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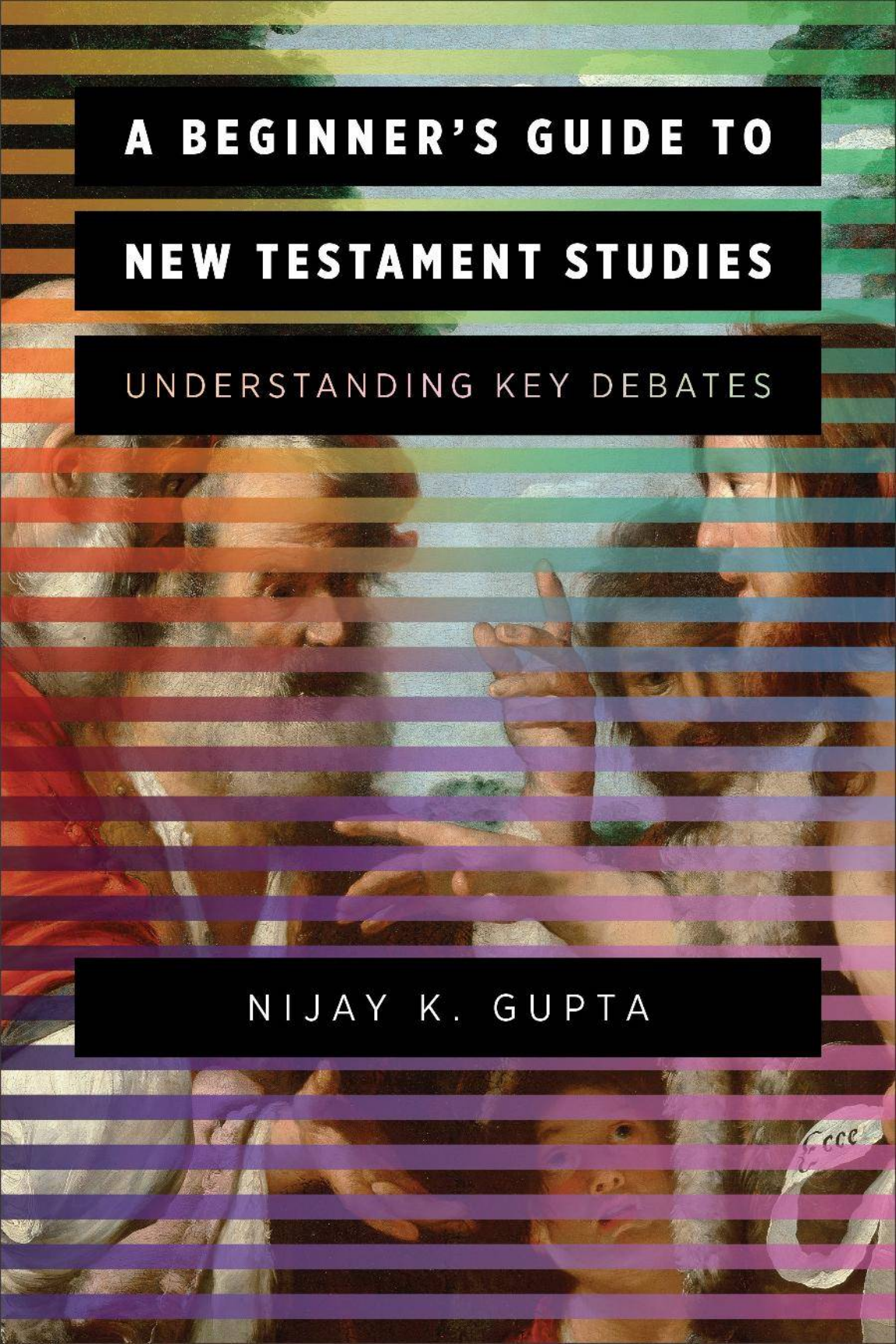
The Synoptic Problem (Introduction and Chapter One of A Beginner's Guide to New Testament Studies: Understanding Key Debates)

Nijay K. Gupta

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

UNDERSTANDING KEY DEBATES



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Introduction

When I first entered theological education as a seminary student, I found myself completely lost in the world of biblical scholarship. Not only were there so many technical terms I couldn't define and histories of interpretation with which I was not acquainted, but it seemed like there were two, or three, or ten views on various debated issues, and I had trouble keeping them straight. Oh, how I wished I had a map that could help me find my way through the maze of scholarship, or a guide to clue me into this view and that view!

