

THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM: JOHN THE BAPTIST AND JESUS

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CURIOSITY AND COLORED PENCILS

For many New Testament scholars, studying the Synoptic Problem is a bit like studying algebra at school—it is a necessary evil. If you don't have some kind of grasp on the issue, you can't proceed to all the really rewarding, high-stakes issues that come afterwards, redaction-criticism, exegesis of the text, Historical Jesus research. It is a topic one first meets in courses offering introductions to the New Testament, when the major solution to the problem is explained in order to provide a framework for future study. To spend any longer on the problem is commonly regarded as a waste of time. It is too complex, too boring and best left to specialists who apparently retain a fascination with the topic long after they were supposed to have left it behind.

Although many New Testament scholars remain unexcited about the Synoptic Problem, their students do find it engaging once they are given the opportunity to explore it as a problem. While it is the norm among New Testament Introductions simply to present the Two-Source Theory, the dominant solution, as a *fait accompli* and then to refract the data through the lens of that solution,¹ there is actually a better way to approach it. The Synoptic Problem becomes exciting to students when they are introduced to it as a puzzle, as a problem in search of a solution. Engaging students in the humanities is, at its best, about teaching them how to engage critically with the materials rather than about simple description of consensus views. It is about appealing to their curiosity. And when it comes to the Synoptic Problem, curiosity can be combined with colored pencils.²

1. See John Poirier, "The Synoptic Problem and the Field of New Testament Introduction," *JSNT* 32, 2 (2009): 179–90.

2. My introduction to the Synoptic Problem uses the metaphor of finding a way through a maze; Mark Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem: A Way Through the Maze* (London: T&T Clark,

The Synoptic Problem is the study of the similarities and differences between the first three “Synoptic” Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, with a view to discovering their literary relationship. They are called “Synoptic” because they can be viewed together in synopsis in a way that facilitates close comparison like this:³

Matthew 3:13–17	Mark 1:9–11	Luke 3:21–22
<p>Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John to be baptised by him. But John prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptised by you, and yet you come to me?’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.’ Then he allowed him. And when Jesus had been baptised, he arose immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to him and he saw the spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him; and behold a voice from the heavens saying, ‘This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.’</p>	<p>And it came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised in the Jordan by John. And immediately, having arisen from the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the spirit as a dove descending into him. And a voice came from the heavens, ‘You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.’</p>	<p>And it came to pass that while all the people were being baptised, Jesus also having been baptised was praying, and the heaven was opened and the holy spirit descended in bodily form as a dove upon him, and there came a voice from heaven, ‘You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.’</p>

2001). The discussion of coloring the Synopsis is on pp. 33–35.

3. There are two main options for English language Gospel Synopses: K. Aland (ed.), *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1985) and Burton H. Throckmorton, Jr., *Gospel Parallels: A Comparison of the Synoptic Gospels* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1993).

Viewing the parallels together like this instantly allows the reader to see the degree of similarity between these three accounts. And one of the best ways of seeing the similarities and differences even more closely is to print out pages of Synopsis like this and to do some coloring. As it happens, fortune has favored the easy coloring of the Synopsis because there are three Synoptic Gospels and three primary colors. A simple coloring scheme quickly becomes intuitive. Matthew is blue, Mark is red and Luke is yellow. Words found only in Matthew can be colored blue; words found only in Mark can be colored red; words found only in Luke can be colored yellow. Agreements between Matthew and Mark are colored purple (blue + red); agreements between Mark and Luke are colored orange (red + yellow); agreements between Matthew and Luke are colored green (blue + yellow) and agreements between all three are colored brown (blue + red + yellow).

The mix of colors in a pericope like Jesus' baptism will show an attractive rainbow of variation in agreement and disagreement and several elements will quickly become clear. The most immediately striking will be a large wash of blue in Matthew's Gospel, where Matthew alone has the paragraph in which John the Baptist argues with Jesus about his coming for baptism. A closer look will then reveal a range of agreements, between Matthew and Mark (arising from the water), between Mark and Luke ("And it came to pass..." and "you are") and between Matthew and Luke ("opened" and "upon"). But the most common kind of agreements here are triple agreements, between all three Synoptics, including the all important conclusion of the story, "my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."

