

THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM: THE STATE OF THE QUESTION¹

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Introduction

In 1964, Stephen Neill published an excellent book on the history of New Testament scholarship. In that book, he wrote that in 1850 Markan priority as a solution to the Synoptic Problem was ‘little known even as a hypothesis’. However, he further notes that by the end of the nineteenth century it was ‘one of the assured results of the critical study of the New Testament’.² By 1961, so far as Neill was concerned (the terminal date of his initial survey), the Two-Source/Document Hypothesis was virtually certain as the explanation of the relations among the Synoptic Gospels. However, just as soon as Neill had written these words, the situation began to change, with William

1. I do not hesitate to quote directly from the material that Bryan R. Dyer and I have written in the introduction and conclusion to our recent edited volume, *The Synoptic Problem: Four Views* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), especially our ‘The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction to its Key Terms, Concepts, Figures, and Hypotheses’, pp. 1-26, and ‘What Have We Learned regarding the Synoptic Problem, and What Do We Still Need to Learn?’, pp. 165-78. I appreciate the opportunity to have presented this material as the major paper for the Synoptic Gospels Section at the Evangelical Theological Society 2016 Annual Meeting in San Antonio, TX, on 15 November 2016. As will be noticed in this paper, I have benefited from ideas suggested by my two respondents, Michael Burer and D. Brent Sandy, as well as the chair of the session, Darrell Bock.

2. Stephen Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1961* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 108. For an excellent collection of essays that evaluate some of the major tenets of Synoptic criticism, see Arthur J. Bellinzoni, Jr, with Joseph B. Tyson and William O. Walker, Jr (eds.), *The Two-Source Hypothesis: A Critical Appraisal* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985).

Farmer reviving what has been called the Griesbach Hypothesis,³ soon to be followed by other major proposals regarding the Synoptic Problem. The result is that there are at least four major hypotheses that are often considered when Synoptic relations are discussed (there are others proposed as well; see below). One of the results of this continuing discussion is the recent publication of a multiple views book on the Synoptic Problem, in which four major views are presented by leading proponents of these positions. I offer here a summary of the state of discussion based on this recent volume, entitled *The Synoptic Problem: Four Views*. This volume includes essays on the Two-Source/Document Hypothesis (including the Four-Document Hypothesis) by Craig Evans, the Farrer (Goulder) Hypothesis by Mark Goodacre, the Two-Gospel (Griesbach/Farmer) Hypothesis by David Peabody and the Orality and Memory Hypothesis by Rainer Riesner, as well as responses by each to the collective proposals of the others. As it so happens, just to anticipate the inevitable question, I am not necessarily an advocate of any of these four theories, although having had the opportunity as an editor to interact with the several positions, I certainly have come to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of the several proposals.

A Brief History of Discussion

The history of discussion of the Synoptic Problem is one that has unfolded over nearly two millennia. It is one of the several major issues within New Testament scholarship that has occupied the church in various ways from almost its beginnings. For the sake of discussion, I will divide the history of discussion into four periods.

The first period is the pre-Synoptic Problem period. By this I mean that, in the earliest discussion, the relationship among the Synoptic Gospels was seen not as a problem but simply as a descriptive fact that there were multiple Gospels. For Tatian (perhaps preceded by Justin), the fact of the four Gospels was an opportunity to create a single Gospel narrative, the *Diatessaron*.⁴ This harmony of the Gospels, no

3. William R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Analysis* (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

4. For recent, brief discussion on this, see Stanley E. Porter, *How We Got the New Testament: Text, Transmission, Translation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), pp. 88-93.

longer extant in Greek (its probable language of composition), was very popular especially in Syria well into the fifth century, and various types of harmonies have been written since, up to the present time. More typical was simply to find comments made about the existence of the several Gospels. Virtually all these statements in the early church—such as by Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.24), Origen (*Comm. Matt.* 1.1) or Augustine (*Cons.* 1.2.4, etc.)—indicate that Matthew's Gospel was written first, presumably as an eyewitness. They were not interested in the Synoptic Problem as it came to be defined in later scholarship.

The second period in the history of the Synoptic Problem is the Matthean solution period (the eighteenth century into the nineteenth century), usually revolving around explaining the relations among the Synoptics but on the basis of Matthean priority (there were admittedly other theories than the ones I will discuss, but many if not most of them still placed Matthew first). One of the earliest to propose such a solution was Henry Owen (1716–95), the Welsh biblical scholar.⁵ Owen believed that Matthew was written earliest as a Jewish Gospel, was used by Luke, and then both were abbreviated by Mark in Rome for Roman Christians.⁶ Better known, of course, is the work of the German scholar Johann Jakob Griesbach (1745–1812).⁷ Griesbach composed the first synopsis of the Gospels, and it became the impetus for him to address various proposals regarding the relations among the Gospels. He did this in two major essays. His conclusions are virtually identical to those of Owen.⁸ He argued that Matthew, written by an apostolic eyewitness, was used by Luke (he concentrated upon the resurrection account), and that Mark had copies of both Matthew and Luke that he used. An important set of facts to note is that Griesbach

5. Henry Owen, *Observations on the Four Gospels: Tending Chiefly, to Ascertain the Times of their Publication; and to Illustrate the Form and Manner of their Composition* (London: T. Payne, 1764).

6. William Baird, *History of New Testament Research. I. From Deism to Tübingen* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 143-44.

7. On Griesbach, see most recently Brandon D. Crowe, 'J.J. Griesbach and Karl Lachmann', in Stanley E. Porter and Sean A. Adams (eds.), *Pillars in the History of Biblical Interpretation Volume 1: Prevailing Methods before 1980* (McMaster Biblical Studies Series, 2; Eugene, OR: Pickwick Press, 2016), pp. 71-90, esp. pp. 71-78.

8. See David Laird Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition, and the Interpretation of the Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), pp. 314-18.

addressed most of the major issues that are still raised regarding Synoptic relations, including Markan dependence upon Peter (an insecure tradition), Mark as the middle term between Matthew and Luke, and Markan omissions in relation to his purposes. Because of this, Griesbach is often seen as the major figure in inciting discussion of the Synoptic Problem.

