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The Synoptic Problem: Where to from here?

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Abstract
The study of the Synoptic Problem continues with a wide range of hypotheses proposed to explain the relationship of Mark, Matthew and Luke to the early Jesus tradition, and to each other. This article reviews recent developments in synoptic studies highlighting the recognition of the ongoing role of the oral tradition, the ways in which scribal compositional practices in the first century have been used to test the major hypotheses, and the methodological constraints that accompany research in this area.

Keywords
composition practice, minor agreements, oral tradition, Q source, Synoptic Problem

Introduction: Major approaches
Exploring the formation of the Synoptic Gospels and their relationship to the development and preservation of the Jesus tradition, and to one another, is a question that continues to be as strongly debated and argued as it has ever been.¹ Plotting and describing the processes by which the sayings and deeds of


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Jesus were preserved and transmitted, both orally and as written narratives, is necessarily speculative, but this has not curbed enthusiasm to rise to the challenge.

For some time now there have been two major lines of investigation. The first is taken by those who argue for the Synoptic Gospels to be the result of independently drawing on the early Jesus tradition described variously as an Ur-Gospel in Aramaic, as oral tradition, or fragments. While these suggestions were prominent in the 18th and 19th centuries they continue in various forms with a focus on eyewitnesses or the oral tradition. Eta Linnemann and David Farnell see the differences between the Synoptic Gospels as due to divergence in the various eyewitness accounts, where Riesner takes a view that draws on the oral tradition, eyewitness accounts, and is indebted to the suggestions of those who take a multi-source approach to the Synoptic Problem.

The second major line of investigation has been in terms of literary interdependence with one or other of the Synoptic Gospels drawing upon either one, or both, of the other Gospels. While the Two Source Hypothesis (2DH) continues as the majority position, its provisional nature is freely admitted, as well as the sense that it is, as in the case with all theories, a working hypothesis. The other major hypotheses are the Griesbach hypothesis/The Two Gospel Hypothesis (2GH); and the Farrer Hypothesis (FH). Alongside the major hypotheses the


Matthean Posterity Hypothesis (MPH) has re-emerged in the work of MacEwen and Garrow, who argue that it is Matthew who depends on Luke, rather than Luke who depends on Matthew as the FH proposes. Other more complex multi-source hypotheses continue to be proposed by scholars such as Boismard and Burkett.

The fact that the major theories are advocated unabatedly and with such vigour indicates at least two things: (i) that the same data is capable of multiple interpretations; and (ii) it reveals that while synchronic readings of the Synoptic Gospels as independent crystallisations and performances of the Jesus tradition have enormous value, there is still an enthusiasm for addressing diachronic questions as we attempt to plot and describe the development of the tradition in its multiple streams and forms, both oral and written, and their interaction.

All synoptic hypotheses have to deal with the same data in terms of how to address the external evidence provided by patristic sources, and the internal evidence in terms of differences in wording and Greek style that may indicate primitivity on the part of Mark, Matthew or Luke, or redactional or stylistic improvements. Attention also needs to be paid to agreements and disagreements in the order of pericopes, as well as dealing with the challenge posed by traditions that are preserved in multiple forms within a given gospel.

Each of the major hypotheses are the subject of criticism for perceived weaknesses. The 2DH hypothesis has difficulty explaining the minor agreements and

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7 It is beyond the scope of this review article to rehearse the surveys indicated in note 1 of this article. For a survey of patristic sources see Andreas Lindemann, ‘The Apostolic Fathers and the Synoptic Problem’, in Foster et al., New Studies, 689–719.

the existence, nature and extent of Q is hotly debated. The 2GH hypothesis is vulnerable in terms of its premise of Matthean priority, its difficulty in explaining Mark omitting so much of Matthew and Luke, and for Mark’s less sophisticated Greek. The Farrer hypothesis has to justify its claim of Lukan dependence on Matthew in terms of order and content, and its elimination of Q, especially after the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas – itself a collection of sayings of Jesus. The FH avoids Q as a source, explaining the shared materials are due to Luke’s dependence on Matthew, but it has not eliminated the fact that Matthew drew on pre-existing materials oral and/or written. To my mind it has not eliminated Q as a source so much as described how that material made its way into these two gospels, either into Luke via Matthew, or by Luke and Matthew independently incorporating these traditions. The Tradition hypothesis for its part is justifiably vulnerable to the charge that it seeks to address the Synoptic Problem only in terms of the use of multiple oral traditions when the degree of verbal correspondence indicates some dependence on written traditions.

