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# The Synoptic Problem and The Genre Question

John E. Toews

Throughout my seminary and graduate studies in New Testament during the 1960's I was told there were two "assured results" of modern biblical studies. The first was that the Gospel of Mark was written first and was used by Matthew and Luke. The second was that the gospels constituted a unique literary form in the ancient world.

If both "assured results" are correct, the author of Mark was a creative genius who gave birth to a new form of literature. Matthew and Luke imitated this new "gospel genre" and borrowed much of his material as well. Of course, their gospels are much longer because they contain material not found in Mark. But Mark was the literary pioneer.

There has been a "shaking of the foundations" since my teachers passed on these "assured results" of modern study. Both the priority of Mark and the uniqueness of the gospel genre are being challenged. The purpose of this article is to outline the challenge to the prevailing consensus and to summarize recent thinking concerning the synoptic problem and the literary form of the gospels.

## ***The Synoptic Problem***

The literary relationship of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) has been considered a problem since the early church fathers because of their extensive overlap in content. Mark has 661 verses, of which 601 are found in Matthew and Luke. Matthew contains 90% of Mark's material, and Luke contains over 50% of Mark's gospel. Only three or four of Mark's 88 literary units (technically known as *pericopae*) are not found in either Matthew or Luke.

To complicate matters further, all three gospels tell the same story (common subject matter); they tell the story in the same order (a similar sequence of events); they tell the story in the same way (similar word and sentence order); and they tell the story with the same words (they have extensive vocabulary agreement, even using the same harsh grammatical constructions and unusual words).

The first explanation offered by the early church fathers was that each writer independently used a common apostolic witness (a common oral tradition). By the time of Augustine (d. A.D. 430), however, the fathers were

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generally agreed that the similarity was due to a literary interdependence. Augustine explained this interdependence by arguing for the priority of Matthew. The first three gospels were written in the same order as they appear in the canon, and the later ones used the earlier writings. Thus Mark abbreviated Matthew; Luke used both Matthew and Mark.

Augustine's proposal seemed to satisfy the questions in the church. The question of synoptic relationships did not surface again in a significant way until the rise of modern critical biblical study in the eighteenth century. Then the options of the early fathers were re-stated in new forms. Men like G. E. Lessing, J. G. Eichhorn and J. G. Herder argued that each gospel writer had used a common gospel, oral or written, in a different form. In 1789 J. J. Griesbach reaffirmed the Augustinian solution in a slightly modified form. In what later became known as the Griesbach hypothesis, he sought to establish the priority of Matthew and the subsequent sequence of Luke and Mark. That is, Mark was the last of the three and abbreviated Matthew.

K. Lachmann in 1835 used the same data and the same comparative method of textual analysis as Griesbach but arrived at a different solution. He proposed the priority of Mark and the dependence of Matthew and Luke on Mark. Markan priority was given its classic form by H. J. Holtzmann in 1883, and strongly re-affirmed by B. Weiss in Europe in 1886 and by B. H. Streeter in England in 1924. Thereafter the question seemed closed. The overwhelming scholarly consensus favored Markan priority. By the middle of the present century the hypothesis of Markan priority had become dogma, one of the "assured results" of modern biblical study. An introduction to the gospels published last year still assumes that Markan priority is a historical fact rather than a theoretical model.<sup>1</sup>

An earthquake occurred in 1964. In *The Synoptic Problem?* W. R. Farmer offered a thoroughgoing critique of Markan priority and the assumptions on which the theory was constructed. Furthermore, he argued for a return to the Griesbach hypothesis of Matthean priority. The initial response to Farmer was mixed. There were some very negative and emotional rejections of his study.<sup>3</sup> Other responses ranged from cautiously critical to mildly favorable.<sup>4</sup> I remember reading Farmer's book in 1968 during my first year of doctoral studies. I was instinctively drawn to his critique of Markan priority, but less certain of the argument for Matthean priority. But most of my teachers and fellow graduate studies ignored Farmer. He was trying to turn back the clock. Markan priority was secure.