The third period of Synoptic discussion is the Markan priority period (the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century), when Markan priority and the Two (Four)-Source/Document Hypothesis emerged. The shift to Markan priority began in earnest in the early nineteenth century. Scholars such as the classicist Karl Lachmann (1793–1851) and the New Testament scholar Heinrich Julius Holtzmann (1832–1910), among many others, began to argue for Markan priority. Lachmann found that, when he compared the Gospels, he could observe Matthew following Mark and Luke following Mark, which suggested to him that Mark reflected an earlier ordering of events that the others followed, and hence its priority.⁹ He also believed that Matthew drew upon a sayings collection, getting this idea from Friedrich Schleiermacher and his view of Papias's reference to 'sayings'.¹⁰ Holtzmann at first began with an *Urmarcus* hypothesis (that he later abandoned), but recognized that Mark was closest to this early source used by all of the Synoptics. Matthew and Luke also, each independently, used a sayings source. Thus, the Two-Source/Document Hypothesis was first most ably formulated. This theory no doubt took root because of the overall forcefulness of Holtzmann as a scholar, who came to dominate historical criticism through his major works of New Testament introduction and theology.¹¹ This reaction to the Griesbach Hypothesis and growing ascendancy of the Two-Source/Document Hypothesis and Markan priority was greatly encouraged, at least in

9. Karl Lachmann, 'Die Ordine narrationum in evangeliiis synopticiis', *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 8 (1835), pp. 570-90; in part translated in N.H. Palmer, 'Lachmann's Argument', *NTS* 13 (1966–67), pp. 368-78; repr. in Bellinzoni et al. (eds.), *Two-Source Hypothesis*, pp. 119-31, esp. pp. 123-29. See Baird, *History*, I, p. 320. Cf. Crowe, 'Griesbach and Lachmann', pp. 78-83.

10. Farmer, *Synoptic Problem*, p. 15.

11. Heinrich Holtzmann, *Die synoptischen Evangelien: Ihr Ursprung und geschichtlicher Character* (Leipzig: Wilhelm Engelmann, 1863). See William Baird, *History of New Testament Research. II. From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), pp. 111-22, esp. pp. 115-16.

English-language circles, by an ongoing seminar at Oxford University under Professor William Sanday (1843–1920). Beginning in 1894 and meeting for nine years, Sanday along with colleagues, many of them graduate students, addressed the Synoptic Problem, resulting in their *Studies in the Synoptic Problem*, published in 1911.¹² The importance of this volume is seen in the fact that the Two-Source Hypothesis was early on called the Oxford Hypothesis. This volume provided substantial support for Mark as the source used by Matthew and Luke, along with the source called Q. The development of Markan priority, and along with it the Two-Source/Document Hypothesis, arguably reached its pinnacle in the work of B.H. Streeter (1874–1937) and his *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins*.¹³ In this work, in some ways the culmination of his work first published in the Oxford seminar volume, Streeter made four major arguments for Markan priority. These include: the use of Mark by the other Gospels, the shared wording in the triple tradition (material found in all three Gospels), the arrangement of the episodes, and the improvements to Markan language by Matthew and Luke. During the nineteenth century, various proposals made regarding the sayings material that Matthew and Luke used were developed further. This sayings source came to be called Q, from the German term used, *Quelle* (source). Authors also began to identify material unique to Matthew and Luke, which has come to be known as M and L material. Streeter developed all these ideas into his Four-Source Hypothesis, with his view of Q becoming a standard and influential one. The Two/Four Source/Document Hypothesis was the theory that held apparently overwhelming sway until the last half of the twentieth century.

The fourth and final period in the history of Synoptic discussion is the period of renewed options (from the mid to late twentieth century to the present). The Two-Source/Document Hypothesis continues to be widely held during this period, and is represented in our recently edited book by Craig Evans.¹⁴ However, there are three further major

12. William Sanday (ed.), *Studies in the Synoptic Problem, by Members of the University of Oxford* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911).

13. B.H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins, Treating of the Manuscript Tradition, Sources, Authorship, and Dates* (London: Macmillan, 1924). See Paul Foster, 'B.H. Streeter and the Synoptic Problem', in Porter and Adams (eds.), *Pillars*, pp. 278-301.

14. Craig A. Evans, 'The Two Source Hypothesis', in Porter and Dyer (eds.), *Synoptic Problem*, pp. 27-45.

proposals that emerged during this period (as indicated above). All of them, along with the Two-Source/Document Hypothesis, are vying for preeminence to the present, although with admittedly varying levels of success. In 1964, soon after Neill wrote his history of New Testament scholarship, William Farmer (1921–2000) published his analysis of the Synoptic Problem, where he revived the Griesbach Hypothesis, which has come to be called the Two Gospel Hypothesis.¹⁵ There are many refinements by Farmer and his followers of the Griesbach Hypothesis, one of the major ones being inclusion of oral tradition. Nevertheless, he argued for Matthew being written first using multiple sources, Luke using Matthew's Gospel and several other sources (thus explaining the double tradition), and Mark using both Matthew and Luke in a conflated account with Mark's distinctive perspective (the so-called Markan Overlay). One of the major arguments of this perspective concerns the so-called Minor Agreements, where Matthew and Luke agree against Mark, difficult to explain by Markan priority (e.g. Mt. 26.67-68; Mk 14.65; Lk. 22.63-64, where Matthew and Luke have 'Who is it that struck you?').

This revival of Griesbach and other early critical proposals also goes back to the earliest traditions of the church and thus relies upon this external evidence. This theory has been promoted during this period by Bernard Orchard, David Dungan and David Peabody, among several others.¹⁶ Peabody has written the chapter on the Two-Gospel Hypothesis in our recent multiple views book on the Synoptic Problem.¹⁷ In 1955, Austin Farrer (1904–68) wrote an article in which he challenged the existence of Q, contending that Luke used both Mark and Matthew to arrive at his Gospel.¹⁸ Although this theory holds to Markan priority,

15. Farmer, *Synoptic Problem*.

16. See, among others, Bernard Orchard and Harold Riley, *The Order of the Synoptics: Why Three Synoptic Gospels?* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987); Allan J. McNicol, with David L. Dungan and David B. Peabody (eds.), *Beyond the Q Impasse: Luke's Use of Matthew* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996); David B. Peabody, with Lamar Cope and Allan J. McNicol (eds.), *One Gospel from Two: Mark's Use of Matthew and Luke* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002).

17. David Barrett Peabody, 'The Two Gospel Hypothesis', in Porter and Dyer (eds.), *Synoptic Problem*, pp. 67-88.

18. Austin Farrer, 'Dispensing with Q', in Dennis E. Nineham (ed.), *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R.H. Lightfoot* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), pp.

it also relies upon the so-called Minor Agreements of Luke and Matthew, contending that Luke's use of both Mark and Matthew more easily explains these passages (using the same passage as above). This theory was most fully developed by Michael Goulder (1927–2010),¹⁹ but also promoted by Mark Goodacre.²⁰ Goodacre has written the chapter on the Farrer (Goulder) Hypothesis in our book.²¹

The third proposal is less a distinct proposal than a revival of ideas that also have been found within the early church and have reappeared in various forms in critical scholarship. This is the Oral Tradition Hypothesis, sometimes simply called the Tradition Hypothesis. Rather than seeing the Synoptic Problem as primarily a literary relationship among Gospels, the Oral Tradition Hypothesis emphasizes the role of oral tradition in Synoptic transmission. The importance of oral tradition is already seen in some of the earliest discussions in church history regarding the Gospels, such as in Papias and his discussion regarding Mark and Peter or the 'sayings' of Jesus known to Matthew (Eusebius, *Hist eccl.* 3.39.15-16). It was in the nineteenth century, however, that the English scholar B.F. Westcott (1825–1901), in a conscious departure from German historical criticism, posited oral tradition as the source of the Synoptic relationships²² (he himself was anticipated by the work of Johann C.L. Gieseler).²³ He argued that the traditions of Jesus originated in apostolic preaching, which preserved the faithfulness of the oral transmission. The Oral Tradition Hypothesis appears

55-88. Farrer had some precedent. See E.W. Lummis, *How Luke Was Written* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915).