Synopses like this can be constructed and colored for passage after passage in the Synoptic Gospels. Sometimes the range of similarity and difference will be like that seen in the Baptism account above. At other times, there will be more differences. Sometimes, the wording is remarkably similar, as here in the immediately preceding pericope, John the Baptist's preaching:

Matthew 3:7-10	Luke 3:7-9
Offspring of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Bear fruit therefore worthy of repentance and do not <i>presume</i> to say in yourselves, "We have Abraham as father;" for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Already the axe is laid at the root of the trees; for every tree not producing good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire.	Offspring of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Bear fruit therefore worthy of repentance and do not <i>begin</i> to say in yourselves, "We have Abraham as father;" for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Already the axe is laid at the root of the trees; for every tree not producing good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire

The similarity between the two versions of the speech is remarkable. If one colors the passage using the scheme suggested above, it is a solid wash of green, representing verbatim agreement between Matthew and Luke (in a passage that does not feature in Mark), with only one word different, the Greek words for “pre-sume” and “begin” respectively.

Agreement like this suggests direct copying. The fact that there are other passages with similarly high levels of agreement suggests that the Synoptic Problem is a literary problem, and that the Synoptic Gospels are related to one another in some kind of literary way, a conclusion further reinforced by the fact that the Synoptics sometimes agree with one another in extraordinary Greek constructions like this one:

Matthew 9:6	Mark 2:10–11	Luke 5:24
“But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on the earth to forgive sins,” then he says to the paralytic, “Arise, take up your bed and go to your house.”	“But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on the earth to forgive sins,” he says to the paralytic, “I say to you, Arise, take up your pallet and go to your house.”	“But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on the earth to forgive sins,” he said to the paralytic, “I say to you, Arise and take up your bed and return to your house.”

In all three texts, the sentence “In order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . .” is unfinished, and the narrator breaks in before Jesus resumes the speech. If there were any further doubt about the literary nature of the problem, the striking agreements in order between the three Synoptics would put them to rest. In passage after passage, the three Synoptics are often found to be in agreement in order.

If three students showed this kind of agreement in a college paper, their teacher would refer them to the student disciplinary body without hesitation. It would be clear that at least two of the three had been engaged in some kind of copying. The only question would be which of the three had been engaged in copying. Were any of them copying from one or more of the others? Or might they have been copying from another source, a textbook or an online essay?

In the case of the plagiarizing students, the instructor could interview one or more of them to work out which ones were the offenders. Unfortunately for the contemporary scholar, there is no chance of this kind of firsthand cross-examination of the evangelists, and the early church witnesses are little help. They do not share the contemporary scholar’s interest in source criticism, and they are either

too late or too terse to shed much light.⁴ The challenge of the Synoptic Problem is therefore to work out, from analysis of the internal evidence, what the literary interrelationship might be. There are several important clues, and these can be explored by taking a closer look at some of the specific examples we have already begun to encounter, the material about John the Baptist in Matthew 3:1–17, Mark 1:1–11 and Luke 3:1–22. This material could hardly be more useful as a way of exploring the Synoptic Problem. It occurs right at the beginning of the Gospel story proper, preceded only by the Birth Narratives in Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2 and it features all the different kinds of Synoptic material, with triple agreements, double agreements, singly attested material and combinations of all different kinds. The variety of the colors in this material encourages the student's curiosity. What does the evidence illustrate?

MARK 1:9–11 (BAPTISM) AND THE PRIORITY OF MARK

In the Synopsis above of the Baptism pericope (Mark 1:9–11 and parallels), there are several triple agreements, several agreements between Mark and Matthew and several agreements between Mark and Luke. (There are also several Matthew-Luke agreements, to which we will return in due course). Pericopes like this are common among the Synoptic Gospels and for most New Testament scholars they illustrate the phenomenon known as the Priority of Mark, whereby Matthew and Luke both knew and used Mark's Gospel. It can be diagrammed like this:

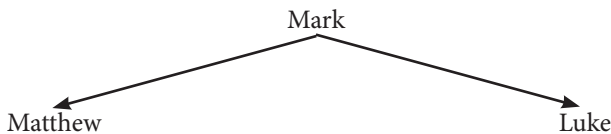


Fig.1: The priority of Mark.