But Markan priority was not as secure as many wanted to believe. E. P. Sanders in 1969 published the most influential book resulting from Farmer's reopening of the synoptic problem.<sup>5</sup> He demonstrated on the basis of careful textual study that the tendencies in the synoptic gospels were much more fluid than people like Lachmann and Streeter had allowed. There was no simple movement of abbreviation or of less specificity from Mark to Matthew, but both expansion and abbreviation, both greater and lesser specificity. Sanders was followed by D. L. Dungan's vigorous case for the Griesbach

hypothesis in 1970;<sup>6</sup> two dissertations by O. L. Cope<sup>7</sup> and T. W. Longstaff<sup>8</sup> in 1971 and 1973 made the case for Matthean priority. The American challenge to Markan priority was supported in 1977 by H. H. Stoldt, *Geschichte und Kritik der Markushypothese*. Stoldt argued that Markan priority is based on a series of *ad hoc* conjectures, misleading inferences, and inconsistent arguments. The case, he insisted, has not been proven textually.<sup>9</sup>

The debate triggered by Farmer's book was carried on in public contexts as well. The first was a series of seminars on gospel relationships, sponsored by the Society of Biblical Literature, which began in 1969. Another series of seminars were conducted within the Society for New Testament Studies from 1971. The first round of seminars in the Society of Biblical Literature came to a dramatic conclusion in a public debate between Farmer/Stoldt and opponents in 1978. There has also been a series of international conferences on gospel relationships. The first occurred in Pittsburgh, April 1970.<sup>10</sup> It was followed by a Griesbach Bicentenary Colloquium in Münster, Germany, July, 1976.<sup>11</sup> A year later (May, 1977) a "Colloquy on the Gospels" convened in San Antonio, Texas.<sup>12</sup> The fourth was "The Cambridge Griesbach Conference" held in Cambridge, England, August, 1979.<sup>13</sup> All four conferences were attended by an ecumenical group of renowned gospel scholars. A fifth conference has been announced for 1984.

While the argument over Markan or Matthean priority has been joined since 1964, another older explanation has emerged with new force. Since the late 1950's and early 1960's two Swedish scholars, H. Riesenfeld and B. Gerhardsson, have been making the case for a common oral tradition as the source for each gospel writer.<sup>14</sup> Both men are leading figures in the conferences on gospel relationships, and their case is receiving a more respectable hearing now than it did 20 years ago. The case for an oral tradition used independently by each gospel writer was strengthened in 1978 by a Canadian classicist, J. Rist.<sup>15</sup> He argues carefully and persuasively that neither Markan nor Matthean priority can explain much of the evidence in the present form of the gospels. He proposes an on-going oral tradition as the common source for each of the gospels as the best explanation of similarities and differences in the synoptic gospels.

The state of synoptic problem studies today must be characterized by the word "pluralism." No single gospel source theory can any longer claim automatic acceptance over others. Three major theories — Markan priority, Matthean priority, oral tradition — seek to explain the synoptic problem. Each has its adherents. Each group of theorists knows that its case depends on which theory best explains the evidence in the texts of the synoptic gospels. That awareness promises an era of careful and creative gospel studies.

### ***The Genre Question***

The year 1964 also witnessed the re-opening of the old question about gospel literary form (genre). Scholars were interested in the gospel genre ear-

ly in the century. For example, J. Weiss in 1903 suggested that the literary form of the gospel might be related to ancient memorabilia (Justin Martyr referred to the gospels in that way around A.D. 150) or to peripatetic biography. In 1915 C. W. Votaw argued that the gospels were examples of Graeco-Roman popular biography as distinguished from historical biography.

