydides whose History of the Peloponnesian War makes much use of

⁷⁰ Norman Geisler, "Philosophical Presuppositions of Biblical Errancy," in Norman Geisler (ed.), Inerrancy (Grand Rapids, Mi: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), p. 308.

⁷¹ See, for example, Grant R. Osborne, "Historical Criticism and the Evangelical," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 42 (June 1999): 206: "As stated above, a paraphrase of Jesus' saying is *ipsissima vox* and just as historically viable as *ipsissima verba*."

⁷² This is the essence of Darrell Bock's case for *Ipsissima Vox* presented in his article "The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex," in Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (eds.), Jesus Under Fire (Grand Rapids, Mi: Zondervan, 1995), quoted both by Robert L. Thomas, "Impact of Historical Criticism on Theology and Apologetics," in Thomas and Farnell (eds.), The Jesus Crisis, pp. 367-372; and Donald E. Green, "Evangelicals and *Ipsissima Vox*," The Master's Seminary Journal 12 (Spring 2001).

speeches. In his introduction to this work, Thucydides explains his approach to these speeches:

I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation.⁷³

If paraphrase was good enough for a respected Greek historian like Thucydides, then it must have been acceptable to the Gospel writers. However, as Donald Green has shown, historians are not convinced that Thucydides' example was the ancient rule, and that the great historian himself may not have lived up to his own principle of recording the essence of what was said. The general gist of the speech was not always adhered to and the historian's imagination was often employed.⁷⁴ This kind of standard would be unacceptable for a work purporting to be Scripture.

Further, Green demonstrates that Jewish historiography was much more concerned with accuracy. Josephus had a low regard for Greek histories, and the trend within Judaism was to report a person's views in their own words. It is far more likely that the early Christians would have looked more to the example of historians like Josephus than those like Thucydides.⁷⁵

⁷³ Thucydides, The History of the Peloponnesian War reprint (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 47.

⁷⁴ Green, "Evangelicals and *Ipsissima Vox*," pp. 53-56.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-60. This is a very brief summary of Green's conclusion. The reader is encouraged to read the entire paper for the full force of his argumentation: <http://www.tmsj.edu/tmsj/tmsj12d.pdf>.

Another reason proposed to explain why the Gospel writers may have paraphrased speeches is the suggestion that Jesus probably spoke a dialect of Aramaic, and this would have to be translated into Greek. Naturally, a Greek translation is not going to represent the very words of Christ, but will be an interpretation of those words into Greek. Thomas, however, challenges the assumption that Jesus must have only spoken Aramaic. Contemporary research shows that Greek was widespread among first century Jews, and there is little doubt that Jesus Himself would have known and spoken the language. It was the *lingua franca* of the Roman Empire, and while early church writers mention an initial Aramaic version of Matthew (see above), all the earliest manuscripts and papyrus fragments extant of the Gospels are in Greek.⁷⁶ This is not to say Jesus did not speak Aramaic, or some form of Semitic language, but that Jesus' words have existed on paper in Greek from the earliest time, and it is certainly plausible that they originated from His mouth in that language.

It is certainly true that over a three year ministry, Jesus would have said much more than is recorded in the Gospel accounts. John himself notes the enormity of material that could be published if everything that Jesus did was recorded (John 21:25). However, this does not mean that the Gospel writers had to resort to paraphrasing or condensing long speeches into much smaller ones. There is no evidence from the Gospel records that this happened. It has already been demonstrated how different Evangelists could have reported different parts of the same speech according to their need. The resulting harmonization, however, need not be considered the sum total of everything that was said on that occasion. For all the modern reader knows, Jesus might have spoken

with the Rich Young Ruler for a couple of minutes; all that the reader needs to know of that speech, though, is what the Holy Spirit directed the Gospel writers to record.

Ipsissima verba does not claim that the Gospel writers recorded every word that Jesus spoke. It simply claims that the words of Jesus, the disciples, Pilate, and whoever else's speech the Gospels quote were words those people actually spoke. They may not be *all* the words spoken in that instance, but they were their own words.

Having discussed the Synoptic Problem and the main solutions proposed, the final part of this paper will present a case study to show how the various approaches actually operate.

