

The Perennial Quest for the Word of Life

Seventh-day Adventists and the Synoptic Problem

By Bert Haloviak

In reconstructing the historical Jesus, a few historical presuppositions are important. . . . Here is one presupposition: the Gospel of Mark was used by the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. It was one of their major sources. That is where I begin. If that is wrong, everything will have to be redone. And, of course, it could be proved wrong.

—John Dominic Crossan

With publication of *The Essential Jesus* by Pacific Press and Signs Publishing Company (see pages 11-14, below), Seventh-day Adventists appear to be entering the discussion about the historical Jesus and his portrayal in the first three Gospels that has stood at the center of academic debate and scholarly activity for over a century. This latest entry marks another twist in the winding road that Adventism has followed in its discussion of appropriate biblical scholarship. Because the synoptic problem has been called the “cornerstone” of historical critical scholarship of the Gospels, Adventism’s latest entry is sure to raise questions.¹

Should Adventists become more actively involved in the synoptic problem? Does the traditional “harmonizing” methodology allow Adventists a voice within a scholarly community that has accepted the literary interrelationship of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) for more than 200 years?

"No other enterprise in the history of ideas has been subjected to anywhere near the same degree of scholarly scrutiny," writes Hans-Herbert Stoldt. Adventist involvement would be applauded by Bruce Corley. "Rather than stand in the distance and rail against the excesses of criticism," writes Corley, "it is the better part of academic responsibility, not to say Christian stewardship, to do constructive shaping of the discipline." According to Gregory Boyd, the issue "requires evangelicals to pay attention and prepare themselves to intelligently respond," in order "to be intellectually viable in our age."²

What Is the Synoptic Problem?

The first synoptic comparison of the Gospels was done by J. J. Griesbach in 1774, when he published his *Synopse* and used the word *synoptic* ("to see together"). "The work printed the three Gospels parallel to each other and showed the agreements and disagreements among them," writes Michael G. Steinhauser.³ "Thus, it allowed the reader to observe a threefold fact:"

1. Virtually all the material in Mark appears in Matthew and/or Luke. Of the 661 verses in Mark, over 600 of them are substantially found in Matthew and over 300 in Luke. Furthermore, apart from that material they share with Mark, Matthew and Luke also share in common about 240 verses not found in Mark. These verses consist almost exclusively of sayings of Jesus and discourses.
2. A close comparison of the three synoptic Gospels reveals a high degree of similarity in vocabulary, in word order and sentence structure, as well as in the particularities of style.
3. The sequence of the narrative units (or pericopes) is similar in each of the three synoptic Gospels. It is unlikely that three different authors working entirely independently would have followed narrative sequences so strikingly alike.

The question of the literary relationship of the first three Gospels or, more specifically, the question of how the agreements and disagreements in wording and content, and the order of events, are

to be explained became a central question in New Testament scholarship and remains an important question to this day. This issue constitutes the synoptic problem.⁴

The Two-Source Hypothesis (2SH) and Markan Priority

Most current writers of synoptic commentaries, as well as others within the last generation, proceed on the assumption that Matthew and Luke used Mark as their primary source. In addition, they supposedly accessed a source known as "Q." Material unique to Matthew has been labeled "M," and that unique to Luke "L." Thus, although other hypotheses about literary sources have vigorously challenged the 2- or 4SH since the 1960s, this one still seems to dominate understandings about how the synoptic evangelists utilized their sources as they wrote their Gospels.

Not all New Testament scholars agree to either Markan priority or the necessity of Q.

In 1964 William R. Farmer reopened the synoptic problem by rejecting the priority of the Gospel of Mark and the whole idea of the use of the hypothetical source "Q" by the authors of Matthew and Luke and called for a return to the hypothesis of Johann Griesbach that Matthew is the first of the synoptic Gospels, that Luke copied his Markan and non-Markan parallels from Matthew, and that Mark put together his Gospel as a conflation of Matthew and Luke.⁵

The Hypothetical Source "Q"

The discovery of the Gospel of Thomas at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945 suggests that something like Q did, in fact, exist.⁶ Some writers have transcended the hypothetical nature of Q and consider it an embedded "Gospel" within Matthew and Luke. "Those two authors also use Mark as a regular source," claims John Dominic Crossan, "so Q is discernible wherever they agree with one another but lack a Markan parallel. Since, like Mark, that document has its own generic integrity and theological consistency apart from its use as a *Quelle* or source for

Matthew Mark Luke Matthew Mark Luke Matthew Mark

others, I refer to it . . . as the *Q Gospel*.”⁷

James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann, and John S. Kloppenborg have attempted the ultimate effort in *Q* research. These three men co-chair the International *Q* Project and have worked with some forty other scholars over a period of a decade to reconstruct *Q* word-for-word in Greek. In 2000, the team published a one-volume critical edition of *Q*. Altogether, it has so far published seven volumes of the “*Documenta Q* Project,” a summary of historically relevant scholarly opinions from French, German, and English scholars on various *Q* topics such as the Lord’s Prayer, the temptations of Jesus, and so forth.⁸