More than fifteen years later, I can now say that I have a reasonable grasp of New Testament studies. Don't get me wrong—there are lots of subdisciplines and specialized topics that I know little or nothing about. But I have taught introduction to the New Testament and New Testament exegesis and hermeneutics many times, certainly enough to feel comfortable tracing the main views and positions—hence, this book, *A Beginner's Guide to New Testament Studies*. This textbook aims to aid the uninitiated in understanding, in a simple way, some of the most important and hotly debated issues in academic study of the New Testament.

Before diving in, I want to clarify the audience, approach, and aims of this book. It is written for relative newcomers to the world of New Testament studies, not experts. Chapters are short, and for the most part, I avoid academic jargon. In each chapter, you will find a short introduction to the issue at hand, explication of two or more views, and a final set of reflections. These reflections are very important in terms of the book's overall intentions. I do not expect that after consulting the short treatment of views I have offered, a reader will either (a) take a side or (b) change views. As will become clear, in nearly all of these debates, highly competent, well-intentioned scholars have good reasons for holding differing views. The reflections at the end of

each chapter consider the key problems, paradoxes, methodological issues, and questions that undergird and generate the disagreement. In many cases I also point to tools and new perspectives that are shedding fresh light on these debates today. I sincerely hope readers will see the rich complexity and textures of the debates with a view toward holistic understanding of the issue, gain sympathy for the "other side," and be inspired to learn more beyond what could be presented in this single book.

On the matter of further reading, each chapter ends with suggested academic works of three kinds: (a) beginner works (basic but longer readings that will orient readers to the subject); (b) readings tied to the presented views (to get firsthand knowledge of a view's perspective and argumentation); and (c) advanced (more technical) works.

A bit of warning and encouragement for those wanting to turn the page and go down the rabbit hole: it can lead to a bit of despair when readers are confronted with so many views and so much disagreement. Why is it so complicated? Can we know anything in the end? Is there any agreement? Such inquiries are inevitable when one is faced with this ostensible cacophony in scholarship. But we must believe knowledge is always good. Knowledge always has the capacity to lead us to better understanding. We do our best to collect all the information we can, and then we live and act and believe based on faith, reason, and conscience. The alternative is to live in ignorant bliss—ignorance is still out there, but I'm not sure it is all that blissful. I have appreciated these famous words of Oliver Wendell Holmes when I struggle with the messiness of biblical interpretation: "I do not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my right arm for the simplicity on the far side of complexity."[1] I have tried my best to provide in this book a bit of complexity *and* simplicity for readers, and I wish you well on the journey ahead toward more complete understanding of the interpretation of the New Testament.

1. Quoted in Donald A. Hagner, *The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), xi.

ONE

The Synoptic Problem

One of my favorite stories in the Gospels is about the woman who anoints Jesus. Recollecting this story from memory, I remember that she brings a very expensive jar of ointment made of spikenard—a costly herb native to India. She anoints Jesus and washes his feet with her tears. She is a sinful woman, and Jesus recognizes her repentance and forgives her. The Pharisees are upset because this suspicious woman is behaving improperly, but Jesus commends her because she has been forgiven for so much and all the more is her love; her story will be told for generations wherever the gospel is preached.