The theory is that Matthew and Luke make best sense on the assumption that they were both copying from Mark but at the same time making modifications to the Marcan material. Most scholars currently think that this is more plausible than the major alternative explanation, that Mark was combining elements in Matthew and Luke, so that the arrows in the above diagram are reversed.⁵

4. See my *Synoptic Problem*, 76–81.

5. See further my *Synoptic Problem*, ch. 3 and *The Case Against Q: Studies in Marcan Priority*

Certain features of the baptism accounts make good sense on the assumption that Matthew and Luke were editing Mark and that Mark was, therefore, the first Gospel to have been written. There are several features in Mark's account that could have caused concern amongst early Christians. Mark introduces John's baptism as "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4) and a moment later, Jesus himself gets baptized by John. One might reasonably infer from this that Jesus, too, came confessing his sins (Mark 1:5) and that he was in some way inferior to John, in spite of the attempts to establish Jesus' superior status (Mark 1:7). Whatever Mark's intention, it looks like both Matthew and Luke rewrote the account in order to deal with the potentially dangerous inferences that certain readers might make.

Matthew avoids the specific description of John's baptism as a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4) and instead speaks about John the Baptist preaching repentance using the same words that Jesus himself will use in Matt 4:17, "Repent! For the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near!" (Matt 3:2). Now John is closely aligned with Jesus' own message of repentance. But this is subtle and insufficient, and something more is needed. The student who has colored the Synopsis of the passage above will have noticed a large wash of blue—unique Matthean material featuring a conversation between the Baptist and Jesus in which John balks over baptizing Jesus, and Jesus piously asserts the need for them to fulfill all righteousness (Matt 3:14–15). Any doubts about the appropriateness of the action are quickly put to rest at Jesus' own insistence.

Luke, too, appears to have made changes to Mark. They are at first sight more difficult to spot but on closer inspection are no less radical than Matthew's changes. Typically, Jesus' experience of the Spirit's descent is enhanced by the Lucan notice that Jesus was "praying" (Luke 3:21, cf. 5:16, 6:12, 9:18, 9:28–29, 11:1, 22:44), but the really striking difference is that Luke's terse narration of the baptism (3:21–22) takes place after he has narrated the arrest and imprisonment of John (Luke 3:18–20), an event saved for later by the other Synoptics (Matt 14:3–12 // Mark 6:17–29). Now it is not even clear quite how Jesus' baptism happens except that it occurs "in a baptism of all the people and Jesus also was baptized" (Luke 3:21).

The alternative explanation, that Mark created his starker, more primitive, more theologically risky account on the basis of editing Matthew's and Luke's accounts seems less plausible than that Matthew and Luke were engaging in a clever damage-limitation exercise. It provides a good example of how study of

the Synoptic Problem can provide insight into the development of early Christian thinking about Jesus. Although the “criterion of embarrassment” is usually associated with Historical Jesus research, it actually applies at a more fundamental and less controversial level in studies of inter-Synoptic relationships. Here, the later evangelists appear to have been embarrassed by what they found in their source material. They value Mark, they like the story of Jesus’ epiphany and the divine voice affirming him as God’s Son and there is a traditional narrative constraint to begin the story with the Baptist,⁶ but they do not want to risk an inference that Jesus came to John for a baptism “of repentance” and they want to underline Jesus’ superiority to him. One might almost say that they are engaged in a kind of orthodox redaction of Mark.

JOHN’S PREACHING (MATT 3:7–10 // LUKE 3:7–9) AND THE Q HYPOTHESIS

While the theory of Marcan Priority provides strong grounds for understanding the construction of the John the Baptist material in the Synoptic Gospels, it can only take us so far. Passages like Matt 3:7–10 // Luke 3:7–9 (John’s preaching, above) show verbatim agreement between Matthew and Luke alone in what is known as “double tradition” material. Depending on how one counts them, there are between two-hundred and two-hundred and fifty verses like this in Matthew and Luke. The most common explanation for the existence of this material is that Matthew and Luke were independent of one another and that they were both dependent on a lost document which scholars label Q, originally so named, it is said, because it is the first letter of the German “Quelle,” meaning “source,” but retained because it is quirky and memorable. The diagram for the Priority of Mark can then be amended in the following way to represent the Two-Source Theory:

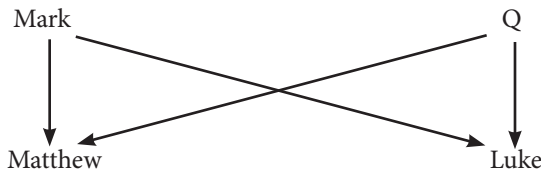


Fig. 2: The two-source theory.