19. Michael Goulder, *Luke: A New Paradigm* (2 vols.; JSNTSup, 20; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989).

20. See Mark Goodacre, *The Case against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002).

21. Mark Goodacre, 'The Farrer Hypothesis', in Porter and Dyer (eds.), *Synoptic Problem*, pp. 47-66.

22. Brooke Foss Westcott, *An Introduction to the Study of the Gospels* (London: Macmillan, 1851). On neglect of Westcott in subsequent scholarship, see Stanley E. Porter, 'The Legacy of B.F. Westcott and Oral Gospel Tradition', in Alan J. Avery-Peck, Craig A. Evans and Jacob Neusner (eds.), *Earliest Christianity within the Boundaries of Judaism: Essays in Honor of Bruce Chilton* (BRLJ, 49; Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 326-45.

23. See Baird, *History*, I, pp. 296-98, referring to Johann Carl Ludwig Gieseler, *Historisch-kritischer Versuch über die Entstehung und die frühesten Schicksale der Evangelien* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1818).

in various forms (sometimes combined with written theories as well), and is associated with such scholars as Harald Riesenfeld, Birger Gerhardsson and Samuel Byrskog in its Scandinavian variety,²⁴ with James D.G. Dunn and his student Terence Mournet in a form that follows the modern oral hypotheses of Kenneth Bailey,²⁵ with Bo Reicke in a variation that appreciates regional traditions (e.g. Galilee, Jerusalem),²⁶ and with other scholars such as John Rist, Eta Linnemann, Werner Kelber and Richard Bauckham (with his eyewitness testimonies theory).²⁷ This hypothesis has had a revival in some circles. In fact, one

24. Harald Riesenfeld, 'The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings', *Studia Evangelica* (TUGL, 73; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1950), reprinted in his *The Gospels Reconsidered* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960), pp. 1-30; Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (trans. Eric J. Sharpe; Lund: Gleerup, 1961); *idem*, *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (trans. Eric J. Sharpe; ConBNT, 20; Lund: Gleerup, 1964); *idem*, *The Origins of the Gospel Traditions* (London: SCM Press, 1979); and Samuel Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher: Didactic Authority and Transmission in Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism and the Matthean Community* (ConBNT, 24; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994); *idem*, *Story as History—History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (WUNT, 123; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000). Riesner himself would probably be identified with this position, in Rainer Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung* (WUNT, 2.7; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981).

25. James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); *idem*, *The Oral Gospel Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013); Terence C. Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency: Variability and Stability in the Synoptic Tradition and Q* (WUNT, 2.195; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005); cf. Kenneth Bailey, 'Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels', *Asia Journal of Theology* 5 (1991), pp. 34-54; *idem*, 'Middle Eastern Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels', *ExpTim* 106 (1995), pp. 363-67.

26. Bo Reicke, *The Roots of the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

27. John M. Rist, *On the Independence of Matthew and Mark* (SNTSMS, 32; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Eta Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem? Rethinking the Literary Dependence of the First Three Gospels* (trans. Robert W. Yarbrough; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983; repr., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); *idem*, *Imprints, Voiceprints, and Footprints of Memory: Collected Essays of Werner H. Kelber* (Atlanta: SBL, 2013);

of the features that distinguishes many of the various views in recent scholarship on the Synoptic Problem is greater emphasis upon oral tradition, especially to explain elements of the Synoptic tradition regardless of the theory that is assumed. No one in our collection strictly holds to the Tradition Hypothesis, which endorses oral tradition as the primary solution to the Synoptic Problem, but most of the major views have increasingly contained a recognition of the place of oral tradition. In that sense, many of the views are combinations of oral and written hypotheses. A further variation on the oral tradition view is advocated in our volume by Rainer Riesner, who argues for a position that mediates the Tradition Hypothesis and the several different multisource hypotheses (such as Two [Four]-Source/Document or Two-Gospel, or even the Farrer Hypothesis), which he calls the Orality and Memory Hypothesis.²⁸ This includes Jesus as a teacher having his sayings memorized and circulated by his followers, possibly the use of written notes, the writing of intermediate sources of the Synoptic Gospels, and their independence (e.g. as seen in Mt. 16.25; Mk 8.35; Lk. 9.24).

Thus, here we are, at almost twenty years into the twenty-first century, and we arguably have at least as complex a set of competing theories as has been found at any time in the discussion of the Synoptic Problem. The ones mentioned are probably the best known, but the proposals in our multi-views book, along with the Tradition Hypothesis, do not even cover all of the views possible. As a partial attempt at comprehensiveness, those others include (in roughly chronological order): the so-called Augustinian view, in which Matthew was used by Mark and Luke used both (a view similar to and often confused with the Two-Gospel Hypothesis, but also with similarities to the Farrer Hypothesis), although there is dispute over exactly what Augustine's view finally was (cf. Augustine, *Cons.* 1.2.3-6; 1.3.6; 1.6.9; and 4.10.11);²⁹ the Lindsey Hypothesis (sometimes known as the Jerusalem School Hypothesis), in which Luke was the first Gospel, used by Mark

and Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

28. Rainer Riesner, 'The Orality and Memory Hypothesis', in Porter and Dyer (eds.), *Synoptic Problem*, pp. 89-111.

29. See Peabody, 'Two Gospel Hypothesis', pp. 86-87.

and then by Matthew;³⁰ the Multiple Source Hypothesis, in which there is no need for Q but there are a variety of other sources, a view held by Marie-Émile Boismard, Philippe Rolland and Delbert Burkett (a view with some similarities to the Farrer Hypothesis and, in a more limited way, to the proposal of Riesner in our recent volume);³¹ the so-called Three-Source Hypothesis in which Matthew used Mark and something like Q, and Luke used all three, held apparently by an early Holtzmann and Robert Gundry,³² essentially combining Markan priority and the Farrer Hypothesis; the Q+/Papias Hypothesis, in which Q was used by Mark, both used by Matthew, then Papias, and then Luke, a view held by Dennis McDonald;³³ and the Matthean Posteriority view, in which Mark was used by Luke and both were used by Matthew, a view similar to the Farrer Hypothesis in its Markan priority without Q.³⁴ There may well be others worth considering. However, the multiplicity of theories indicates that, no matter how settled many scholars may be on the Two-Source/Document Hypothesis, or even possibly the Farrer Hypothesis or Two-Gospel Hypothesis (scholars who hold to particular positions often seem to find it hard to believe that others do not find their hypothesis equally convincing and even self-evident), there remain

30. Robert Lindsey, *A Hebrew Translation of the Gospel of Mark* (Jerusalem: Dugith, 1969). (I appreciate information about this solution found on the Internet.)