Case Study: The Cursing of the Fig Tree

This incident in the Gospel narratives is interesting for at least two reasons. First, it is one that is often flagged as “difficult,” since Jesus appears to use his power to take revenge on a fig tree for not being able to satisfy His hunger. Jesus' action toward the fig tree seems very out-of-character.⁷⁷ Also there is an apparent Lukan parallel which is actually recorded as a parable, not a historical incident. This raises the question whether the fig tree incident recorded by Matthew and Luke was influenced by the parable, or the parable was Luke's way of presenting the story without damaging Jesus' character, or whether the historical incident and the parable are unrelated.

As is common practice with Synoptic studies, the three passages will be presented in their original Greek in their canonical order, since any similarities or differences must

⁷⁶ Thomas, “Impact of Historical Criticism on Theology and Apologetics,” p. 368.

be noted in the source language. This brief study will then analyze the passages to determine which Synoptic solution best explains the similarities and differences.

Matthew 21:18-22

18 Πρωὶ δὲ ἐπανάγων εἰς τὴν πόλιν ἐπείνασεν. 19 καὶ ἰδὼν συκὴν μίαν ἐπὶ τῆς ὁδοῦ ἦλθεν ἐπ’ αὐτὴν καὶ οὐδὲν εὔρεν ἐν αὐτῇ εἰ μὴ φύλλα μόνον, καὶ λέγει αὐτῇ· μηκέτι ἐκ σοῦ καρπὸς γένηται εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα. καὶ ἐξηράνθη παραχρῆμα ἡ συκὴ. 20 Καὶ ἰδόντες οἱ μαθηταὶ ἐθαύμασαν λέγοντες· πῶς παραχρῆμα ἐξηράνθη ἡ συκὴ; 21 ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν καὶ μὴ διακριθῆτε, οὐ μόνον τὸ τῆς συκῆς ποιήσετε, ἀλλὰ κἂν τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ εἴπητε· ἄρθητι καὶ βλήθητι εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν, γενήσεται. 22 καὶ πάντα ὅσα ἂν αἰτήσητε ἐν τῇ προσευχῇ πιστεύοντες λήμψεσθε.

Mark 11:12-14; 20-25

12 Καὶ τῇ ἐπαύριον ἐξεληθόντων αὐτῶν ἀπὸ Βηθανίας ἐπείνασεν. 13 καὶ ἰδὼν συκὴν ἀπὸ μακρόθεν ἔχουσαν φύλλα ἦλθεν, εἰ ἄρα τι εὐρήσει ἐν αὐτῇ, καὶ ἐλθὼν ἐπ’ αὐτὴν οὐδὲν εὔρεν εἰ μὴ φύλλα· ὁ γὰρ καιρὸς οὐκ ἦν σύκων. 14 καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν αὐτῇ· μηκέτι εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα ἐκ σοῦ μηδεὶς καρπὸν φάγοι. καὶ ἤκουον οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ.

20 Καὶ παραπορευόμενοι πρωὶ εἶδον τὴν συκὴν ἐξηραμμένην ἐκ ριζῶν. 21 καὶ ἀναμνησθεὶς ὁ Πέτρος λέγει αὐτῷ· ῥαββί, ἴδε ἡ συκὴ ἣν κατηράσω ἐξηρανται. 22 καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγει αὐτοῖς· ἔχετε πίστιν θεοῦ. 23 ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ὅς ἂν εἴπῃ τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ· ἄρθητι καὶ βλήθητι εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν, καὶ μὴ διακριθῆ ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτοῦ ἀλλὰ πιστεύῃ ὅτι ὁ λαλεῖ γίνεται, ἔσται αὐτῷ. 24 διὰ τοῦτο λέγω ὑμῖν, πάντα ὅσα προσεύχεσθε καὶ αἰτεῖσθε, πιστεύετε ὅτι ἐλάβετε, καὶ ἔσται ὑμῖν. 25 Καὶ ὅταν στήκετε προσευχόμενοι, ἀφίετε εἴ τι ἔχετε κατὰ τινος, ἵνα καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς ἀφῆ ὑμῖν τὰ παραπτώματα ὑμῶν.

