

The Ground is Shifting Slowly: Current Studies in the Synoptic Problem

The publication of *New Studies in the Synoptic Problem*, with a 2011 imprint, provides an appropriate review of the present state of research in this pivotal area of gospel studies.¹ The volume represents the proceedings of the Oxford Conference of the Synoptic Problem of April 2008, supplemented by additional articles. The occasion of the conference was, in part, to recognize the hundredth anniversary of the publication of the major fruits of William Sanday's famous seminar on the Synoptic Problem in 1911.²

The essays are in honor of Christopher Tuckett. The volume opens with a laudatory statement of appreciation for Tuckett by David Catchpole; and after John Kloppenborg's introduction, the first essay is Tuckett's wide ranging, forty-page article titled *The Current State of the Synoptic Problem*.³ Coming from a seasoned expert who is both a renowned defender of the Two Document Hypothesis and a teacher at Oxford a connection (not always evident) between Oxford and the Two Document Hypothesis is thus highlighted at the beginning and end of the century.

In his introduction to the volume John Kloppenborg notes the large number of conferences on the Synoptic Problem that took place, especially during the twentieth century.⁴ Perhaps the closest in scope to the Oxford Conference was the 1984 two-week meeting in Jerusalem.⁵ Three teams of scholars presented both theoretical and exegetical arguments in favor of the Multiple Stage Hypothesis, Neo-Griesbach (as it was called then) and the Two Document Hypothesis. In addition, a second group of scholars assessed the arguments, and at the end of the conference assisted in evaluating the results. A major conclusion was not to announce that any of the source theories was most likely to be true; but the conference did note that, "the

¹ P. Foster *et al.*, eds., *New Studies in the Synoptic Problem* (BETL 239; Leuven-Paris-Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2011).

² W. Sanday, ed., *Studies in the Synoptic Problem by Members of the University of Oxford* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911).

³ Christopher M. Tuckett, "The Current State of the Synoptic Problem," in *New Studies in the Synoptic Problem*, 9-50. Henceforth, *NSSP*.

⁴ John S. Kloppenborg "Introduction," *NSSP*, 3.

⁵ David L. Dungan, ed., *The Interrelations of the Gospels: A Symposium Led by M.-E. Boismard - W.R. Farmer - F. Neiryneck*, Jerusalem, 1984 (BETL 95; Leuven: Peeters, 1990).

evangelist's compositional activity, giving a coherent and reasonable picture of the whole of each Gospel, is the most important method of argumentation in defense of a source hypothesis.”⁶

I mention this because this finding signaled a move away from a focus on theoretical, almost metaphysical, approaches to particular source theories over to an emphasis on exegetical discussion. To me this trend continued at Oxford.⁷ The goal at Oxford was not to duplicate the Jerusalem meeting. It was to summarize the present state of research and to suggest ways forward.⁸ But, in the end, although the Oxford conference was dominated by advocates of the Two Document Hypothesis, participants seemed to be suspicious that some particular source theorem would definitively solve the problem. Hear Tuckett at the end of his essay:

We are (hopefully) all now much more aware of the provisional nature of any alleged “solutions” to the Synoptic Problem, and aware too that between our (sometimes neat and simple) solutions and historical reality may lie an unbridgeable chasm.⁹

Results at Oxford

So what did the conference at Oxford conclude about the Synoptic Problem given that the major pre-understanding of most of the participants was that after one hundred years the 2DH still, as Tuckett noted, “ruled/rules the roost?”¹⁰

Procedurally, the particular Source paradigms on display: the Austin Farrer Hypothesis; Neo-Griesbach (now the Two Gospel Hypothesis); and the Two Document Hypothesis were placed in the spotlight for critical examination. As an advocate of the Two Gospel Hypothesis I was impressed with the irenic tone people from other perspectives utilized in their analysis of our hypothesis. I definitely concur that a major goal of the conference to be “programmatic rather than polemical” was fulfilled.¹¹ This decision to highlight three first-tier hypotheses did give focus to the discussion and provided a basis for raising most of the critical issues that have emerged in Synoptic Problem research over the last one hundred years.

⁶ “Agenda for Future Research,” in *The Interrelations of the Gospels*, 609.