31. Marie-Émile Boismard, with A. Lamouille and P. Sandevour, *Synopse des quatre Évangiles en française: Avec parallèles des Apocryphes et des Pères, vol. 2: Commentaire* (Paris: Cerf, 1972); Boismard, *L'Évangile de Marc: Sa préhistoire* (EB, 26; Paris: Lecoffre, 1994); Philippe Rolland, *Les premières évangiles: Un nouveau regard sur le problème synoptique* (LD, 166; Paris: Cerf, 1984); and Delbert Burkett, *Rethinking the Gospels Sources: From Proto-Mark to Mark* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); *idem, Rethinking the Gospel Sources, Volume 2: The Unity and Plurality of Q* (Atlanta: SBL, 2009).

32. Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 608-609. (I appreciate information about this solution found on the Internet.)

33. Dennis Ronald McDonald, *Two Shipwrecked Gospels: The 'Logoi of Jesus' and Papias's 'Exposition of the Logia about the Lord'* (Atlanta: SBL, 2012). (I appreciate information about this solution found on the Internet.)

34. See Robert K. MacEwen, *Matthean Posteriority: An Exploration of Matthew's Use of Mark and Luke as a Solution to the Synoptic Problem* (LNTS, 501; London: Bloomsbury, 2015), who recounts the history of this position going back to the eighteenth century, even if the view is held more incidentally than assertively.

scholars who are unconvinced by the usual hypotheses and are seeking other solutions, some of them more or less plausible than others.

The Major Issues Remaining

In the above section, I have briefly traced the history of the development of the discussion of the Synoptic Problem. I have, of course, had to abbreviate a great amount of material in order to capture the broad sweeps that have resulted in the current situation. So, as a result, what is the state of the question of the Synoptic Problem? I offer the following *status quaestionis* based on having edited the previously mentioned, recent volume on the Synoptic Problem.

Preliminary Observations

I begin by offering several important preliminary observations. The first is that it is difficult to determine the exact lay of the land regarding views on the Synoptic Problem. One of the participants in our volume claimed that ‘most New Testament Scholars’, not surprisingly, held to his position. This may be true, but what exactly does that mean? Does that mean that this is indeed most New Testament scholars, including all New Testament scholars whether they have in fact studied the issue or not (so Pauline scholars, Johannine scholars and Petrine scholars included), or does it represent most of those who have actually studied it? There are probably far more scholars who have simply accepted what was the dominating hypothesis of their environment, such as the hypothesis of their favorite teacher or teachers, rather than critically analyzing the issue for themselves. If we contend that only informed scholars have a vote in deciding this issue, which may seem like a useful restriction, we then have the problem of determining what constitutes an informed opinion, without simply limiting this opinion to those with whom one agrees. I have no way of assessing this situation, except to say that it remains unclear, even if a large number holds to one view, what the basis for this opinion is.

A second preliminary observation is that Markan priority seems to be one of the common factors in solution to the Synoptic Problem. Two of the four major views treated in our recent book depend upon Markan priority, including the Two-Source/Document and the Farrer Hypotheses. Each believes that Mark was the first Gospel written, and that the other Gospels used Mark in some way. The Two-Source/Document Hypothesis believes that Mark and a sayings source, called Q, was used

by Matthew and Luke, whereas the Farrer Hypothesis believes that we can account for Matthew and Luke without Q, but with Matthew using Mark and Luke using both. The Oral and Memory Hypothesis is not necessarily dependent upon Markan priority, but is, at least in the form promoted by Riesner, compatible with such a hypothesis, as he contends for multiple independent sources. This leaves the Two-Gospel Hypothesis (revised Griesbach Hypothesis) as the singular viewpoint that does not promote Markan priority. In fact, this position argues that Mark was not first but that it was last, and that Mark used Matthew, which was first, and Luke.

A third preliminary observation is that only one of the hypotheses is clearly dependent upon the existence of a non-biblical Gospel source, such as the sayings source Q. The Two-Source/Document Hypothesis posits the existence of Q as the sayings source that is drawn upon independently by Matthew and Luke, and as the second of the two major Gospel sources, along with Mark. However, this is the only viewpoint that is dependent upon Q, even if the Orality and Memory Hypothesis leaves the possibility of Q open. Neither the Farrer Hypothesis nor the Two-Gospel Hypothesis requires the existence of Q. The so-called common material of Matthew and Luke is accounted for in the Farrer Hypothesis by Matthean imagination and Lukan imagination and dependence upon Matthew, and it is accounted for in the Two-Gospel Hypothesis by Matthew being first and being used by Luke (with Mark not using such material and hence its existence only in Matthew and Luke). The result is that the so-called Minor Agreements are accounted for in both the Farrer Hypothesis and the Two-Gospel Hypothesis by Luke using Matthew.

A fourth and final preliminary observation is that there are competing interests in discussion of the various hypotheses regarding their simplicity and complexity. From one perspective, three of the hypotheses seek simplicity and the fourth believes in complexity. The Two-Source/Document Hypothesis, the Farrer Hypothesis and the Two-Gospel Hypothesis are all hypotheses that seek elegance, simplicity and minimum of explanation. They are essentially based upon the premises of explaining the maximal amount of data—the existence of the three Synoptic Gospels—by means of the smallest number of extant sources or documents. In the case of the Two-Source/Document Hypothesis, it uses two fundamental documents (Mark and Q) to account for all three Gospels (supplemented in the Four-Source Hypothesis by material

unique to Matthew and Luke). In the Farrer Hypothesis, there is a single source, Mark, that accounts for all three Gospels. In the Two-Gospel Hypothesis, there is also a single source, Matthew, that accounts for all three Gospels. The Orality and Memory Hypothesis, however, recognizes complexity, and believes that to do justice to the data, there must be additional factors, such as both written documents and oral tradition, messiness, and hence maximum of explanation. As a result, this particular theory does not take a particular position on any of the documents but recognizes the possibility of their existence, along with the existence of other possible documents and especially of oral tradition that is transmitted and provides the basis for the entire Gospel tradition. From a different perspective, one might just as easily argue something roughly the opposite, that is, that the four theories mentioned above are all complex theories, regarding complex relations among sources, various types of sources, and even the creation of non-existent documents. This is the case for the four theories presented in our volume, while the Tradition Hypothesis, relying entirely upon oral tradition, is arguably a model of simplicity in its supposition of oral tradition. Increasing recognition by the other theories (at least most of them) that there is a place for oral tradition, rather than simply confining themselves to working with written documents, has been one of the major developments in the fourth period of Synoptic criticism noted above.