Which Gospel is this story from? Well, if you look it up in the New Testament Gospels, you will find that I have inadvertently combined and mixed up details from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The gist of my summary above resembles the story of the sinful woman who is forgiven in Luke 7:36–50. But a few pieces of information that I accidentally added appear only in Matthew or Mark. Mark mentions that this ointment is made from spikenard (Mark 14:3; neither Luke nor Matthew has this detail). Matthew is the one who mentions that this woman's fame will go out to all the world (Matt. 26:13). Though in Matthew's telling her repute involves her *anointing* Jesus with this ointment, not necessarily her extraordinary love. When we compare Luke against the other Gospels, Luke says that she weeps on Jesus's feet; Matthew and Mark do not offer this information. Luke mentions that she is a sinful woman, but Matthew refers to her only as a woman. Matthew and Mark seem to be telling the exact same story with only slight variation in some of the details. Luke appears to be sharing a story with a few overlapping aspects, but it potentially *could* be a different story—and yet how likely is it that on separate occasions two different women unexpectedly come to Jesus in a home with an alabaster jar of expensive ointment, cover him with it in some fashion, are criticized by dinner guests, and are defended by Jesus?

When we compare Matthew, Mark, and Luke in this way—lining up their versions of a particular story or saying and trying to puzzle out how they are similar and different—we are engaging in what scholars call the "Synoptic Problem." The word "synoptic" means "seen together," and it is used to refer to these three Gospels, since they can be placed side by side and compared and contrasted because of their similarities—what we might call "family resemblances." How can it be that these Gospels seem so similar in ordering (for the most part), inclusion of material (for the most part), and verbal overlap (sometimes), and yet there are some major differences (e.g., very different beginnings and endings) and numerous small differences?

And what about John? John is often studied separately from the Synoptic Gospels, because it is so different. John has no exorcisms and a very limited number of Jesus's miracles, for example, compared to the Synoptics. John is more likely to recount Jesus talking about "eternal life" than about the "kingdom of God." So, when we bring John into the mix, it is all the more clear that the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) belong together; they seem to have *some* sort of shared background, or they share some kind of original set of traditions. Or perhaps one or two of them is dependent on the third.

Have you ever wondered why the early Christians came to include *four* Gospels in their canon? Why not just one (such as Matthew) or two (Luke and John)? Why not just the earliest one because it is closest to the time of Jesus, or the latest one because it would include the most time-tested traditions? Does it not set Christians up for confusion to have *four different* Gospels? Sometimes I have heard this explained by the analogy of multiple witnesses to a crime. Imagine three different people who view a car accident. When they are independently interviewed by the police, surely they will end up agreeing on a few key elements of what happened: maybe that the incident happened around 10 a.m. on Thursday; there were two vehicles, a car and a truck. And maybe also that one car was wrecked and the other was fine. But we might also expect that, based on human error and various viewpoints, some details would be different between the witnesses: one witness might say the truck had one person, but another saw two people. Or they might disagree about who was at fault for the accident.

This analogy relates to the Synoptic Gospels in some ways, but the matter is more complex than chalking up differences to human error or point of view. What if two of the witnesses of the car accident are brothers and they talk at length about the incident before being interviewed? What if all three could recall both license plates perfectly, but then they disagreed about the states of the license plates? The scholarship on the Synoptic Problem attempts to address how these three Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are noticeably

similar and yet have many differences in how they word things, how they arrange material, and what they include or leave out.

A Long History of Investigation

Many of us discover the Synoptic Problem in college or seminary, but in truth this conversation and investigation has been going on for almost two thousand years. A third-century theologian named Origen attempted to trace the development of the writing of the Gospels and gave this account: "I have learned by tradition that the Gospel according to Matthew . . . was written first; and that he composed it in the Hebrew tongue and published it for the converts from Judaism. The second written was that according to Mark, who wrote it according to the instruction of Peter. . . . And third, was that according to Luke, the Gospel commended by Paul, which he composed for the converts from the Gentiles. Last of all, that according to John."[1] As you can see, Origen was especially interested (as others were in his time) in priority (who wrote first), ordering, influences, and audience/purpose. The Gospels were clearly not written as free-floating literary works for intellectual consumption. They had some unique interests and objectives. But the Synoptic Problem has to do with their interrelationship: How is it that they are part of the same family? And how are these family members related?

We will engage with these questions with two different perspectives in view. The most common approach to answering these questions focuses on textual or literary relationships (who copied from whom). We will call this the "literary-dependence perspective." In recent years, though, some scholars have tried to incorporate what they have learned from oral cultures into their answers to the Synoptic Problem. Many of these scholars are still interested in the question of copying, but they acknowledge that this process would have looked different in a primarily oral culture.