Luke 13:6-9

7 Ἐλεγεν δὲ ταύτην τὴν παραβολὴν· συκὴν εἶχέν τις πεφυτευμένην ἐν τῷ ἀμπελῶνι αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἦλθεν ζητῶν καρπὸν ἐν αὐτῇ καὶ οὐχ εὔρεν. 7 εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς τὸν ἀμπελουργόν· ἰδοὺ τρία ἔτη ἀφ’ οὗ ἔρχομαι ζητῶν καρπὸν ἐν τῇ συκῇ ταύτῃ καὶ οὐχ εὐρίσκω. ἔκκοψον [οὗν] αὐτήν, ἵνατί καὶ τὴν γῆν καταργεῖ; 8 ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς λέγει αὐτῷ· κύριε, ἄφες αὐτὴν καὶ τοῦτο τὸ ἔτος, ἕως ὅτου σκάψω περὶ αὐτὴν καὶ βάλω κόπρια, 9 κἂν μὲν ποιήσῃ καρπὸν εἰς τὸ μέλλον· εἰ δὲ μὴ γε, ἐκκόψεις αὐτήν.

⁷⁷ See, for example, Floyd V. Filson, *Matthew*, 2nd ed. (London, England: A & C Black, 1971), p. 225: “Jesus elsewhere used his power for unselfish, beneficent ends; to condemn a tree for not satisfying his hunger seems to reverse his attitude in iv.3f., and the spiritual purpose of the miracle is hard to see.”

Analysis

The context of both Matthew and Mark's accounts is Jesus entering Jerusalem. In the preceding verses, Jesus had sent two of his disciples to procure transportation for Him to ride into Jerusalem. In Matthew's account the disciples get a donkey and a colt (ὄνον καὶ πῶλον) which Jesus rides, in Mark it is just a colt (πῶλον),⁷⁸ and He rides into Jerusalem amid the adulation of the crowd. Matthew then continues his narrative with Jesus overturning the money-changers' tables before departing to Bethany. Mark simply notes that Jesus went to the temple and then left for Bethany with the Twelve; he records the cleansing of the temple after the following incident with the fig tree.⁷⁹ Craig Evans believes this to be evidence of Matthew "smoothing out" Mark's "bumpy chronology."⁸⁰ He summarizes the events as Mark tells it, with Jesus entering and leaving Jerusalem multiple times, something he feels Matthew "simplifies." It could be, however, that Evans is assuming first that Mark intended every aspect of his narrative to be understood

⁷⁸ The difference may not be due to a misunderstanding of Zechariah 9:9, but due to the fact that the colt upon which Jesus sat was, according to Mark, unbroken, and hence would traditionally be accompanied by its mother. Naturally, Matthew picks up on the fulfillment of prophecy, but it does not have to be regarded as contrived either by Matthew or by Jesus. The fact that Mark makes no mention of the donkey may simply be due to his lesser interest in Messianic prophecy fulfillment. See Donald A. Hagner, Matthew 14-28 (Dallas, Tx: Word Books, 1995), p. 594.

⁷⁹ Reconciling Mark's seeming placement of the Cleansing of the Temple the day following the Triumphal Entry with Matthew's placement of this event directly after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem appears to be a possible case where either Matthew or Mark are tampering with the sequence of events for effect, or one of them is simply mistaken. As discussed previously, the latter option is not consistent with a high view of Scripture, and the first should also be considered inconsistent with a view of Biblical inerrancy and integrity. Another alternative might be to note the lack of a temporal particle in the Greek of Mark 11:15 (Καὶ ἔρχονται εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα), which could mean this event might not be intended to follow sequentially from the preceding. However, the fact that in verse 12 they had just left Bethany, it would make sense for them to be arriving in Jerusalem in verse 15. It is perhaps best, given the paucity of data to go on, and the desire to honor the Biblical text, to regard this as a passage presented with a deliberately loose chronological anchoring. Mark did not give strong indications that the Cleansing of the Temple followed the Cursing of the Fig Tree, perhaps because he understood it to have happened broadly within that time-frame, but without being dogmatic when.