With these four preliminary observations made, I now turn to major points of dispute and topics for further discussion in current Synoptic studies.

Major Points of Dispute in Discussion of the Synoptic Problem

In the light of these varying perspectives, there are still major points of dispute in discussion of the Synoptic Problem. I identify seven of them, recognizing that there may be others as well, depending upon one's solution to the issue.

(1) Historical Evidence. The first question is what role historical evidence plays in the discussion. The Two-Gospel Hypothesis bases its theory on both internal and external evidence. The external or historical evidence includes the recognition that Augustine listed the Gospels in the order of Mathew, Mark, Luke and John (e.g. *Cons.* 1.2.4), and that he later thought that Mark used both Matthew and Luke (*Cons.* 4.10.11). The view that Matthew was the first Gospel is a view that has persisted from the early church until into the nineteenth century and is

still responsible for our Gospel ordering in our contemporary Bibles. However, this historical evidence has been challenged. There is question about Augustine's evidence, as he appears to propose different views of the relationships of the Gospels (cf. *Cons.* 1.2.3-6; 1.3.6; 1.6.9; and 4.10.11). There is also some debate about Papias's statements regarding Mark in relation to Matthew (in which it is thought by some that Papias indicates that Mark has Matthew as a source), and how the evidence in Eusebius is to be understood, that is, whether Eusebius himself does not indicate that Mark is the first Gospel due to the ordering of his discussion.³⁵

There are two questions regarding the historical evidence. The first is whether this evidence is sufficient to answer the kind of question of textual origins that needs to be asked, and the second is whether and to what degree the position of the early church is determinative for contemporary scholarly discussion—if we can even determine what its information is and whether it is accurate.

(2) Triple Tradition. Triple tradition is the usual term used of substantive parallel material found in all three Synoptic Gospels.³⁶ This material is important for all the major views of Synoptic origins. For both the Two-Source/Document and the Farrer Hypotheses, the triple

35. This is a point made by Evans ('Two Source Hypothesis Response', in Porter and Dyer [eds.], *Synoptic Problem*, pp. 13-25, esp. 15, who notes that Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.15 concerning Mark precedes 3.39.16 concerning Matthew, even though the two passages are often cited in reverse order.

36. See Porter and Dyer (eds.), *Synoptic Problem*, pp. 7-11, 49, for charts and references: e.g. John's Messianic Preaching (Mt. 3.11-12; Mk 1.7-8; Lk. 3.15-18), Baptism of Jesus (Mt. 3.13-17; Mk 1.9-11; Lk. 3.21-22); The Temptation (Mt. 4.1-11; Mk 1.12-13; Lk. 4.1-13); Healing the Paralytic (Mt. 9.1-8; Mk 2.1-12; Lk. 5.17-26); Calling of Levi (Mt. 9.9-10; Mk 2.13-15; Lk. 5.27-32); Peter's Confession (Mt. 16.13-20; Mk. 8.27-30; Lk. 9.18-21); Jesus Foretelling His Passion (Mt. 16.21-23; Mk 8.31-33; Lk. 9.22); Following Jesus (Mt. 16.24-28; Mk 8.34-9:1; Lk. 9.23-27); Transfiguration (Mt. 17.1-9; Mk 9.2-10; Lk. 9.28-36); Jesus Healing a Boy Possessed by a Spirit (Mt. 17.14-21; Mk 9.14-29; Lk. 9.37-43a); Jesus Foretelling His Passion Again (Mt. 17.22-23; Mk 9.30-32; Lk. 9.43b-45); True Greatness (Mt. 18.1-5; Mk 9.33-37; Lk. 9.46-48); Jesus Blessing the Children (Mt. 19.13-15; Mk 10.13-16; Lk. 18.15-17); Rich Young Man (Mt. 19.16-22; Mk 10.17-22; Lk. 18.18-23); Triumphal Entry (Mt. 21.1-9; Mk 11.1-10; Lk. 19.28-49); Jesus Being Questioned about His Authority (Mt. 21.23-27; Mk 11.27-33; Lk. 20.1-8); Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen (Mt. 21.33-46; Mk 12.1-12; Lk. 20.9-19); Betrayal by Judas (Mt. 26.14-16; Mk 14.10-11; Lk 22.3-6); and Trial before Pilate (Mt. 27.11-14; Mk 15.2-5; Lk. 23.2-5).

tradition indicates both Markan priority and the dependence of the other two Gospels on Mark, on the basis of the three Synoptics sharing the same ordering of material and having often identical wording in all three sources. For both the Orality and Memory and the Two-Gospel Hypotheses, however, the triple tradition is not convincing (e.g. the parallels of the Rich Young Man in Mt. 19.16-22, esp. 24; Mk 10.17-22, esp. 25; Lk. 18.18-23, esp. 25, with ‘alterations’ moving in different directions). The Orality and Memory Hypothesis recognizes some similar material but also finds it implausible that on numerous occasions both Matthew and Luke deleted Markan features. The Two-Gospel Hypothesis sees an alternating pattern whereby Mark has conflated material in Matthew and Luke.

The questions concerning the triple tradition must address how one determines whether Mark is the source or the result and not simply the ‘middle term’ between Matthew and Luke, how one best accounts for unique Markan features (such as use of ‘again’ [πάλιν] and whether this is deleted by the other Gospels or was added by Mark as a ‘Markan Overlay’), and how one accounts for other similarities and differences among the three Gospels (for example, similarities between Matthew and Luke if they are independently using Mark).

(3) Double Tradition. Double tradition is the usual term reserved for substantive parallel material found in Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark, and is also important for all four major hypotheses (e.g. Jesus’ Statement over Jerusalem in Mt. 23.37-39; Lk. 13.34-35). The Farrer and the Two-Gospel Hypotheses believe that the kinds of substantive similarities, as well as relatively minor disagreements, found in the double tradition can best be accounted for on the basis of either Luke using Matthew or Matthew using Luke. The Two-Source/Document Hypothesis attributes the double tradition to a source that Matthew and Luke used in common, Q. However, the problem with this theory is that Q must be expanded from being a sayings source to a narrative and saying source, since some of this double tradition is more than simply sayings.

The presence of the double tradition also raises numerous questions. These questions include the most plausible explanation of material common to Matthew and Luke in the light of their own authorial tendencies, and how to account for major divergences within a similar episode for Matthew and Luke.

(4) Minor or Major Agreements? The so-called Minor Agreements are those places where Matthew and Luke agree against Mark where they share parallel material (e.g. Mt. 6.21; Mk 8.31; Lk. 9.22 regarding whether Jesus' resurrection would be 'on the third day' in Matthew and Luke or 'after three days' in Mark). The major question here is how major such agreements are to the discussion. Such passages have long been recognized, and these are a special problem for the Two-Source/Document Hypothesis, as they suggest that Matthew and Luke may not have been independent in their use of Mark, something found in especially the Farrer and the Two-Gospel Hypotheses. The Two-Gospel Hypothesis treats these parallel passages as major agreements or major problems for theories of Markan priority, as it seems implausible in these instances that, independently of each other, Matthew and Luke arrived at similar changes. It is at this point that theories such as the Two-Source/Document Hypothesis appeal to oral tradition and multiple recensions of the Gospels to find an explanation.