Two-Source Hypothesis and Redaction Criticism

Another form of criticism that has entered into the synoptic discussion is redaction criticism. According to G. R. Osborne, this is “a historical and literary discipline which studies both the ways the redactors/editors/authors changed their sources and the seams or transitions they utilized to link those traditions into a unified whole.”⁹

“The purpose of this approach,” continues Osborne, “is to recover the author’s theology and setting. . . . Redaction criticism must build upon the results of source criticism, for the final results are determined in part by one’s choice of Markan or Matthean priority.”¹⁰

Osborne suggests that any study of the Gospels will be enhanced by redaction-critical techniques: “A true understanding of the doctrine of inspiration demands it. . . . God gave the synoptists freedom to omit, expand and highlight these traditions in order to bring out individual nuances peculiar to their own Gospel.” With that view of how inspiration worked in the Gospels, concludes Osborne, “there is no necessity to theorize wholesale creation of stories, nor to assert that these nuances were not in keeping with the original Gospels.”¹¹

Seventh-day Adventists and Synoptic Research

According to Raymond Cottrell, an associate editor of the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, which was

published between 1953 and 1957, the open theological climate within Adventism in the 1950s to mid-1960s offered an “honest way” for the editors “in their dedication first to the Bible and then to the church” to address the issue of interpretation of the Scriptures.¹²

“We realized that some church members, used to the dogmatic, proof-text approach,” he has recalled, “would feel uncomfortable and threatened by the openness of the *Commentary*, but we believed that in time the church would come to appreciate the virtues of openness and that our endeavor to be faithful to the text of Scripture would have a corrective effect.”¹³

This climate of openness allowed a Seventh-day Adventist, apparently for the first time, to address the question of the synoptic problem in print. Earle Hilgert, professor of New Testament at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary (then in Takoma Park, Maryland), wrote the 230-page article “‘Lower’ and ‘Higher’ Biblical Criticism” that appeared in Volume 5 of the *Commentary*. After a brief history of scholarly approaches to the “literary similarities that exist between the Synoptic Gospels,” Hilgert listed proposed solutions, among them 2SH and an analysis that B. H. Streeter had offered in 1924.¹⁴

Hilgert had offered some “tentative suggestions,” essentially embracing what today is known as the 2SH. Hilgert’s major points were that the Holy Spirit led the synoptic evangelists to “use previously written documents in the preparation of their Gospels”; Mark was “probably” the first Gospel to be written; Mark was “evidently one of the written sources upon which Matthew and Luke drew in composing their accounts of Jesus”; and “similarities in the material common to Matthew and Luke, but not found in Mark, indicate that they drew upon another common source, or sources, besides Mark.”¹⁵

In the end, Hilgert decided that, “Although the exact content and place of origin of this source cannot be determined, the term *Q* may be considered a working label for purposes of identification.”¹⁶

A clearly different atmosphere toward theological openness prevailed during the 1980s. In its approval of the report of the Methods of Bible Study Committee, the 1986 Annual Council of the General Conference accepted the following statement:

uke Matthew Mark Luke Matthew Mark Luke M

In recent decades the most prominent method in biblical studies has been known as the historical-critical method. Scholars who use this method, as classically formulated, operate on the basis of presuppositions which, prior to studying the biblical text, reject the reliability of accounts of miracles and other supernatural events narrated in the Bible. Even a modified use of this method that retains the principle of criticism which subordinates the Bible to human reason is unacceptable to Adventists.¹⁷

The committee rejected comparative analysis of sources that synoptic evangelists used. Instead, in cases of apparent "discrepancy or contradiction," readers were urged to "look for the underlying harmony" and to "keep in mind that dissimilarities may be due to minor errors of copyists or may be the result of differing emphases and choice of materials of various authors who wrote under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit for different audiences under different circumstances."¹⁸

Some denominational theologians urged the Church to take a decisive stand against the historical-critical method. "The historical-critical method has emptied churches in Europe," claimed one, "it has taught man to live autonomously relative to God's Word. As a church we must take a decisive stand before we find ourselves in similar circumstances. We must recognize where we are and treat the causes of the disease before the results are fatal."¹⁹

Another wrote that "Rejection of the historical-critical method cannot be done partially. Who keeps a little of it, keeps it entirely. . . . I entirely reject any humanistic scientific-critical method for studying the Scriptures."²⁰