The search for the more exact literary context of the gospels ended in 1919 with the introduction of form criticism by K. L. Schmidt and M. Dibelius. The concern shifted from the form of the gospel as a whole to the form of the smaller units of tradition collected and transmitted by the gospel writers. R. Bultmann sealed the issue in 1921 with his monumental *History of the Synoptic Tradition*. The collection and transmission of the smaller units of gospel material, he argued, used traditional Jewish and Hellenistic forms. But the form of the gospel as a whole was unique to the Christian church. The gospel, Bultmann argued, was the proclamation of the cross and resurrection of Jesus as a fulfillment of Scripture. The gospels, he went on, were the result of a gradual expansion of this proclamation. Over time the early Christians added miracle stories, or sayings, or myths, or the teachings of early Christian preachers to the central proclamation. The Gospel of Mark was the first end product of this historical development. It married the unique message of the gospel with a unique literary form. Bultmann's absolute stance against any literary analogy to the gospels closed the question of gospel genre. His understanding of the gospel form, however, raised serious questions about the historical reliability of the gospel records and led to the new quest for the historical Jesus.

The Bultmannian consensus began to unravel in 1964-65. Two different developments opened the question of gospel genre in those years. First, two of Bultmann's students, H. Koester and J. M. Robinson, began to discuss the genre of collections of like materials in the gospels, e.g., miracle stories, sayings, parables.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, M. Hadas and M. Smith pointed to the relationship between the gospels and ancient aretalogies in *Heroes and Gods* (1965).<sup>17</sup> An aretalogy is a narrative of miraculous deeds designed to accredit the divine power of a god or hero. Initially the book was ignored; it was not reviewed in scholarly journals for the first four years. By 1969, however, a group of scholars within the Society of Biblical Literature agreed to establish a seminar to examine the literary character of the canonical gospels. The following year the Hadas and Smith book was the main topic of discussion at the seminar. The same year, 1970, Robinson proposed that Mark and John had composed their gospels with the aid of a prior collection which he called an aretalogy.<sup>18</sup> The definition of a gospel genre was suddenly an open question.

Several forces were at work to re-open the genre question in the late 60's and early 70's. The first was a growing critique of the form-critical approach to the gospels in particular and the historical critical method of studying the Scriptures in general. That is, the post-critical mood in much modern scholarship began to impact biblical scholarship. A second, and closely

related movement, was the growing influence of cross-disciplinary studies. Literary criticism in recent decades had agreed that a particular text standing alone could not communicate meaning. The meaning of what is said is determined by its context. That basic interpretive rule, it was pointed out, applied not only to words in a sentence, or sentences in a paragraph, or a paragraph in a larger literary section, but to documents as a whole. A genre is a sociological and literary convention through which meaning is conveyed. To argue that the gospel genre is unique raises the possibility that it communicated no meaning because no one in the ancient world knew how to interpret the form.<sup>19</sup>

Two additional observations emerged rather quickly from the impact of such thinking. First, the question of content and genre is separable. A distinctive theological message does not necessitate a unique literary genre to communicate the content. Paul, for example, used the common letter genre of his day to communicate his uniquely Christian gospel. Secondly, the critical element in genre studies is to discover the way in which an author transforms an existing genre to communicate his message. Thus a writing must be interpreted in the context of a large group of similar texts. A totally novel form would be unintelligible. But the interpretation of the text in the context of its larger genre must also be sensitive to changes in the genre that communicate meaning.<sup>20</sup>

The current state of genre studies must also be characterized as "pluralistic." There are two broad movements. The one seeks to understand the genres of special collections of like materials within the present gospels and their meaning in relation to similar collections in the ancient world. For example, one type of collection consists of miracle stories which point to the extraordinary power of God in Jesus. Such collections call the disciples to receive the benefits of the power of God for themselves. A second type of collection is the sayings of Jesus. Such collections state that God's presence is manifest in theological and moral guidance which calls the disciple to obedience. A third type of collection pictures Jesus as the revealer. God's presence is manifest in the disclosure of new information about the ultimate origin or destiny of man or the will of God for man in the world. The disciple is called to change the nature of his/her life in accordance with the new insight communicated by God.<sup>21</sup>