6. Luke in particular feels that this is the right place to begin the story—cf. Acts 1:5, 1:22, “beginning with the baptism of John,” 10:37, 11:16, 13:24–25, 19:4. John’s Gospel too, in spite of its cosmic opening, begins with multiple references to John the Baptist.

Matthew and Luke draw independently on both Mark and Q, their two sources. A lot of the Q material is made up of sayings, usually Jesus' sayings, but in the example here (Matt 3:7–10 // Luke 3:7–9), John's. The degree of agreement is so high that it makes a purely oral hypothesis an impossibility. This is the kind of agreement that requires direct copying, and so Q, like Mark, would appear to have been a document.⁷

Since no textual witnesses of Q have survived, it can only be reconstructed by the careful analysis of Matthew's and Luke's double tradition material. In cases like this, where there is almost one hundred per cent agreement between the two, the reconstruction is straightforward. In other cases, where Matthew's and Luke's wording varies, the interpreter has to make a judgment about which of the evangelists is more likely to have changed the wording of his source. Sometimes this is a difficult business because good reasons can be given for either one of the evangelists to have made the change in question. Nevertheless, a working critical text of Q is now available, the product of years of careful, collaborative work by a group of scholars known as "the International Q Project."⁸ The text is, of course, only an approximation of what the hypothetical document looked like, but it has value in reminding us that there must have been other source materials which will be forever lost. Indeed Luke, in his preface (1:1–4), appears to allude to the existence of "many" narratives of the events that "have been fulfilled among us."

The apparent contours of Q are fascinating in that it is difficult to see any sign of a Passion Narrative. And since so much of Q is made up of sayings material, some have speculated that it might be an example of a "sayings gospel" like the *Gospel of Thomas*, which is made up of loosely connected sayings of Jesus with no narrative structure and no Passion. If Q is indeed like *Thomas* and if both can be dated to the first century, then it would appear that there was a trajectory in early Christianity that was less interested in Jesus' death and instead placed special emphasis on the salvific importance of the proper interpretation of Jesus' words.⁹

7. See further John S. Kloppenborg, *Q, the Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

8. James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann and John S. Kloppenborg, *The Critical Edition of Q: Synopsis including the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark and Thomas with English, German, and French translations of Q and Thomas* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) and James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann and John S. Kloppenborg, *The Sayings Gospel Q in Greek and English: with Parallels from the Gospels of Mark and Thomas* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

9. For this perspective, note in particular the seminal work James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971). Helmut Koester writes that "The *Gospel of Thomas* and Q challenge the assumption that the early church was unanimous in making Jesus' death and resurrection the fulcrum of Christian faith. Both documents presuppose that Jesus' significance lay in his words, and in his words alone," *Ancient*

However, passages like those under discussion place a question mark against this perspective. While the *Gospel of Thomas* is reasonably characterized as a sayings gospel, Q, by contrast, appears to show a marked interest in Jesus' career, with clear signs of a narrative sequence and a major investment in the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist. Like Mark's Gospel, Q begins with John the Baptist, who preaches about repentance (Matt 3:8 // Luke 3:8, "bear fruit worthy of repentance"), baptizes with water and speaks of a "coming one" (Matt 3:11 // Luke 3:16), Jesus, who is himself baptized (Matt 3:16 // Luke 3:21). Many of these early signals are apparently picked up later in Q. When John the Baptist makes another appearance, he is in prison, apparently having been arrested (Matt. 11:2–6 // Luke 7:18–23), though he can communicate with "his disciples" who now follow up on the question of Jesus' identity as "the coming one," an identity which is, incidentally, confirmed not through Jesus' words but through his deeds in fulfillment of Scripture (Matt 11:4–5 // Luke 7:22). All this is quite unlike anything that one finds in the *Gospel of Thomas* and so it may be that the generic differences between the two texts turn out to be greater than the generic similarities.

