

BOOK REVIEW

Porter, Stanley E., and Bryan R. Dyer (eds.), *The Synoptic Problem: Four Views* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016). x + 208 pp. Pbk. \$22.99.

In the last few years, the market has experienced a proliferation of books presenting multiple views on a single topic. The Counterpoints series by Zondervan now has thirty-one volumes. The series sells well and has even served as the focus of sessions at annual academic conferences, such as ETS. Many pastors and students welcome these short introductions, which free them from the requirement of reading multiple books. It is the closest thing to one-stop shopping in biblical studies. It is surprising, then, that no such book has addressed the Synoptic problem since Robert L. Thomas (ed.), *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002). Thankfully, Stanley Porter and Bryan Dyer saw the need and gathered an excellent group of scholars in *The Synoptic Problem: Four Views*.

The book has four sections. In the first section, the editors offer a well-designed introduction to the issues surrounding the Synoptic problem. In the second section, there is a round of articles by the four contributors: Craig Evans, Mark Goodacre, David Peabody and Rainer Riesner. The third section is comprised of another set of articles by the contributors, in which they respond to one another to address the strengths and weaknesses of their positions. Lastly, the editors summarize points of agreement while indicating directions for the future. It is not possible to discuss each position in detail, so I will briefly discuss the individual sections before evaluating the book as a whole.

For many readers, the introduction will be an important element in learning about the Synoptic issues. Porter and Dyer offer an orientation to the historical development of the topic, highlighting the major contributors and movements. Readers will appreciate this detailed albeit approachable introduction that familiarizes them with the major positions without bias.

Some nuanced and technical discussions neglect to distill and identify the matter that lies at the core of the debate. The editors indicate that their primary focus is determining the literary and historical relationships of the Synoptic Gospels. This focus allows the volume to penetrate to the heart of the issue without undue bias. The editors note two weaknesses of the term ‘Synoptic Problem’. First, it insinuates there is dilemma that requires fixing. This negative characterization has influenced nearly every aspect of Gospel studies, especially concerning their value for reconstructing history. A second problem arising from the terminology is the suggestion there is a solution that needs to be sought. While the editors note that the term has become engrained within the debate and capitulate to using it, they are right to warn readers of these problems. There might not be a discernable solution, and the pursuit of such might not be the correct focus. Despite the warnings, the matters concerning Synoptic relations are worth examining.

The first article is by Craig Evans, who champions the Two Source Hypothesis, which he notes is the dominant position today (a counter-view is noted on pp. 143, 166). Evans is a logical choice for this chapter since he has published numerous times in defense of this position, most notably in his two-volume commentary on Mark. The Two Source position contends for Markan priority and proposes that the Evangelists Matthew and Luke independently revised and expanded on Mark for their Gospel accounts. A distinctive feature of the position is the necessity of positing the existence of a document circulated before Mark referred to as Q (from the German *Quelle*, meaning ‘source’). According to this theory, Matthew and Luke also independently drew upon Q in creating their Gospels.

While the theory is called the Two Source Hypothesis, in truth, there are more sources. Matthew incorporates his own personal material, known as M, and Luke draws on different material, known as L. Additionally, all three Gospel writers made use of oral material. Therefore, readers will sometimes see references to the Four Document Hypothesis within the wider literature.

Surprisingly, I found Evans’ article to be the weakest. He has done better work elsewhere. His statement that Matthew and Luke make improvements to Mark is too nebulous (p. 28). For instance, the argument that Mark would not use $\epsilon\chi\beta\alpha\lambda\lambda\omega$ in the way he does if he is writing subsequent to Matthew and Luke is too restrictive and not

altogether convincing (pp. 30-31). However, the article does present the theory in an organized and palatable manner.

The second contributor is Mark Goodacre, who is also no stranger to the Synoptic debates. In his article he admirably demonstrates the youngest position in the book, called the Farrer Hypothesis, although its correct title is the ‘Farrer-Goulder-Goodacre’ position. Like the Two Source view, it holds to Markan priority. However, it maintains that Luke made use of Matthew, thereby making any reference to the hypothetical Q document unnecessary. In fact, Goodacre has a book titled *The Case Against Q* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002). This article has the most modest tone of the volume, with many arguments worthy of further consideration.