There is no doubt that the Minor Agreements raise numerous further questions, especially for the Two-Source/Document Hypothesis. The major ones are: the extent and nature of these Minor Agreements and whether they can thereby assume the status of major problems, and whether explanations of documentary relations that must then introduce theories of multiple sources or oral tradition have provided assessable means of answering these questions.

(5) Oral Tradition. Various more purely oral theories are not as popular today as they once were, even though most of the current theories are bound to introduce oral elements into their explanations. This use of oral tradition probably comes about as a recognition of the need to explain discrepancies that are not readily explainable by documentary means, but also the fact that memory and orality were essential features of the educational and even transmissional environment of the ancient world of which Jesus was a recognized part (and as other places in the New Testament recognize). As a result, most theories of Synoptic origins include recognition of oral tradition, at least in the pre-written Gospels stage, as well as in the subsequent transmissional stage, even if assessment of its presence is very difficult.

There are several questions regarding oral tradition that must be raised. One is the question of how one might quantify the role and influence of oral tradition, since it is by definition oral and leaves no documentary form, and whether invoking such a category mitigates the

distinctiveness or even essence of any of the hypotheses. If the role of oral tradition is recognized in the Two-Source/Document Hypothesis, this may indicate a move away from it being a literary or documentary hypothesis and a move toward it becoming an orality hypothesis, with Q itself ending up as predominantly an oral source. The result of such modifications might be that this theory begins to resemble the Farrer Hypothesis, in which the interaction of the written Gospels includes their interaction with various oral materials and may account for significant differences (although Goodacre also appeals to editorial fatigue, where the author using a source at first makes changes but then returns to the source later on).³⁷ Even the Two-Gospel Hypothesis might lose some of its distinctiveness in the light of the influence of oral tradition.

(6) Determining Textual Movement. The major theories of Synoptic relations are formulated around the idea of what it means that texts have relationships to other texts. The Two-Source/Document and the Farrer Hypotheses appear to follow a developmental model in regards to both literary elements and theology. This means that they see the literary style of the authors moving from simple to complex, and their theology becoming increasingly more developed. This developmental view is perhaps not too surprising when one considers that Markan priority is the product of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century thought. The Orality and Memory Hypothesis is less dependent upon such a developmental model, apart from the recognition of a growth model from simple to complex. The major issue is whether such a pattern of development is justifiable in the light of what we know about the use of Greek at the time and the nature of New Testament Christology. In other words, is it justifiable to believe in Markan priority simply or primarily on the basis of its supposed more primitive Greek (including its supposed Semitic elements) and its more primitive Christology (what Evans refers to as Markan dignity, or rather lack of dignity)?³⁸ If either, or both, are not pertinent to the discussion—that is, that there is no clear way to determine literary dependence upon the basis of stylistic changes and that Christology was sufficiently fluid so as to have both ‘high’ and ‘low’ elements concurrently—then this raises a further question about how to chart lines of development between texts. The Two-Gospel Hypothesis raises such questions, although it too has

37. See Mark Goodacre, ‘Fatigue in the Synoptics’, *NTS* 44 (1998), pp. 45-58.

38. Evans, ‘Two Source Hypothesis’, p. 31.

its own theories regarding how texts relate to one another, such as Mark drawing in alternating fashion from Matthew and then Luke.

There are several questions to raise regarding textual movement. These include the question of what kinds of textual features indicate borrowing, how many features are necessary and of what type to determine a clear pattern of dependence, and how other issues, such as Christology, play a role in such determinations in the light of the evidence of early Christianity (e.g. Paul's high Christology, and the arguably high Christology of the beginning of Mark's Gospel).

(7) Explanations for Mark. Mark remains one of the central issues in discussion of the Synoptic Problem. On the one hand, the Two-Source/Document Hypothesis contends that Mark's Gospel is the most primitive (least dignified), and that the other Gospels show signs of improving Mark in language, style and even content (e.g. Mt. 8.23-27; Mk 4.35-41; Lk. 8.22-25, concerning the stilling of the storm). This viewpoint is often couched in various forms, but focuses upon those places where Mark's language is such that it supposedly warrants rewording in the other Gospels. This viewpoint is not as pronounced in the Farrer Hypothesis, although a similar set of assumptions seems to be in place to help account for Markan priority. On the other hand, the Two-Gospel and the Orality and Memory Hypotheses question this assumption by identifying features of Mark that are said to evidence Markan redaction not present in the other two Gospels (e.g. use of 'again' [πάλιν]). Further, the Two-Gospel Hypothesis contends that Mark's Gospel is best explained as the last of the Gospels written, as an introduction, apology or explanation of the other Gospels.

There are several questions regarding Mark. The major contention involves how to conceive of Mark, the Gospel around which the other Gospels arrange themselves. If one conceives of Mark's Gospel as only possible as an early example of early Christian writing, or if one conceives of Mark's Gospel as explainable as the result of adapting earlier Christian Gospel material (after all, all the Gospels include and exclude material not found in the other Gospels), then one's conclusions will vary widely in relation to the hypotheses presented.

These are some of the remaining areas of dispute in Synoptic studies—they are not insubstantial, but in fact raise major questions for the various hypotheses. I now turn to several topics for further discussion.

Topics for Further Discussion

Having outlined the above major points of dispute, I wish to raise three other topics that should be mentioned regarding the state of discussion of the Synoptic Problem.

(1) Q. The first issue is the posited sayings source Q. It is admittedly difficult to determine this, but it appears that Q has become a tacitly accepted part of much New Testament scholarship—despite that at least two if not three of the four solutions to the Synoptic Problem do not require it. Q is only required by the Two-Source/Document Hypothesis, but not by the other three—regardless of the forms in which Q might be conceived (and they are numerous). The Orality and Memory Hypothesis is willing to entertain the notion of such a thing as Q, but it is a Q of a different sort, and one that in some ways threatens the kinds of categories used in many of the theories, with their firm lines of division. Markan priority and Q were established as two fundamental components for solving the Synoptic Problem in the nineteenth century and their status endured beyond the mid twentieth century. With the period of renewed options, other suggested theories have tended to move away from the necessity of Q. As a result, even the Orality and Memory Hypothesis is not wedded to the necessity of Q, at least as Q is conceived by Streeter and his successors, such as John Kloppenborg, Christopher Tuckett and others (that is, a definable document with definable character and even development and theology).³⁹ This minimizing of the role of Q suggests that there are alternatives to Q in the broader notion of oral tradition that includes both narrative and sayings material, not differentiated documents or sources. The Farrer and the Two-Gospel Hypotheses are fundamentally opposed to Q and do everything they can to explain Synoptic relations without it.