MARK 1:7–8 AND MARK-Q OVERLAPS

Indeed, Q becomes increasingly curious the more that one looks at it. The oddity of its lack of a Passion Narrative becomes striking when one notices the degree of overlap Q has with elements in Mark's Gospel, a feature that is prominent in the texts under consideration here. It is not just that Q begins its account by presupposing a narrative about John the Baptist and Jesus, but it is also that the wording itself overlaps:

Matthew 3:11–12	Mark 1:7–8	Luke 3:15–17
	7 And he was preaching, and saying,	15 Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he might be the Christ, 16 John answered and said to them all,

<p>11 "I, on the one hand, am baptizing you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove his sandals; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit <i>and fire</i>. 12 <i>His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor; and he will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.</i>"</p>	<p>"After me one is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."</p>	<p>"I, on the one hand, am baptizing you with water; but one is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of his sandals; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit <i>and fire</i>. 17. <i>His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.</i>"</p>
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The words here in italics in Matthew and Luke represent major agreement between the two against Mark. If they are using Mark and Q independently of one another, as the Two-Source Theory suggests, it is difficult to reconstruct the wording of Q here. It would be absurd to imagine that Q simply had "and fire . . ." and that Matthew and Luke each stitched the sayings together in the same way. It must have been the case, then, that Q featured the same account told in the same or similar words.

This phenomenon of "Mark-Q overlap" is one of the most intriguing elements in the Synoptic Problem and it suggests to some scholars that there may be something wrong with the Two-Source Theory. The Two-Source Theory works on the basis that Matthew and Luke are independent of one another, so that neither knows how the other one is treating the Marcan source material that they share. Indeed one of the reasons commonly given for their independence of one another is that they never agree together in major ways against Mark, or, stated another way, that Luke never shows knowledge of Matthew's modifications of Mark. However, examples like this, where Matthew and Luke share a practically identical redaction of Mark 1, appear to contradict those kinds of assertions.¹⁰ Indeed, a large stretch of text, from Matt 3:1 to 4:11, in parallel to sections in Luke 3:1 to 4:13, features a range of agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark of the kind that are supposed not to occur on the Two-Source Theory.

10. For examples of this argument and for a discussion of it, see my *Case Against Q*, 49–54.

Passages like this draw attention to the possibility that Matthew has added to Mark's wording and that Luke has copied the Matthean redactional reframing of this material. This model, known as the Farrer Theory,¹¹ suggests that an additional arrow can be drawn from Matthew to Luke. Marcan Priority is retained, but Luke also knows Matthew. Thus although Luke makes Mark's Gospel his major source, he also uses Matthew and adds supplemental material from there:

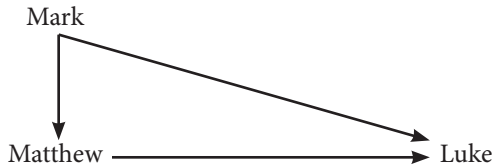


Fig. 3: The Farrer Theory

Students often find this model initially more appealing than the Two-Source theory because it is able to explain the agreements between the Synoptics without appeal to a hypothetical document. It retains the strengths of Marcan Priority but does not require the postulation of an otherwise unattested text. That kind of sceptical perspective can be helpful, but the matter is not going to be settled by reflecting on generalities. Given that many, many texts from antiquity have been lost, the hypothetical nature of Q can never, in and of itself, be held against its plausibility as a means of explaining how Matthew and Luke came to be. It is only the detailed study of the Synopsis that can provide the answers about whether the model stands up to scrutiny or whether an alternative like the Farrer Theory has greater explanatory strength.

VERBATIM AGREEMENT IN MATTHEW 3 AND LUKE 3

One way forward is to ask whether the language shared by Matthew and Luke alone makes better sense as material they both took over from a hypothetical text or whether it makes better sense as having been copied by Luke from Matthew. There is a potential indicator here that is rarely discussed in the literature, the fact that the agreement between Matthew and Luke in the double tradition is so close.

11. Named after Austin Farrer, "On Dispensing with Q," in *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot* (ed. D. E. Nineham; Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), 55–88. The theory owes most to Michael Goulder. See especially *Luke: A New Paradigm* (JSNTSup 20; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989).

To see the point, we need to look again at the agreement between Matt 3:7–10 and Luke 3:7–9 (above) and between Matt 3:12 and Luke 3:17 (above). The student who colors the synopsis has an easy job in these verses—there is almost one hundred per cent verbatim agreement between Matthew and Luke, so on the coloring scheme suggested above, almost all of it is green. Now the degree of identity between the two here makes much better sense if Luke is copying Matthew than if both are independently copying Q.