Literary-Dependence Perspective

As a professor, sometimes I have to deal with plagiarism, that unfortunate occasion when you get two papers or exams that have a lot of word-for-word

1. Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 1.1, trans. John Patrick, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 10, ed. A. Menzies (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1896), 412, quoted in Stanley E. Porter and Bryan R. Dyer, "The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction to Its Key Terms, Concepts, Figures, and Hypotheses," in *The Synoptic Problem: Four Views*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Bryan R. Dyer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 1–26, at 14.

overlap. Clearly somebody copied off of someone else. Usually, even without talking to the people involved, you can highlight the similar or identical portions and detect the copied bits, but unless someone confesses to copying, it is actually pretty difficult to figure out who wrote first and who copied. We have a somewhat similar challenge with the Synoptic Gospels, insofar as scholars have debated and disagreed about who's first. Let's say that one of the Gospels was composed first, and others depended on that first one for a large amount of information but also incorporated information from other sources. How would you decide which one was written first?[2]

St. Augustine came up with a theory about the interrelationship of the Synoptics. He argued that Matthew was written first; Mark came second, abbreviating Matthew's Gospel. And Luke came next, utilizing both Matthew and Mark.[3] Until the nineteenth century, the view was rather popular that Matthew was first. But eventually scholars by and large came to believe that Mark was written earlier than Matthew and Luke. There are many reasons for this conclusion of Markan priority—for example, Mark supplies some Aramaic words where Matthew and Luke offer only the word in Greek; and it makes more sense that Matthew and Luke (both longer Gospels than Mark) would *add* information about Jesus's teachings (like the Sermon on the Mount), rather than that Mark would choose to *cut out* material (if the shorter Mark borrowed, let's say, from the longer Matthew).

At present, the most popular theory (presuming literary dependence) is that Matthew and Luke depended on Mark; that is, they had access to Mark's Gospel and wrote their Gospels based on his (with some editorial freedoms), but clearly they had other sources as well. If you take out of Matthew and Luke passages or stories that are also in Mark, you are left with two kinds of material: (1) material unique to their respective Gospels (e.g., Luke's song of Mary, 1:46–55; Matthew's Great Commission teaching, 28:16–20) and (2) material that Matthew and Luke have in common (that is not in Mark). Scholars refer to this shared material (2) as coming from a hypothetical source that we call "Q."

In the study of Jesus and the Gospels, Q is short for the German word *Quelle*, which means "source." It is important to know that this is a *hypothetical* document. There is no such real text in existence—we don't have a physical copy of Q, or a fragment, and no ancient writer referred to

2. Though I have mentioned plagiarism here as an illustration, it is important to know that no one in the ancient world would have accused the Gospel writers of any sort of theft or bad intentions. See further chap. 8 for more on literary dependence in the ancient world.

3. Augustine, *De consensu evangelistarum* 1.2–3.

anything called Q—but some scholars believe some kind of document like this must have existed. Take, for example, the teaching of Jesus about the man who builds his house on the rock. This teaching is not in Mark, but it is in Matthew (7:21–27) and Luke (6:46–49). How is it that Matthew and Luke both have this teaching if it is not in Mark? The Q theory explains this. According to scholars invested in relying on Q as a source, this theoretical document would not have been a narrative-based Gospel but more like a collection of teachings of Jesus. Some Q proponents hold loosely to this hypothesis and refuse to go too far down the road of outlining Q in detail. Others have worked hard on mapping out the contents of Q in minute detail. And still others believe there are important reasons to question the existence of Q altogether. For example, Mark Goodacre has argued that the shared material between Matthew and Luke is better explained by Luke using and editing Matthew rather than the two of them separately depending on another source (Q).[4]

Whatever the case, from a literary-dependence perspective, it appears that Luke and Matthew also had special sources for the information that is found only in their respective Gospels. The reality is that scholars are put in a position here where they have to do a lot of guessing and piecing together of sources. It is somewhat like seeing a crime scene and developing theories about what happened, by whom, and how, based on the final scene.