In 2012 Tuckett reflected that we have to settle for the likelihood that no one theory will end up carrying the day given the provisional nature of all hypotheses that have been proposed. While this is disappointing on one level it is most important that we come to terms with the limits of what can be achieved in describing a complex number of processes and their interaction. There are methodological constraints that must be recognized in such a way that the provisional nature of the work of reconstructing these processes be admitted. There are some things that are inherently complex and the formation of the gospel tradition is one of them.

While there are those who opt for the judicious use of Occam’s Razor, thereby keeping hypotheses as simple as we can, my sense is that while that may be desirable, it is ultimately unhelpful. This approach has its adherents but appeals to elegant simplicity are open to the reasonable criticism that this is an example of a premise providing a lens through which more complex models are negatively evaluated. In fairness to this approach, if a simpler hypothesis provides an adequate explanation, why look further? To my mind the question is not so much a matter of whether a hypothesis is adequate, though that has to be considered, but whether it provides an explanation that is sufficiently accurate and robust. As Tuckett has astutely observed, simple hypotheses have to postulate highly complex forms of redactional activity on the part of the evangelists.

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On the other side of the coin there are many that are increasingly comfortable with the possibility that our reconstructions of the formation of the Synoptic Gospels, and their relationship to one another, can hardly do justice to what was in all likelihood much more multi-faceted and dynamic than even the more complex hypotheses that have been proposed to date.\footnote{See Boring, \textit{An Introduction to the New Testament}, 537–539 for his reconstruction of the process.} Riesner’s own proposal examines not only the formation of the logia of Jesus in different streams and locations, but the communities that preserved them in Hellenistic Jewish–Christian circles, Jewish–Christian communities and Gentile–Christian communities. It is a hypothesis that plots the contribution of memory, oral tradition and literary dependence.\footnote{Riesner, ‘The Orality and Memory Hypothesis’, in Porter, \textit{The Synoptic Problem}, see pp. 106–107 for a graphic presentation. See also Boring, \textit{An Introduction to the New Testament}, 504, who describes it thus: ‘One should rather think of a flexible and dynamic diagram with curved and interwoven connecting lines, all floating in a sea of oral tradition.’} Arnal is of the opinion that it is ongoing influence of the oral tradition that ensures that the major theories of literary interdependence will be ‘heuristic and schematic’.\footnote{William E. Arnal, ‘The Synoptic Problem and the Historical Jesus’, in Foster et al., \textit{New Studies}, 371–432, see p. 431.}

The provisional nature of any proposed solutions to the Synoptic Problem is largely due to the methodological difficulties that are associated with the task. We have variables we can identify but not quantify with precision with regard to their impact in the processes involved in bringing the texts of the Synoptic Gospels to the form we have them today, as well as their impact and relationship on one or other variables.

\textbf{Textual tradition}

One known unknown is the nature of the texts used in the exploration of the Synoptic Problem. Our modern texts are composite ones: the end result of the comparison of thousands of extant manuscripts in order to come up with a best guess of what Mark, Matthew and Luke would have looked like. A consequence of this is that we do not have access to the texts that Mark produced, or what version of Mark that Matthew and Luke had access to, if Markan priority is accepted, or what version of Matthew Luke and Mark would have had access to if Matthean priority is proposed. As indebted as we are to the countless hours and judgements that have gone into the formation of the critical editions of the Greek New Testament currently in use there is a danger of forgetting that they are scholarly reconstructions. With particular reference to the Nestle-Aland text, Head observed:

In other words, in order to analyse synoptic relationships, the evangelists’ style and theology, redactional interests and theological intentions, we have simply taken over
this particular reconstructed text and treated it as if it actually is the text of
the evangelists.\textsuperscript{15}

This is not at all to suggest that the task should be abandoned as hopeless, rather,
to acknowledge the limitations and constraints that accompany these endeavours.\textsuperscript{16}
It also brings into relief that the work of text critics and synoptic theorists intersect
more than is often recognized.\textsuperscript{17}

Scribal emendation and assimilation are part of the journey that the manuscripts
have taken and need to be identified as much as is possible so that mistaken cat-
egerisation of scribal activity for that of the evangelists be avoided and mistakenly
incorporated into a specific hypothesis of synoptic relationships.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} Peter M. Head, ‘Textual Criticism and the Synoptic Problem’, in Foster et al., \textit{New
and Textual Criticism’, in Georg Strecker (ed.), \textit{Minor Agreements: Symposium
makes the point very clear speaking of ‘hypothetical reconstructions’ and our critical
texts as being the best approximations to the text that we can reasonably achieve.