Another aspect of this sort of genre studies is to find ancient analogies to the gospels as a whole. These studies move in four different but related directions. The first looks for analogies in Graeco-Roman literature. Here three genre types have been proposed: (1) the aretological biography, the story of a god or hero who performs marvelous deeds;<sup>22</sup> (2) the laudatory biography, the story which narrates the greatness and merit of an individual;<sup>23</sup> (3) the tragic drama, which seeks to interpret the gospels by means of the Socratic dialogues and Aristotle's theory of tragedy.<sup>24</sup>

The second type of study searches for analogies in Jewish literature. At least four genre types are current: (1) one group of scholars suggest that the

Elijah/Elisha stories provide the genre model for the gospels;<sup>25</sup> (2) another group of writers find analogies in the Moses stories;<sup>26</sup> (3) M. D. Gouldner proposes the midrash genre, a new interpretation of a biblical text or theme in light of a new experience;<sup>27</sup> (4) H. C. Kee works with the model of the eschatological deliverer in Jewish apocalyptic literature.<sup>28</sup>

A third kind of study seeks to apply modern genre theory to the gospels. N. R. Peterson and G. W. E. Nickelsburg, in particular, have tried to interpret the Gospel of Mark on the basis of “intrinsic/extrinsic models of genre analysis.”<sup>29</sup>

The fourth type argues for the merger of the generic worlds of both Jewish and Graeco-Roman culture. Robbins proposes the category of “eschatological memorabilia” as the genre for the Gospel of Mark.<sup>30</sup> “Eschatological” points to the prophetic, eschatological, and apocalyptic analogies, while “memorabilia” suggests the rehearsal of individual episodes found in Hellenistic biography.

It is clear that there is no consensus about the specific genre of the gospels. But there is general agreement that the gospels do not represent a unique literary genre. The gospels must be interpreted in the context of ancient biographical literature. The thematic dominance of the passion narratives in each gospel indicates that the gospel writers did not blindly adopt available literary conventions. Rather they adapted existing genres to communicate the message that Jesus is Messiah and Lord.

### **Conclusion**

There is new excitement in gospels studies since 1964. Scholarly and literary activity is creative and prodigious. Much new light is being shed on the gospels in general and on many specific texts or collections of texts.

Current studies of the synoptic problem and the genre question are emphasizing the critical role of the early church in the formation of the gospels. The gospels represent the witness literature of the early church to the messiahship and lordship of Jesus. Both the form and the content utilize and transform existing categories and genres to proclaim “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> F. Nickle, *The Synoptic Gospels* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> New York: Macmillan, 1964.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, F. W. Beare, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (1965): 295-297; T. A. Burkill, *Christian Century* 81 (1964): 1430; F. C. Grant, *Interpretation* 19 (1965): 352-354; W. Schmithals, *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 92 (1967): cols. 424-425.

<sup>4</sup> See J. W. Cook, *Religion in Life* 34 (1964): 639-640; W. E. Hull, *Review and Expositor* 65

(1968): 490-492; J. H. Ludlum, *Christianity Today* 9 (1964): 306; J. Reumann, *Dialog* 4 (1964): 308-311.

<sup>5</sup> *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> "Mark — the Abridgement of Matthew and Luke," *Perspective* 11 (1970): 51-97.

<sup>7</sup> O. L. Cope, "Matthew: Scribe, Trained for the Kingdom," Dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1971. The dissertation has been published as *Matthew: A Scribe Trained for the Kingdom of Heaven* (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1976).

<sup>8</sup> T.W. Longstaff, "Evidence of Conflation in Mark," Dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1973. The dissertation has been published as *Evidence of Conflation in Mark? A Study in the Synoptic Problem* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977).