⁸⁰ Craig A. Evans, Mark 8:27-16:20 (Nashville, Tn: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), p. 149.

in strict chronological sequence. There is also the fact that neither Matthew nor Mark is attempting an exhaustive account of everything that occurred over the space of a couple of days. Editing out the many other things Jesus and His disciples may have done to focus on the most dramatic and salient things could indeed lead to a choppy narrative.

The next day, Jesus leaves Bethany for the city, sees a fig tree, and hoping to satisfy his hunger with its fruit approaches it, only to be disappointed. He pronounces a curse upon it, which causes the tree to wither. This event becomes an object lesson in faith for Jesus' disciples.

A comparison of the Matthean and Markan versions of the story shows a general agreement on the facts, but not much by way of verbal agreement. Matthew places the event "at first light," whereas Mark simply says "the next day." Matthew says that Jesus' hunger struck as they were returning to the city, for Mark it happened while they were going out from Bethany. Within these first few lines it is clear that the two accounts are saying the same thing but in different ways. The question that needs to be asked is whether this shows a dependence of one writer upon the other or two writers independently relating the same story.

Donald Hagner is convinced that Matthew is depending on Mark, saying this dependence is "clear" but then goes on to describe the way in which Matthew "takes considerable freedom with Mark's wording."⁸¹ Given the amount of variation, one has to wonder why Matthew would have bothered starting with Mark's account in the first place since he has virtually re-written it. Only if one presupposes that Matthew did not know of this event aside from reading it in Mark could one speculate that he used Mark as a

basis for his own heavily adapted version. But then one would have to account for Matthew knowing that the event happened “at first light,” and not just sometime the following day,⁸² for example, or that this fig tree was alone. It is possible that Matthew was relying not on Mark only, but also on some variant of Q that contained Matthean material.⁸³ However, one has to wonder how much the critic is truly dealing with the issue when he is relying upon the existence of yet more hypothetical documents to explain a problem with his theory. The simple solution appears to be the one that undercuts Markan Priority: Matthew is independently relating the same story. This accounts for the similarity in structure and content, but also the differences in language, and detail.

The next three words, *καὶ ἰδὼν σικκῆν*, constitute the first case of true verbal agreement between the first and second Gospels in this passage. This meeting of minds is brief, however, and the two accounts part ways again immediately after. Matthew says that Jesus saw the fig tree alone beside the road; Mark says that Jesus saw it from afar and that it had leaves, the assumption being that it would therefore have fruit. When Jesus approaches the tree to investigate further, Mark says He found nothing on it except leaves. The words *ἐπ’ αὐτήν οὐδὲν εὔρεν εἰ μὴ φύλλα* are also in Matthew’s account, though not in this exact sequence (Matthew has *οὐδὲν εὔρεν ἐν αὐτῇ εἰ μὴ φύλλα μόνον*).

⁸¹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 604.

⁸² Hagner says that Mark’s chronology “differs” from Matthew’s at this point (*ibid.*, p. 605). One wonders how “at first light” is really different from “the next day”? The former is perhaps more specific than the latter, but the chronology would really only be different if Mark had said the event occurred that afternoon, or in the evening.

⁸³ Osborne and Williams note that scholars have suggested the existence of different versions of Q to account for Q passages in Matthew and Luke that have variations in wording. See Osborne and Williams, “The Case for the Markan Priority View of Gospel Origins,” p. 69.

Unlike Matthew, Mark provides an explanation why the tree was barren of fruit: it was not in season. Hagner attributes this omission to Matthew considering it “misleading” and “an unnecessary complication, irrelevant to Jesus’ prophetic action.”⁸⁴ From Hagner’s perspective, Matthew is using this story to show Jesus’ prophetic judgment upon a fruitless Israel, which is why the explanation for the tree’s fruitlessness would not have served his purpose.⁸⁵ Filson notes that even in spring, while the fig tree would not have had its regular crop of figs, it may have had an early growth that could be eaten.⁸⁶ Keener concurs, but notes that these early figs were rarely eaten except by those who were too hungry to care about the taste, and a leafy fig tree without early figs would bear no figs at all that year.⁸⁷ Evans suggests that, understood correctly, Mark’s comment explains why Jesus went to examine the tree: He had his doubts about its fruitfulness because He knew it was not the season for figs.⁸⁸ Coupled with Filson and Keener’s observations, Jesus’ action makes sense. Although He knew it was not fig season, there was still the possibility of finding some (barely) edible fruit on the tree.