The goal of this enterprise is to map sources and the origin of materials in order to trace them back to the beginning and understand the influences, flow, and editing processes involved. If Matthew depended on Mark, and copied material from Mark, what did he employ untouched, and what did he leave out or change—and why? What about Luke? Did he use Mark or just Matthew? Or something else? Did he use the same Q document as Matthew? Did he have a different version of Q? Is there a Q at all?

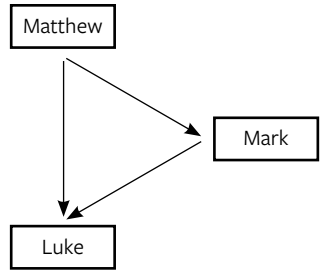
Here it might help to lay out four important scholarly theories that try to resolve the Synoptic Problem.

Augustine's Solution

As I have already mentioned above, Augustine saw Matthew as coming first, then Mark, with Luke written later and depending on both Matthew and Mark. Some scholars think that he was influenced by the canonical order of the Gospels (Matthew → Mark → Luke), despite the fact that biblical book sequence does not necessarily assume order of composition.

4. Mark Goodacre, *The Case against Q* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002).

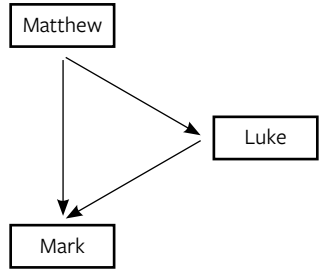
Figure 1.1
Augustine's View of the Synoptic Problem



Griesbach's Solution

J. J. Griesbach (1789) suggested that Matthew came first (in agreement with Augustine), but he put Luke second. Mark came along third, attempting to bring Matthew and Luke together in a short form.

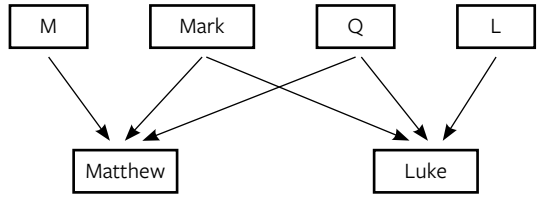
Figure 1.2
The Griesbach Hypothesis



Two- or Four-Source Hypothesis

In the nineteenth century, there developed an interest in placing Mark first (Markan priority), for reasons suggested above (among other reasons). This theory claims that alongside Mark, Matthew and Luke also used Q—hence two sources, but if we include special L and special M material (material unique to their respective Gospels), we have four sources that existed (hypothetically) before Matthew and Luke were written.

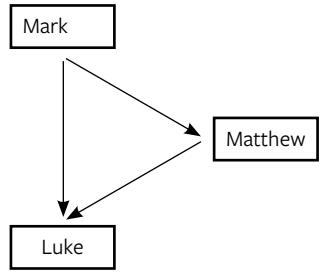
Figure 1.3
The Four-Source Theory



Farrer's Solution

A fourth theory worth noting is traced especially to Austin Farrer (1950s). Farrer argued in favor of Markan priority but denied the necessity of Q. If Luke relied on both Mark *and Matthew*, Q as a hypothesis is not really necessary, he posited.

Figure 1.4
The Farrer Hypothesis



For many years the scholarly debate of the Synoptic Problem largely dwelled on these matters of textual sources and redaction (editing). But in recent years there has developed concern with theories that focus exclusively on textual composition, literary dependence, and intentional (literary and theological) redaction. There is a surge of interest in what can be gained from better understanding the nature and impact of the development of traditions that are passed on orally in community.

Dynamics-of-Oral-Tradition Perspective

Virtually all New Testament scholars agree that in the earliest years of Christianity (approximately 35–45 CE) stories about Jesus and his teachings would

have been passed on orally. Perhaps some things would have been written and recorded for posterity, but inevitably much would have circulated as communities proclaimed these things out loud in mission and worship. But written Gospels did emerge—such as Mark—and an industry of Gospel writing began (not only Matthew, Luke, and John, but many others in the second and third centuries). Thus academic discussions have tended to focus on textual sources and dependence and on the intentional authorial habits of collating, removing, supplementing, and nuancing.