The need to posit Q for solution to the Synoptic Problem is essentially found in the need to explain the similarities between Matthew and Luke. This makes it somewhat ironic that the Q industry

39. For example, John S. Kloppenborg Verbin, *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000); and Christopher M. Tuckett, *Q and the History of Early Christianity: Studies on Q* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996). There have been recent delimitations of Q, such as in James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann and John S. Kloppenborg, *The Critical Edition of Q* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). For a collection of important essays on Q, see John S. Kloppenborg (ed.), *The Shape of Q: Signal Essays on the Sayings Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

has grown to what it has become. The Two-Source/Document Hypothesis requires such a theory to explain the double tradition, the material that Matthew and Luke have in common but that is not found in Mark. However, this is not the only conceivable way to explain these similarities. Both the Farrer Hypothesis and the Two-Gospel Hypothesis explain these similarities based on Luke using Matthew. Both theories are also able to explain unique features of Mark, although by different means—the Farrer Hypothesis believes that these unique features originated in Mark and were retained by either Matthew or Luke, whereas the Two-Gospel Hypothesis believes that these features were added by Mark (the so-called Markan Overlay) to either Matthew and/or Luke (e.g. use of ‘again’ [πάλιν]).

The theory of Q, regardless of the final shape that it ends up taking, probably will continue to develop, so long as some scholars believe that a relatively independent source separate from Mark, Matthew and Luke best accounts for the material shared by Matthew and Luke. This proposal is opposed to a theory that shows that Matthew and Luke, or one of them alone, whether using Mark or being used by Mark, can sufficiently account for the same materials.

(2) Oral Tradition and its Possibilities. In the most recent discussion of solutions to the Synoptic Problem, the wild card for most theories (the Two-Gospel Hypothesis being the exception perhaps) is the role of oral tradition. There are two directions that this discussion might take. The first is the area of social memory. There has been much written about social memory and the Gospels, by such scholars as Bauckham, Dale Allison, Chris Keith, Anthony Le Donne, Rafael Rodriguez and others.⁴⁰ There are several major problems with social memory theory, especially in relation to the Synoptic Problem. These include the diversity of the theories involved, the lack of specificity of its claims, its being a theory of memory rather than of transmission, its modern

40. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*; Anthony Le Donne, *The Historiographical Jesus: Memory, Typology, and the Son of David* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009); Dale C. Allison, Jr, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010); Rafael Rodriguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory: Jesus in Tradition, Performance and Text* (LNTS, 407; London: T&T Clark, 2010); Chris Keith, *Jesus' Literacy: Scribal Culture and the Teacher from Galilee* (LNTS, 413; London: T&T Clark, 2011); *idem*, *Jesus against the Scribal Elite: The Origins of the Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014); among a growing number.

psychological and sociological foundations and its modernist assumptions regarding memory within culture and society.⁴¹ The result of social memory theory is an often overly skeptical view of ancient memory. In any case, social memory theory is not a theory of Synoptic relations, but of individual memory capacity.

A more viable area of discussion is the Tradition Hypothesis. Oral tradition has a primary role to play in the Orality and Memory Hypothesis, of course, but it has come to be included in some of the other proposals, even if reluctantly. Most of the theories regarding the Synoptic Problem—at least the major ones—are theories of literary dependence, a feature of the Orality and Memory Hypothesis as well, to the extent that this position as represented by Riesner believes that the solution rests in recognizing multiple sources in a complex relationship, including the use of oral tradition. The Tradition Hypothesis, although it dates to the nineteenth century along with other theories and has had more recent advocates, has not garnered as much support, and certainly not as much notoriety, as other theories (even if probably more scholars hold to such a position than they do something like the Farrer Hypothesis, which seems to be held by relatively few scholars). In other words, the nature of the Synoptic Problem has remained a literary problem rather than becoming a problem of oral tradition and oral transmission—and in fact one that resembles how a German (or perhaps English) scholar of the nineteenth century would solve such a problem using the available books on his (and virtually all of those involved in the discussion at the formative level seem to have been men) shelf in his study of the time.

If there were to come a time when scholars became convinced that the usual literary hypotheses were untenable, or even that they could offer nothing further to the discussion, there may be an increase in attention to the Tradition Hypothesis or a strictly oral theory. Elements of such a theory, at least as represented by the work of Riesenfeld, Gerhardsson and Byrskog, as well as a few others (such as Dunn), have already been incorporated into some elements of other theories, especially where oral tradition is concerned. One of the strengths of the

41. For a response, see Stanley E. Porter and Hughson T. Ong, “‘Social Memory’ and Oral Tradition—A Genuine Mismatch”, in Stanley E. Porter, Hughson T. Ong and David I. Yoon (eds.), *The Origins of the Gospels* (forthcoming); and Porter and Ong, ‘Memory, Orality, and the Fourth Gospel’, *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 12 (2014), pp. 143-64, esp. 147-54.

three other hypotheses is that they are theories of literary dependence and thus involve the examination of written sources, so far as we have them or conjecture them. The examination of oral traditions is, by definition, far more difficult—some might even say impossible for the ancient world, except only in the most abstract sense. Nevertheless, if, as most of the contributors to the discussion as represented in our book recognize, oral tradition was an integral part of the equation from the start, then it appears that more needs to be done to consider what role oral tradition might play in attempting to answer the question of the origins of the Synoptic Gospels.

Several ways forward in inclusion of oral tradition have been suggested. One is to pay more attention to modern oral cultures and attempt to interpret how their demonstrable orality may relate to the ancients and their practices. This has already been explored to some extent in theories regarding similarities between Homeric bards and modern singers of tales.⁴² A second way is to explore more fully the relationship between orality and literacy, in both modern and ancient contexts.⁴³ The growing interest in the relationship between orality and literacy in modern scholarship has tended to dissolve the traditional divide between the two and has shown that they may have more in

42. This reflects the so-called Parry-Lord hypothesis of oral tradition. See, among many important works, Albert Bates Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (New York: Atheneum, 1960); *idem*, *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); G.S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962); Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963); Berkley Peabody, *The Winged Word: A Study in the Technique of Ancient Greek Oral Composition as Seen Principally through Hesiod's Works and Days* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975); and John Miles Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); and followed by a number of scholars, including biblical scholars, since. A recent incorporation of the theory is found in John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), although they may have overstated their case at some points.