Jesus then curses the fig tree, something that appears to be all the more peculiar in Mark given his explanation. Matthew records the words (rendered literally) “no longer will there be fruit from you ever,” while Mark records “no longer ever may no one eat fruit from you” (again rendering the Greek literally). While slightly different, these two

⁸⁴ Hagner, p.604.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 606.

⁸⁶ Filson, Matthew, p. 225.

⁸⁷ Craig S. Keener, Matthew, p.317.

⁸⁸ Evans, Mark 8:27-16:20, p. 157.

accounts of Jesus' words can be harmonized, and the idea of each Gospel writer choosing which of Jesus' words to record is not unreasonable. Indeed, so far the text has not betrayed much evidence of being copied either Mark from Matthew or Matthew from Mark, so it would be odd if one of them suddenly decided to copy and alter a quotation of Jesus at this point. Matthew notes that the fig tree immediately dried up. Mark wants to cut away to the Cleansing of the Temple, so he points out that the disciples overheard Jesus and moves on.

The sequence of events appears to differ at this point. Matthew continues his narrative with the disciples seeing the withered fig tree and wondering how this happened (verse 22). Mark comes back to the fig tree early in the morning while they were passing through (verse 20). Matthew's Greek does not have any solid, specific temporal indicators here, so it is possible that Mark's time sequence is the way it happened, and Matthew simply recalls that it was broadly within that timeframe and relates the second part immediately after the first for the sake of continuity.

Finally, Jesus uses the example of the fig tree to teach the disciples regarding faith. All the elements of the teaching are present in Matthew and Luke (i.e., have faith, moving mountains, the importance of faith when praying), just not in the same words. In fact, the only instance of exact verbal agreement in this part is the phrase τῷ ὄρει τοῦτῳ... ἄρθητι καὶ βλήθητι εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν. Given the striking nature of this saying, it seems only natural that it should appear in both accounts verbatim. Again, the use of different words might simply be due to each Evangelist pulling different phrases from all of those that Jesus said. One does not have to go down the path of "changing" and "paraphrasing" to account for the variations.

This passage is among those that are used to testify to Markan Priority on account of its “difficulty.” Osborne and Williams state that

Matthew and Luke seem to have modified Mark’s strong statements, probably to avoid misunderstanding or confusion on the part of their readers. Mark, for instance, tells us that when Jesus cursed the fig tree, “it was not the season for figs” (11:13), a detail that Matthew omits.⁸⁹

Again, the question of “difficulty” is subjective. Was this considered a “difficult” passage for Matthew and Mark? One would have to conclude that it was not, otherwise what purpose would the story have served? Jesus said and did many things during His three-year ministry that are excluded from the Gospel accounts. Luke chose not to include this story in his account of Passion Week, a fact that Evans attributes either to embarrassment or the fact that Luke tells a parable about a fruitless fig tree and he does not want to repeat himself, or both.⁹⁰ Again, the “embarrassment” factor would only apply if this account was understood by the first century Evangelists as being an inexplicable, emotive outburst from Jesus, displaying an uncharacteristic lack of control over His power over nature.