The major theological voice against approaches to the synoptic problem that stress literary dependence was Gerhard Hasel, professor of Old Testament and Biblical Theology at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. In two major works on hermeneutics, Hasel urged against focusing on "a supposedly preliterate stage or its reconstructed setting in life." Instead, he called for a focus solely upon the final text of the Scripture "as it is available to us."²¹

Hasel exhibited wide familiarity with the literature of source, form, and redaction criticism, yet he concluded, "We believe that the historical-critical method is not an adequate method of Bible study for a person who accepts the Bible as the Word of God."²²

In 1982, John Brunt offered the most compelling Adventist argument in favor of 2SH in synoptic research and the value of the historical-critical method. He made his point in "A Parable of Jesus as a Clue to Biblical Interpretation," which *Spectrum* published in December 1982.²³

Brunt analyzed the parable of the wicked tenants and discussed how each of the synoptic writers used the parable differently. "When the synoptic gospels are carefully compared," noted Brunt, "it is evident that the evangelists have modified material they received" (41).

Brunt embraced the usefulness of redaction critical exegesis. "This modification is purposeful," he wrote. "While in no way contradictory, the Gospels do use the parable with different theological emphases, and the modifications contribute to these emphases. . . . Differences in detail are not merely a matter of faulty memory, but rather of conscious modification in order to communicate a message" (41-42).

Brunt called for Adventists to reap the benefits from studying each synoptists' redaction. "By analyzing the editing of this parable by each gospel writer," he claimed, "Bible students have three texts from which to learn, instead of one" (42).

To Brunt, study of the way each Gospel writer used "both traditional material and his own contributions to form a new literary creation" can provide deep insight into the purpose of the inspired writer and provide insight into relevance of the writing for our time. (37).

Conclusion

Adventists can benefit from a comparative analysis of the sources used in writing the synoptic Gospels.²⁴ These benefits arise partly from the intensity with which the synoptists' words and phrases are examined, thus demanding a close look at the Scriptures.

At present, practitioners of source and redaction criticism no longer view the synoptic evangelists as

Matthew Mark Luke Matthew Mark Luke Matthew Mark

mere purveyors or “scissors and paste” accumulators, but rather as inspired theologians who, although bound to their sources, felt called to organize and adapt their materials within their own contexts.

Regardless of their approach, it seems erroneous for one group of theologians to place practitioners of the 2SH beyond the pale of orthodoxy. Wrote George Eldon Ladd, himself a conservative evangelical scholar, “Most evangelical New Testament scholars have recognized the validity of the ‘documentary hypothesis,’ viz., that Matthew and Luke made use of Mark and Q; and . . . this critical solution is in no way hostile to an evangelical faith.”²⁵

As they have done in other contexts, perhaps Seventh-day Adventists can learn to see Jesus within

the correct text of the Gospels, and the correct way to interpret the Gospels, is a vital aspect of the Church’s perennial quest for the Word of Life.²⁸

Notes and References

1. The epigraph is taken from John Dominic Crossan, in Paul Copan, ed., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? A Debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1998): 33-34. For the synoptic problem in general, see Stephen C. Carlson, “The Synoptic Problem FAQ” <www.mindspring.com/~scarlson/synopt/faq.htm>. There are a number of Web listings useful to study of the Synoptic Gospels. The most useful are Carlson’s, Mahlon Smith, Mark Goodacre, Brian E. Wilson, Thomas R. W. Longstaff.
2. Hans-Herbert Stoldt, *History and Criticism of the Marcan Hypothesis* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1980), 1; Bruce

Not only has this study of the literature led me to appreciate more fully the inspired reconstruction of the synoptists, . . . it has also enhanced my understanding of a more thoroughly contextual approach to studying the Adventist historical interpretation of Scripture.

a later New Testament setting. “The historic figure of Jesus of Nazareth was of such overwhelming importance that even when men were thinking of Jesus primarily as the heavenly Lord,” writes C. K. Barrett, “they chose to interpret, to vary, to modify, to supplement the tradition rather than to abandon it altogether in the interests of a purely supernatural figure; hence the fact . . . that the Gospel account of Jesus belongs to two separate and distinguishable contexts, that of his ministry, and that of the Church after the resurrection.”²⁶

Study of this issue has led me to agree with David Dungan. “At one level, the Synoptic Problem is not really a ‘problem’ at all,” he claims.²⁷

At its deepest level, the Synoptic Problem is not a scientific “problem” but part of the Church’s never-ending conversation with the God of Jesus Christ. At its deepest level, the quest for the correct solution to the Synoptic Problem, like the Church’s quest for the correct canon of the Gospels, and