<sup>9</sup> Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht. ET, *History and Criticism of the Marcan Hypothesis* (Mercer University Press, 1980). For a defense of the priority of Mark, see J. A. Fitzmyer, "The Priority of Mark and the 'Q' Source in Luke," *Perspective* 11 (1970): 130-170; and C. H. Talbert and E. V. McKnight, "Can the Griesbach Hypothesis be Falsified?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 338-68.

<sup>10</sup> See D. G. Buttrick, ed., *Jesus and Man's Hope*, 2 vols. (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1970), for the papers from this conference.

<sup>11</sup> The papers were published by J. B. Orchard and T. R. W. Longstaff, eds. *J. J. Griesbach. Synoptic and Text Critical Studies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> The papers were published by W. O. Walker, ed., *The Relationships Among the Gospels* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1978).

<sup>13</sup> The papers are to be published soon under the editorship of W. R. Farmer.

<sup>14</sup> See H. Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition and Its Beginnings* (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1957); and B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, (1964); *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1964); and *The Origins of the Gospel Traditions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

<sup>15</sup> *On the Independence of Matthew and Mark* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

<sup>16</sup> See J.M. Robinson, "LOGOI: SOPHON: On the Gattung of Q," *Zeit und Geschichte*, ed. E. Dinkler (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1964), 77-96; and H. Koester, "One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels," *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968): 203-247. Both articles have been republished in *Trajectories through Early Christianity*, ed. J.M. Robinson and H. Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

<sup>17</sup> New York: Harper and Row.

<sup>18</sup> "On the Gattung of Mark (and John)," *Jesus and Man's Hope*, 1:101.

<sup>19</sup> See B. E. Perry, *The Ancient Romances* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967); E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967); R. Wellek and A. Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956); C. H. Talbert, *What is a Gospel?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); N. R. Petersen, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

<sup>20</sup> See Talbert, *What is a Gospel?* p. 11; C. H. Talbert, "The Gospel and the Gospels," *Interpretation* 33 (1979): 352ff.; M. J. Suggs, "Gospel, Genre," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), pp. 370ff.

<sup>21</sup> See Talbert, "The Gospel and the Gospels," pp. 354ff., and the literature he cites.

<sup>22</sup> See Hadas and Smith, *Gods and Heroes*.

<sup>23</sup> See P. Shuler, "The Synoptic Gospels and the Problem of Genre," Dissertation, McMaster University, 1975; and P. Shuler, "The Griesbach Hypothesis and Gospel Genre," *Perkins Journal* 33 (1980): 41-49.

<sup>24</sup> See D. L. Barr, "Toward a Definition of Gospel Genre," Dissertation, Florida State



University, 1974; and G. G. Bilezikian, *The Liberated Gospel: A Comparison of the Gospel of Mark and Greek Tragedy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977).

<sup>25</sup> See R. E. Brown, "Jesus and Elisha," *Perspective* 12 (1971): 85-104; and W. Roth, "The Biblical Matrix of Literary Structure and Narrative Execution in the Synoptic Gospel," unpublished paper presented to the Chicago Society for Biblical Research, April, 1980.

<sup>26</sup> See D. A. Baker, "Form and the Gospels," *Downside Review* 88 (1970): 14-26; M. G. Kline, "The Old Testament Origins of the Gospel Genre," *Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (1975): 1-27.

<sup>27</sup> *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974).

<sup>28</sup> *Community of the New Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977).

<sup>29</sup> See N. R. Petersen, "The So-Called Gnostic Type Gospels and the Question of the Genre Gospel," unpublished paper presented to the Task Force on Gospel Genre, Society of Biblical Literature, 1970; and *Literary Criticism*; and G. W. E. Nickelsburg, "The Genre and Function of the Markan Passion Narrative," *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (1980): 153ff.

<sup>30</sup> See V. K. Robbins, "Mark as Genre," *Seminar Papers of the Society of Biblical Literature*, 1980 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1980), pp. 392f.