Is it not possible that Matthew and Mark record the event because it was something notable that happened during Jesus’ last days, and perhaps Luke omitted it either because his sources did not contain it (which is unlikely given the statement in Luke 1:1-4), or because Luke decided to include Jesus weeping over Jerusalem instead and, as noted above, he had already recorded a parable about an unfruitful fig tree that

⁸⁹ Osborne and Williams, “The Case for the Markan Priority View of Gospel Origins,” p. 41.

appears to reflect the same theme.⁹¹ Luke's parable, unique to his Gospel, tells of a barren fig tree that is threatened with destruction if it does not bear fruit soon (Luke 13:6-9). It might be tempting to suggest that Luke turned the historical cursing of the fig tree into a parable so he could incorporate the story without potentially impugning Jesus' character. Alternatively, one might think that Mark and Matthew turned a parable of Jesus about a fig tree doomed to destruction as a judgment for its lack of fruit into a historical event, either intentionally or through confusion. However, as John Nolland points out, there is little linguistic evidence to connect the parable with the event.⁹² Indeed, in the parable, the fig tree is threatened with destruction; the reader is not told if the threat is carried out. There are certainly thematic parallels, but it should not be a surprise that fig trees would play a part in both Jesus' life and His story-telling given their ubiquitous presence in that region. The fact that Jesus encounters a barren fig tree, and also uses a barren fig tree as the object of a parable should not be considered unusual.

It seems clear, therefore, that this remarkable event in the life of Jesus is intended to demonstrate two things: the coming judgment on barren Israel, and the power of faith. Matthew and Mark both seem to relate this event in their own way, and it is this writer's view that there is sufficient difference between them to undermine any thought that they are dependent upon one another in any sense, whether Mark on Matthew (as per the Two-Gospel, or Greisbach Hypothesis), or Matthew on Mark (as per the Two-/Four-Source, or Markan Priority Hypothesis). Rather than composing an elaborate view of copying and redacting, taking the material from one Gospel, and combining it with other sources to

⁹⁰ Evans, p. 150.

⁹¹ See also Blomberg, The Historical Reliability of the Gospels, p. 131.

create a narrative that speaks to a particular community, it seems simpler, and more reasonable, to suggest that this was a historical event that happened in the life of Jesus. Matthew was an eyewitness to the event, and recorded the story according to what he remembered, possibly aided by his fellow disciples (including Peter). Mark was not an eyewitness, but would have heard the story from Peter and would have included it as he heard it from that source. The fact that one Gospel's account includes material not found in another does not have to be seen as evidence of editing or embellishing. This can simply be attributed to either each writer selecting which part of the narrative he wants to include, or each writer being dependent upon what his sources (memory, or the oral reminiscences of eyewitnesses) recount, or both.

Conclusion

The foregoing examination of the Synoptic Problem and the proposed solutions to the question of the origins of the Gospels has been necessarily brief. Many books and papers have been written going into often overwhelming detail in presenting each viewpoint. There do seem to be some general considerations that undergird the perspectives of those that hold to each of the main overarching perspectives (the dependence views and the Independence View). These considerations are largely philosophical since it is here that the crux of the matter lies. The testimony of the last two hundred years is that all the evidence available to scholars is provided within the pages of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The conclusions drawn from the evidence are determined by the scholar's philosophical presuppositions.

Despite the protests of those Evangelicals who hold to dependency views—especially the Markan Priority view—the fact of the matter is that these views were born out of a post-Reformation anti-supernaturalistic worldview. Whether out of some misguided Bultmannian attempt to rescue the credibility of the Bible from the embarrassment of the miraculous, or out of a genuine desire to undermine the authority of God’s Word, the methodology employed by Source, Form, and Redaction critics starts with the premise that the Gospels were constructed, not written, and that the Gospel “writers” felt free to change, correct, and re-arrange each other’s material according to their own needs. The Evangelical may try to dress this up under a doctrine of inspiration, and claim the Holy Spirit’s superintendence over each Gospel, but this simply does not work in practice. It is impossible to claim inerrancy for a document that has been “corrected” by a later inspired and inerrant document. It is a logical fallacy to suggest, for example, that Mark and Matthew’s chronology of the Cursing of the Fig Tree differ from one another,⁹³ and then claim both accounts to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. It seems to this writer that if one is going to hold to a high view of Scripture that recognizes an unchanging God of truth as its ultimate Author, one is forced to find ways to harmonize accounts, otherwise the only alternative is to abandon the doctrines of inerrancy and infallibility altogether.

⁹² John Nolland, Luke 9:21-18:34 (Dallas, Tx: Word Books, 1993), p. 717.

⁹³ E.g., Hagner, p. 604.

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