- Corley, ed., *Colloquy on New Testament Studies: A Time for Reappraisal and Fresh Approaches* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1983), 8; Gregory Boyd, *Cynic Sage or Son of God? Recovering the Real Jesus in an Age of Revisionist Replies* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1995), 11, 19.
3. “The Sayings Gospel Q,” in John S. Kloppenborg et al., *Q Thomas Reader* (Sonoma, Calif.: Polebridge Press, 1990), 8.
 4. Ibid.
 5. Arthur J. Bellinzoni Jr., ed., *The Two-Source Hypothesis: A Critical Appraisal* ([Macon, Ga.]: Mercer University Press, 1985), 9.
 6. Robert H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1987), 109.
 7. John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York, N.Y.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994): x-xi.
 8. James M. Robinson, “The Real Jesus of the Sayings ‘Q’ Gospel” <www.religion-online.org>.
 9. G. R. Osborne, “Redaction Criticism,” in Joel B. Green, and Scot McKnight, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992), 662-63.
 10. Ibid.
 11. Ibid.
 12. Raymond F. Cottrell, “The Untold Story of the Bible Commentary,” *Spectrum* 16.3 (Aug. 1985): 45-46.
 13. Ibid., 47.
 14. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1956), 5:175-79.
 15. Ibid.

Luke Matthew Mark Luke Matthew Mark Luke M

16. Ibid.

17. General Conference of SDAs, "Methods of Bible Study Committee Report," *1986 Annual Council/Booklet*, 17-23. It seems apparent that a basic tenet of the 2SH and of redaction criticism is inadvertently accepted within the phrase "different audiences under different circumstances." Indeed, the document, no doubt unknowingly, accepts many of the basic assumptions that have traditionally been accepted by what is known as the historical-critical method.

18. Ibid., 22.

19. E. Edward Zinke, "Historical Criticism," 5. <biblicalresearch.gc.adventist.org/documents/historicalcriticism.htm>

20. Mario Veloso, "Modern Scientific-Critical Method—A Testimony," *Adventist Perspectives* 6.2 (1992): 35.

21. Gerhard Hasel, *Understanding the Living Word of God* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1980), 158.

22. Gerhard Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today: An Analysis of Modern Methods of Biblical Interpretation and Proposals for the Interpretation of the Bible as the Word of God* (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Research Institute, 1985), 98. Some major SDA works (listing not intended to be exhaustive) addressing the synoptic problem that disagree with Hasel's position are George E. Rice, *Luke, a Plagiarist?* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1983); Tom Shepherd, *Markan Sandwich Stories: Narration, Definition, and Function* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1993) (both of these works emphasize an oral transmission hypothesis as a suggestion toward explaining the synoptic problem); Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown,

Md.: Review and Herald, 1991); John McVay, "The Synoptic Problem: Conference Study Paper" (1997) <www.andrews.edu/~jmcvay>; Robert K. McIver, *The Four Faces of Jesus: Four Gospel Writers, Four Unique Perspectives, Four Personal Encounters, One Complete Picture* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2000); Ernest Bursery, "Texts and Trivia: The Denials of Peter" *Spectrum* 30.2 (spring 2002).

23. Pages 35-43.

24. Not only has this study of the literature led me to appreciate more fully the inspired reconstruction of the synoptists as they related to their own time, it has also enhanced my understanding of a more thoroughly contextual approach to studying the Adventist historical interpretation of Scripture. For example, the Parable of the Ten Virgins is not, nor should it be, interpreted today as during the "shut door" period.

25. *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1967), 148.

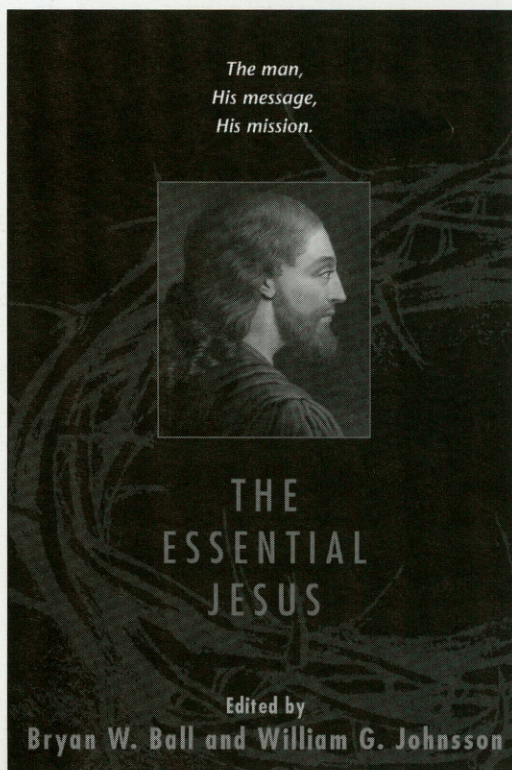
26. *Jesus and the Gospel Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 16.

27. *A History of the Synoptic Problem* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 394.

28. Ibid.

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