In the last few decades especially, though, there has been a swell of interest in the dynamics of oral tradition and how communities shared their cherished and important teachings. What if, some have wondered, the differences between the Synoptic Gospels are not primarily about one individual (e.g., Luke) sitting down with different sources and fashioning a new version of a Gospel? What if the majority of differences and similarities can be better explained in relation to the stability and flexibility of oral tradition?

One of the scholars who has stimulated this conversation is Kenneth Bailey, who argues that oral cultures can transmit teachings in an informal manner, and yet that community can maintain some control over the proper preservation of these teachings (hence his theory of "informal controlled oral tradition").[5] Bailey spent many decades in the Middle East and gave anecdotal evidence of this sort of phenomenon where a community gathered regularly to share stories, poems, and other important teachings. In such settings, there may not have been a designated teacher, but naturally the elders of the community carried the burden of passing on the wisdom of the past accurately. Some communities were rather strict with how material was recited, but Bailey found that many communities demonstrated flexibility in retellings—while small details might have been left out or paraphrased, the key pieces of the tradition were regularly transmitted in a faithful way. Bailey applies this to the Synoptic Problem—what if the small differences between these Gospels are not authorial changes, mistakes, modifications, or contradictions? Perhaps these are the natural and acceptable differences that emerged as early Christian leaders passed on the Jesus tradition over many years and as this group of Jesus followers expanded and moved into different regions.

James D. G. Dunn has further worked to strengthen this kind of approach to the Synoptic Gospels. He urges that we modern Westerners must

5. Kenneth E. Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels," *Themelios* 20, no. 2 (1995): 4–11. In scholarship, it is recognized that Werner Kelber's work has had the greatest impact; see Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

learn to break out of a literary paradigm when it comes to studying the Bible. We must reckon with an oral culture. Dunn explains that there was relatively low literacy in the ancient world. Much was learned and presented in person and by voice.[6] And the earliest Jesus tradition developed in rural communities, again where teachings were regularly passed on by mouth, not written text. Dunn argues that taking into account this mentality about instruction in early Christianity can help to address some of the concerns about small differences among the Synoptic Gospels. While it is true that Matthew or Luke must have played some role in selecting, reshaping, and interpreting Jesus material, we must also take into account the natural way that oral tradition bends and flexes while still adhering to some sense of stability with respect to the core features of a teaching or story. The coherence and overlap between the Synoptics stem from the way traditions maintain the heart or core of the tradition. But probably some of the variance results from the passing on of traditions orally from one community to another.

At the same time this study of orality was taking place, biblical scholars were reflecting on the nature of personal and social memory. Scholars like Dale Allison have argued that cognitive science shows how humans can remember events well as a whole, even if the details get fuzzy.[7] If the Gospels are testimonies based on memories of Jesus, then Jesus scholarship has long been wrongheaded in its use of authenticity tools that weigh the validity of individual sayings or event details.

Until now, we have been referring to the nature and dynamics of oral tradition theoretically, but it may be helpful to look at a case study: the Lord's Prayer. Most Christians who know and recite the Lord's Prayer concentrate on Matthew 6:9–13, but there is another version of the Lord's Prayer in Luke (11:2–4) (see table 1).

When we compare these two versions of the Lord's Prayer, there is obviously much overlap and verbal repetition. Key words or phrases are shared: "Father," "Hallowed be your name," "Your kingdom come," "daily bread," "forgive," "temptation." Luke's version is much shorter, and almost terse. Scholars have long wondered how these two texts relate. A common assumption is that

6. Just as a simple example, you might recall that in 3 John the author explains that he wishes to write much to the reader but prefers to talk face-to-face rather than communicate via ink and pen because the former is superior to the latter (3 John 13–14).

7. See Dale C. Allison Jr., *Constructing Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010); for a basic overview of his approach, see Allison, "The Study of the Historical Jesus and Human Memory," *Catalyst*, March 1, 2012, https://www.catalystresources.org/the-study-of-the-historical-jesus-and-human-memory/.