43. Some of this exploration has occurred in, for example, Jack Goody (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968); Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); *idem*, *Literacy and Orality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); and Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

common than separates them.⁴⁴ One of the areas of further exploration might include some of the implications of the notion of secondary orality, in which written texts become oral texts, a process that might be found within some theories of the Gospels.⁴⁵ There is growing thought that this scenario, originally devised for discussion of modern literacy, is true of the ancient world as well. A third way is to attempt to define legitimate means of determining signs of orality within written documents. This would require development of more sophisticated linguistic tools than have traditionally been used to examine the question of the Synoptic relationships.⁴⁶ There are other possibilities as well that might lead to transcending both the perceived disjunction between orality and literacy and, perhaps more importantly, the inherent encumbrance that we do not have oral sources from the ancient world for examination, but only have written sources that themselves must provide our access to an oral tradition. Some of these options are being considered and weighed in relation to other theories of Synoptic relations in the Origins of the Gospels Project at McMaster Divinity College. The first test cases of that project should emerge relatively soon in a published volume of essays on various dimensions of the hypothesis and its relations to other elements of Synoptic discussion, to be followed by appropriate works developing the hypothesis.

(3) Has a Stalemate Been Reached? The Two-Source/Document Hypothesis emerged in the late nineteenth century as the predominant solution to the Synoptic Problem. That position is ably and forcefully propounded in many different venues, not least in the essay by Evans in the recent volume that Dyer and I have edited (with some of Evans's own enhancements of the argument, such as that regarding Markan

44. See Hughson T. Ong, 'Orality, Literacy, Multilingualism, and the Oral Traditions of the Gospels' and 'Discussing Oral Traditions via a Sociolinguistic (Ethnography of Communication) Approach', in Porter, Ong and Yoon (eds.), *The Origins of the Gospels* (forthcoming).

45. See Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1980), p. 11.

46. See, for example, M.A.K. Halliday, 'Differences between Spoken and Written Language: Some Implications for Literacy Teaching' (1979); repr. in *Language and Education* (Collected Works of M.A.K. Halliday, 9; ed. Jonathan J. Webster; London: Continuum, 2007), pp. 63-80; *idem*, *Spoken and Written Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and especially Douglas Biber, *Variation across Speech and Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

dignity).⁴⁷ Nevertheless, this position has come under attack on several fronts. In some ways, the oldest attack is by the Orality and Memory Hypothesis, which also dates to the nineteenth century (at least in one of its forms, the oral) and has continued to be promoted to the present, even if it has not commanded nearly as much widespread assent as the now-usual theory of Markan Priority and Q. The Two-Gospel Hypothesis dates back at least to Griesbach, if not earlier to Augustine (a debated point, as indicated earlier), and has been renewed in more recent work by Farmer and his followers. The Farrer Hypothesis, although perhaps argued in an earlier form by others (e.g. Lummis), dates to the 1955 essay by Farrer on dispensing with Q, even if it was developed much more rigorously by Goulder and then by Goodacre. By any reckoning, these four theories of the Synoptic Problem (as well as others, even if they have commanded less attention) have been on the table for consideration for a minimum of fifty years and quite possibly a minimum of one hundred years, if not longer for at least some of them. And yet we are still seriously debating the fundamental plausibility of the various proposals, with most of the essential arguments being the same ones that have been used over and over during the same time.

This situation raises the question of whether we have reached a stalemate in the study of the Synoptic Problem. In other words, after using the same arguments that have been used over the last fifty or

47. Evans, 'Two Source Hypothesis', pp. 31-34, citing such examples as the stilling of the storm (Mt. 8.23-27; Mk 4.35-41; Lk. 8.22-25), where Mark is purportedly less dignified in recording the cry of the disciples than in Matthew or Luke; crossing the Sea of Galilee (Mt. 14.24-33; Mk 6.47-52), where Matthew deals with supposed Markan oddities; and warnings about leaven (Mt. 16.5-12; Mk 8.14-21), where Matthew changes Mark's reference to Herod to Herodians. During discussion of this paper, the point was made that the issue is not simply that there are primitive or less dignified elements in Mark that are 'improved', but that in places Matthew and Luke explain various elements (such as Semitisms) in Mark (some of the examples above would probably qualify in this regard, such as Matthew adding Peter walking on water in Mt. 14.29-31 and concluding more positively). See Evans, 'Two Source Hypothesis', pp. 34-35. The comment was also made during discussion that there are also some places where Matthew or Luke is more 'primitive' than Mark, such as the divorce passage in Mt. 19.9 and Mk 10.11-12, where Matthew has a singular, male oriented divorce, and Mark has bilateral divorce. See E.P. Sanders, 'Appendix II: Suggested Exceptions to the Priority of Mark', in his *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition* (SNTSMS, 9; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 290-93; repr. in Bellinzoni et al. (eds.), *Two-Source Hypothesis*, pp. 199-203.

more years regarding these issues (during the period of renewed options), what are the results of such debate? One or more of the positions may claim to be making progress in relation to the other, and no doubt there are strong advocates of each position who perceive that their arguments are beginning to have an effect and to convince others to join their ranks. Those of the other positions are no doubt less inclined to see such positive results from others' apologetic efforts. This situation brings us back to the question of whether we have reached a stalemate in the study of the Synoptic Problem.

The answer to this question is both yes and no. We do indeed observe that many of the same arguments are repeatedly made on behalf of the various positions. If the volume that we have recently edited is any indication, even in these recent statements virtually the same arguments are made. The lines are still starkly and strongly drawn. However, I am optimistic that the impasse is not unbreachable, because there is still potential for further developments in the discussion. Some of these areas are the following. We need more linguistically astute means of assessing the style of each author, so as to be able to establish whether one Gospel is earlier than the others; we need more linguistically astute means of assessing a range of other linguistic arguments to determine the characteristics of such features, that is, whether they constitute authorial additions or are dependent upon sources or are integral to the authorial style; we need more widely acceptable means of assessing the putative strength of an argument when there are diverse arguments involving a variety of divergent factors; we need to find a way to incorporate study of John's Gospel (usually excluded from treatment of the Synoptic Problem) into the equation, perhaps by redefining the notion of Synoptic Gospel; and, most idealistically of all, we need new arguments that push the discussion in new and previously unexplored directions (recognizing that this is by far the most difficult task of all).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to offer a résumé of the state of the question regarding the Synoptic Problem, based upon the recently completed multiple views book that Bryan Dyer and I have edited. In that sense, my conclusions reflect the range and kinds of issues raised in that volume by those positions represented and the advocates for them and their responses to each other. However, the fact that at the end of the

volume there is no clear ‘winner’ in the debate, and each proponent apparently stands equally convinced of his rightness—while his opponents stand equally convinced of theirs—indicates that we are far from done discussing this fundamental issue in New Testament studies. Perhaps it is symptomatic of the times that there remains so much discussion of divergent viewpoints, viewpoints that in several cases are fundamentally at odds with each other. Or perhaps it is because of the closeness of our perspective that we are unable to see that the major arguments have been convincingly made but we have simply not yet recognized their persuasive force. However, the fact that we continue to discuss them tells me that the current state of the question is that many questions, and with them, responses, remain to be asked and answered.