In the third article David B. Peabody presents the oldest position, known as the Two Gospel Hypothesis. As with the Farrer position, there is no need for Q. However, in distinction from both previous theories, the Two Gospel theory contends for Matthean priority, with Luke drawing on Matthew and Mark drawing on both Matthew and Luke. The unique feature of this position is its support from external as well as internal evidence. According to Peabody no one before the end of the eighteenth century debated or denied Matthean priority. Also, Papias of Hierapolis in the second century testified that Matthew wrote first. Peabody draws on these observations in his article and response.

While Peabody’s historical evidence carries some weight, the literary evidence for his position is not convincingly presented. For instance, while Goodacre produces charts showing explicit lexical parallels between various texts, Peabody uses general, sweeping references in his charts. Then, when lexical items are highlighted in another chart, the evidence seems embellished by the inclusion of the word ‘and’ (p. 77). In fact, Peabody labels the word ‘and’ in the middle of the chart as indicating verbatim agreement among passages in the Synoptics. However, Mt. 8.16b and Mk 1.33 have *καὶ*, while Lk. 4.40b has *δὲ*. To be labeled as being in verbatim agreement, texts should agree in the original languages, irrespective of modern translations or glosses.

The last article is by Rainer Riesner, who draws on his decades-long defense of the Orality and Memory Hypothesis. The position lies between the Tradition Hypothesis and Multisource Hypothesis, as it incorporates oral tradition, memory, developmental stages and multiple minor (perhaps unpublished) written sources. Riesner does well to

point out that the role of orality and memory is underdeveloped in the other competing positions.

In the first round, the contributors have modest goals, namely to present their theories with rudimentary evidence. The authors achieve their end by introducing students to the parameters of the discussion and the general principles supporting each position. Being freed from trying to make breakthroughs in Synoptic research, the contributors can more clearly present their cases to students at a beginner or intermediate level. If the book stopped at this point, it would still be a helpful resource in seminary courses.

Thankfully, the book does not end but continues with another round of articles, in which the contributors directly address the competing positions. Here the benefits of a multi-view book truly shine. Each contributor tries to highlight the explanatory power of his position while focusing on what he finds to be the weakness of other positions.

Is there a solution to the problem? The editors note that scholarship is seemingly both at a stalemate and showing signs of ways forward. Current Synoptic theories are not based on strictly objective methodologies with scientific results; literary analysis is an interpretive enterprise. Goodacre illustrates the problem well in his response article. He draws attention to the fact that the contributors wrote their first articles independently of one another, yet they chose similar examples to illustrate how their competing positions were correct. The difficulty of the task and the level of inherent subjectivity likely mean no consensus will ever be reached.

Therefore, the book wisely does not propose a simple answer. However, one surprising point of agreement arising from the collected voices is the need for greater scholarly attention to orality and memory, which the editors call the 'wild card in the discussion' (p. 174). The importance of orality and memory is conveyed in the two quality articles by Riesner, and readers will note how the other positions also give credence to the orality position. As Riesner points out in his response, 'all three other Synoptic theories acknowledge the existence of an oral tradition' (p. 161). Furthermore, while Evans notes that any conclusion is tentative at best, he does respond, 'Riesner is on the whole correct' (p. 114, see also 132-33, 139-40).

A couple of weaknesses of the book are worth noting. First, there is no significant attention given to textual variation in the manuscript history. While the contributors are trying not to complicate their

presentations unnecessarily, neglecting textual variation means ignoring important features of history. Readers would benefit from hearing how textual criticism affects the Two Source and Two Gospel theories. Likewise, textual criticism could strengthen or weaken the Orality and Memory theory and its developmental aspects.

The second area for improvement is the unnecessary repetition of material. While the book rightly grounds the positions and debates in their historical context, the introduction sufficiently covers this information, making its presence in the articles redundant (e.g. pp. 91-93).

Overall, it is a well-executed work. The contributors are good representatives of their positions. Those familiar with the topic will especially enjoy the second round of articles. For those new to the debates, the introduction and conclusion are essential study guides. Accordingly, the book will serve excellently as assigned reading in a seminary setting. Also, I think pastors and lay readers interested in Gospel studies will appreciate the approachability and irenic tone.

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