In order to illustrate what is at stake, it is worth returning to the analogy of plagiarizing students. If an instructor receives two papers that are almost identical, one possibility is that both students have copied from a third source, perhaps the text book or some online essay. The other possibility is that one student has copied the other's work. The closer the papers are to one another, the more likely it becomes that one copied from the other than that both copied from a third, unknown source.

In the case of Matthew and Luke, there is a way of checking to see whether this very close verbatim agreement is what we ought to expect. On the Two-Source Theory, Matthew and Luke are independently working with both Mark and Q, but they differ in how close they are to one another in the two different types of material. They are more conservative with Q (double tradition) than they are with Mark (triple tradition). Passages with very high verbatim agreement are often found in the double tradition (e.g. Matt 6:24 // Luke 16:13, Matt 12:43–45 // Luke 11:24–26) but Matthew and Luke do not agree together as closely in their versions of triple tradition passages.¹² It will not do to point out that the evangelists are generally more conservative in sayings material than they are in narrative material because the same phenomenon can be seen there too—Matthew and Luke tend to be closer together in Q sayings material than they are in Marcan sayings material.

On the Farrer theory, the degree of closeness between Matthew and Luke in double tradition is just what one might have expected. They are not mutually copying a third source, as they are in triple tradition, but Luke is copying directly from Matthew. Thus the near verbatim agreements between Matthew and Luke in passages like Matt 3:7–10 // Luke 3:7–9 and Matt 3:12 // Luke 3:17 make good sense as cases where Luke shows his direct knowledge of Matthew, where there is one arrow rather than two.

12. One of the clearest representations of the relevant data is Charles E. Carlston and Dennis Norlin, "Once More—Statistics and Q," *HTR* 64 (1971): 59–78 (71), though they use the data to point to the written nature of Q.

MATTHEW 3, LUKE 3, AND MATTHEAN LANGUAGE

The question about the degree of identity between Matthew and Luke in passages like this does not of course settle the question about which way the arrow should point. Advocates of the Farrer theory make a case for Luke's familiarity with Matthew and one of the reasons that this direction of dependence appears more plausible than the opposite¹³ is that the language, imagery and rhythm of much of the double tradition material makes better sense as originating in Matthew's redaction. So here in Matt 3:7 // Luke 3:7, the construction "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" bears the hallmarks of Matthew's style. He will use this offensive vocative + rhetorical question twice again in remarkably similar forms, Matt 12:34, "Brood of vipers! How can you speak good things when you are evil?" and Matt 23:33, "Snakes, brood of vipers! How can you flee from the judgment of gehenna?"¹⁴ It is not only the rhythm but also the imagery (snakes' offspring) and language (wrath, judgment, gehenna) that sounds Matthean and may indicate in which direction the borrowing is going.

Similarly, in Matt 3:10 // Luke 3:9, "Therefore every tree not producing good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" appears again only in Matthew, in virtually identical format, in 7:19, and it is not just the language but also the imagery that is Matthean. Matthew's is the Gospel that exploits harvest imagery to tell the story of judgment and hell-fire. The Matthean apocalyptic scenario, here appearing for the first time in the Gospel, will be repeated at regular intervals, with a demand for good fruits (good works) from the faithful, a separation between good and evil at the Eschaton, and the burning of those whose deeds are evil (see especially Matt 13:24–30, 36–43, 47–50; 25:31–46).

This way of modeling Synoptic relationships has certain advantages. The Farrer Theory is able to provide a plausible account of this complex of agreements without appeal to a hypothetical text and without having to suppose that both Matthew and Luke behaved in practically identical ways independently of one another. This is, of course, only one brief series of Synoptic parallels and the same kind of analysis and reflection needs to take place in relation to all the data in order to see which models are preferable overall. The fact that scholars still disagree about the Synoptic Problem shows that the data can be read in different ways, and that scholars continue to assess the competing models differently.

13. Among other reasons, it is also noteworthy that Luke sometimes apparently becomes fatigued when copying from Matthew—see my "Fatigue in the Synoptics," *NTS* 44 (1998): 45–58.