Table 1. The Lord's Prayer in Matthew and Luke

Matthew 6:9–13	Luke 11:2–4
Pray then in this way:	He said to them, "When you pray, say:
Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.	Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.	Your kingdom come.
Give us this day our daily bread.	Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.	And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us into temptation, but rescue us from the evil one.	And do not bring us into temptation."

Note: In Matt. 6:13 and Luke 11:4 "into temptation" is in the NRSV footnote.

Matthew expanded and filled out a short form of the Lord's Prayer that we see in Luke, though that does not mean Luke was written before Matthew. But if the Lord's Prayer was so important to early Christian tradition, why would Matthew lengthen it or Luke shorten it?

If we take into account what has been said about the workings of oral tradition in this time and culture, some scholars believe we are not best served by relying on theories of literary dependence and editing, even though that has been the default attitude of scholars for many decades. Rather, the two different versions of the Lord's Prayer we find in the Gospels could be explained via the flexibility of many tellings and liturgical performances of the Lord's Prayer in many places in the first century. Leaders and elders would have exercised *some* control over the transmission of this prayer to ensure it stayed true to the teaching of Jesus Christ, but individual communities would naturally adapt the wording in small ways to their context and cultural vocabulary. Could this explain the two different versions of the Lord's Prayer in the Gospels better than a primarily literary or authorial (intentional) editing choice? Many scholars today are drawn to this perspective, or at least more open to it. But at the end of the day, scholars who press for oral-tradition perspective do not discount or reject source-comparison questions or the impact of literary dependence. Instead, they urge that the dynamics of oral tradition should be taken into consideration from the start and should factor into solutions to the so-called Synoptic Problem.

Reflections

As long as there is a biblical studies guild, work will continue steadily on the Synoptic Problem. But why? What has continued to fan this flame and keep the fire of interest and explanation burning? What are the deep questions that prick the minds of Gospels scholars and spur them on to revisit this matter time and time again? Almost certainly one driving impulse is to look for the historical Jesus (see chap. 2). As the theory sometimes goes, the better we can outline how the Synoptics are related, and what methods and techniques the evangelists used to modify, eliminate, add, or combine material, the better we can sort out what belongs to "true history" and what might be embellishment, extra commentary and interpretation, or later liturgy and teachings. Another driving impulse is the desire to peer into the busy, chaotic, and exhilarating world of the early Christians of the middle and late first century as they retold the story of Jesus that they believed had brought transformative good news to the world. What inspired the first evangelist to write? And why was another Gospel written? And another? And another? There are also natural curiosities about genre and purpose that are intricately related to the Synoptic Problem: Did the evangelists think they were reporting history? What kinds of artistic license were allowed? How did they know if their editorial changes went too far beyond transmitting their received traditions faithfully? Was any material considered sacrosanct?

But lately there has been disillusionment (and even despair) in the whole enterprise of sorting out sources and layers of history and tradition, and there has been concern that we may never be able to retrieve (objectively) what the historical Jesus actually said or did. What we have is the testimonies found in these Gospels (and other written sources). That is not to say these sources are fictitious, deceptive, or misinformed. But as of late there is a growing interest in both oral tradition (as we have noted above) and the nature and operations of personal and social *memory*. Virtually all scholars who study the Gospels agree that what we find in the Synoptics is not myth or legend, but neither is it modern journalistic reporting. Instead, we have testimony and proclamation about a real person (Jesus), and that witness is based on how Jesus was *remembered* by his followers. This reality has led to industrious work on the psychology and sociology of memory and collective commemoration. And it has complicated and enriched how we talk about what the Gospels are and how they relate to one another. With these new questions about memory, testimony, and oral and written traditions, the Synoptic Problem will continue to have a new life. What we are seeing is a broadening of approaches to this problem such that many more factors are

taken into consideration beyond the more simplistic charts and figures of a few generations ago. Perhaps what is most fascinating is how the Synoptics now, more than ever, are being appreciated not for what they might contain that points to other important texts (like Q) but for what they themselves offer as pieces of literature and testimony.

Suggested Reading

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