⁷ Kloppenborg, *NSSP*, 6.

⁸ Kloppenborg, *NSSP*, 3.

⁹ Tuckett, *NSSP*, 49-50.

¹⁰ Tuckett, *NSSP*, 9.

¹¹ Kloppenborg, *NSSP*, 6.

Less successful, in my judgment, was the attempt to summarize comprehensively the research in a massive number of areas – some almost idiosyncratic. Even after nine hundred pages I could still find important omissions. For example, on a macro-level, I was puzzled by the lack of substantive coverage of French scholarship on the Synoptic Problem over the past fifty years. Perhaps after the death of Boismard, the interest in the Multiple Stage Hypothesis has moved it to a second tier.¹² This is unfortunate since mainstream Anglo-American scholarship could profit much through substantive interaction with French perspectives.

On a micro-level, although in many ways this volume represents the most serious modern engagement with the Two Gospel Hypothesis, the critical issue of linguistic characteristics and what advocates of this hypothesis call the Markan Overlay was not addressed substantively; neither, at least to my satisfaction, was the crucial issue of order (whether Mark is the accompanied or the one who accompanies – who from whom?) given a comprehensive airing. No doubt adherents of other perspectives could legitimately have similar reservations; but since the two issues I noted stand at the bedrock of the whole question of Markan priority, after nine hundred pages, one may have expected a fuller discussion in these areas. Perhaps this only proves that we should have sympathy for the task of the editors and the judgments they had to make. In the end it is impossible to be fully comprehensive.

The fact that it can be plausibly claimed (as this volume does), after one hundred years since the Oxford seminar, that the Two Document Hypothesis is still the major source paradigm, may lead to a mistaken assessment of recent scholarship. No doubt some teachers will note this conclusion and continue to proceed to ignore the issue. They will still relegate the Synoptic Problem to a few minutes summary at the beginning of their classes on *Jesus* or *Introduction to the New Testament* – just in time for new students to be seated or find the classroom. But it would be wrong to say that nothing has changed. If you look closer, the tone and methodology of these essays confirm this claim. We have definitively moved into an era of pluralism with reference to the solution of the Synoptic Problem. It necessarily follows that credible exegesis can no longer categorically assume a particular source hypothesis as absolute. (Writers of commentaries on the Synoptic Gospels and textbook authors please note!) Just as with textual

¹² Although, note the work of Delbert Burkett, an American Scholar, *Rethinking the Gospel Sources: From Proto-Mark to Mark* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2004); and *Rethinking the Gospel Sources (2): The Unity and Plurality of Q* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2009).

criticism we are bound to explore other paradigms when encountering difficult passages. We are in San Francisco, and so this may not be the most appropriate image. Nevertheless, although it is clear that the 2DH is still the regnant source theory; major shifts are taking place under the surface. The ground is moving. This conference was not a coronation for the Two Document Hypothesis. Most notable, I detect a new pragmatism with reference to the present state of source criticism of the Synoptics. There is a growing willingness to test the consequences of following different source models, both in the interest of understanding the text and tracing the development of the Jesus tradition in earliest Christianity. If this trend develops, the written legacy of the Oxford conference will prove useful and fruitful.

Conclusion

In fifteen minutes it is not possible to enter into an analysis of the many fine essays in this volume. But as exemplars of an appropriate methodology for the future, I would note particularly David Sim's "Matthew and the Synoptic Problem,"¹³ and William Arnal's lengthy treatment, "The Synoptic Problem and the Historical Jesus."¹⁴ Sim seeks to connect the Synoptic Problem with developments in the earliest stages of the church. He shows creatively that any analysis of the history of the early church inevitably is tied in with our understanding of the composition of the gospels. On the other hand, Arnal engages what is at stake theologically for the different hypotheses with regard to our understanding of Jesus. One final footnote on the question of the names for these first-tier hypotheses; let us all get behind the suggestion in the volume and standardize our terminology -- Two Document Hypothesis, Two Gospel Hypothesis and Farrer Hypothesis. I look forward to us being consistent in this use in our future publications. At least that will be a step forward.

Allan J. McNicol
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¹³ D.C. Sim, *NSSP*, 187-208.

¹⁴ William Arnal, *NSSP*, 371-432.