14. See also Matt 23:17 and 23:19 and Michael Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974), 242–44.

Nevertheless, there is a real pay-off for studying the Synoptic Problem, however the individual scholar or student attempts to resolve it, and there is good reason to begin studying it at an early point in exploring Christian origins. Spending time with a Synopsis of the Gospels is ideal for unlearning naïve pre-suppositions about how the Gospels were written. That there was a lot of copying going on might make us skeptical about seeing the three Synoptic Gospels as three separate witnesses to the same events. That there are many differences between the Synoptic Gospels gives us reason to reflect on the historical and theological motivations for the differences. In the case of the John the Baptist narrative, the degree of copying suggests some caution in reconstructing his mission and his relationship with Jesus. The Synoptic differences similarly give us pause, especially as Matthew's John sounds so similar to Matthew's Jesus.

ELIJAH, JOHN THE BAPTIST, AND JESUS

However, the payoff for engaging in serious study of the Synoptic Problem is not solely about inviting the student into a kind of healthy skepticism. Drawing lines between the Synoptic Gospels enables the historian to reflect on the interaction between differing Christian portraits of Jesus. If Mark is indeed the first Gospel, it can provide insight into how Christology developed and it can offer our earliest major source for studying the historical Jesus. And watching the way that Matthew and Luke interact with Mark is itself instructive in understanding the development of Christian thought. Indeed there is one suggestive example in the parallels that have been under discussion here. There is an element in both Mark and Matthew that is absent in Luke and it demonstrates the importance also of reading intertextually, in light of the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as intra-Synoptically:

Matthew 3:4	Mark 1:6
Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.	John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey.

This language describing John the Baptist's clothing and diet is clearly reminiscent of 2 Kgs 1:8 and it suggests an identification between John and the prophet Elijah. That this is the evangelists' intention is confirmed by other links made later in the narrative, most clearly in Matt 17:9–13 // Mark 9:9–13, where Jesus tells his disciples, on the way down from the mountain where he was transfigured, that "Elijah has come" and, as Matthew then underlines, "the disciples understood that he was

speaking to them of John the Baptist.” The point being made is Christological—it is about Jesus more than it is about John. If John is Elijah, then Jesus is indeed the “coming one,” the Christ, who for Mark and Matthew fulfils the prophecy of Mal 4:5–6. And since John met a violent death, this is a sign that Jesus too will die violently (“So too the Son of Man will suffer at their hands,” Matt 17:12).

The study of the Synoptic Problem helps out in cases like this by drawing attention to similarities as well as differences between the accounts, providing the necessary data for redaction-criticism, which involves the study of the evangelist’s own redactional (editing) agendas. If Matthew is using Mark here, he is wholeheartedly endorsing Mark’s fascinating take on the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus. Where Mark is content simply to allude to the identification, leaving the reader to puzzle out the mystery, Matthew prefers to underline the identification, making it explicit that John is Elijah and drawing the all important conclusion that this confirms Jesus’ identity as the Messiah who will suffer. Mark tells a subtle story in line with his reading of the Hebrew Bible, and Matthew understands, endorses and re-tells Mark’s story in light of his reading of the Hebrew Bible.

Luke, on the other hand, is less enthusiastic about the identification between John the Baptist and Elijah. He has John coming in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17) but he draws back from making the two men identical. His omission of the material about John’s clothing in Mark 1:6 // Matt 3:4 coheres with his omission of the discussion of John’s identity in Matt 17:9–13 // Mark 9:9–13. It is a striking difference and it may be due to Luke’s wish to link Jesus more strongly with Elijah (e.g. Luke 7:11–17, Raising of the Widow of Nain’s Son) and to downplay the importance of John the Baptist, a tendency that John’s Gospel takes further, where “They asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ And he said, ‘I am not.’” (John 1:21).¹⁵

The Synoptic Problem is a staple of historical introductions to the New Testament but it need not be studied in a grudging way, nor should it be confined to the introductory courses and textbooks. Exploring how the Synoptic Gospels relate to one another is not just the beginning point for exploring many key issues in Christian origins; it is an essential component of the ongoing academic study of the New Testament, integral to key questions. In other words, it is a high-stakes game for which curiosity and colored pencils pay off.

15. See further on this material Mark Goodacre, “Mark, Elijah, the Baptist and Matthew: The Success of the First Intertextual Reading of Mark,” in *Biblical Interpretation in Early Christian Gospels*, vol. 2. *Matthew* (ed. Tom Hatina; LNTS 310; London: T&T Clark, 2008), 73–84.

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