\textsuperscript{16} Gordon D. Fee, ‘Modern Textual Criticism and the Synoptic problem: On the
Problem of Harmonization in the Gospels’, in Eldon J. Epp and Gordon D. Fee
Synoptic Problem’, in Bernard Orchard and Thomas R. W. Longstaff (eds), \textit{J. J.
University Press, 1978), 154–169, draws attention to the interrelationship of the two
disciplines and noted Streeter as the last comprehensive study up until 1978 (p. 154).
Peter M. Head, ‘Textual Criticism and the Synoptic Problem’, agrees and observes that
text critics tend to think that synoptic scholars have sorted out the Synoptic Problem,
and that synoptic scholars, for their part, can fall into the misapprehension that our
critical texts can be used as though they are the final texts, here p. 117. It is interesting
that Burnett Hillman Streeter, \textit{The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins, Treating of the
Manuscript Tradition, Sources, Authorship and Dates} (rev. London; Macmillan, 1930),
n. 19 xxi saw the need for the specialist branches of research to ‘co-ordinate the results
reached.’ In this he made specific mention of source and text critics.

\textsuperscript{17} James Keith Elliot ‘The Relevance of Textual Criticism to the Synoptic Problem’, in
Boismard, W. R. Farmer, F. Neirynck, Jerusalem 1984} (BETL 95; Leuven,
University Press/Peeters, 1990). Matthew C. Williams, \textit{Two Gospels from One: A
Comprehensive Text-Critical Analysis of the Synoptic Gospels}, (Grand Rapids, MI:
Kregel, 2006). This work sets out to test Markan priority on textual and linguistic
grounds and concludes in favour of Markan priority.

\textsuperscript{18} Willem F. Wisselink, \textit{Assimilation as a criterion for the establishment of the text: A
comparative study on the basis of passages from Matthew, Mark and Luke} (Kampen:
Uitgevermaatschappij J. H. Kok, 1989). James Keith Elliot, ‘Textual Criticism,
Text critical studies have made a contribution to the study of the minor agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark. Streeter claimed that a large number of minor agreements were due to textual corruption and paid attention to some 30 examples that could be explained text critically, though Hawkins was more circumspect and suggested oral transmission, or a recension of Mark, to have played a possible role in their formation. Neirynck’s study of the minor agreements explored the relationship of variant readings to the formation of minor agreements.

In recent times text critical studies have made their contribution to some aspects of the study of Q and whether pre-canonical traditions pre-dating Q can be identified. After the publication of a critical edition of Q, Goodacre has expressed concern about the tendency to treat Q as a document rather than as a reconstructed and hypothetical source. As Head puts it, it is ‘a helpful heuristic fiction, at its worst it might be perceived as rather misleading’.

Streeter’s call for text critics and source critics to work in a more complementary manner still applies and there is still much to be explored and refined.

The impact of synopses design and layout

A number of scholars including Kloppenborg, Neirynck, Dungan and Elliot have explored the impact of synopsis arrangement on the ways in which synoptic

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There is also an additional list of variant readings from the Huck-Greeven text which noted some 51 variant readings for Mark, 20 for the text of Matthew, and 17 for the text of Luke, 97–98.
As soon as one sets out to produce a synopsis a number of challenges have to be addressed such as what gospel is to be situated in each of the columns. Does placing Matthew on the left indicate a judgement of its intrinsic worth or priority when compared to Mark or Luke? Does placing Mark in between Matthew and Luke already point the reader in the direction as Markan priority? Does a certain layout and arrangement significantly privilege a certain hypothesis over others? Whether it is possible to produce a neutral synopsis has been a question of some debate. Dungan has postulated that it is virtually impossible, and Orchard agrees and his own synopsis was laid out according to the 2GH. More recent work by Kloppenborg would indicate that the division of pericopes and the ways that parallels are arranged has a greater impact. The manner in which doublets and parallels are displayed and the division of pericopes can influence the ways in which relationships are perceived and evaluated. The delimitation of pericopes varies among synopses ranging between 275 in Huck-Greeven, 367 in Aland, 338 in Orchard and 375 in Benoit and Boismard.

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27 My own way of addressing this was to produce a source critical edition of both Matthew and Luke where the integrity of these two Gospels was respected with the apparatus indicating what was unique, what was shared with Mark, and what was shared with Luke. Christopher J. Monaghan, A Source Critical Edition of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke in Greek and English, 2 vols (Subsidia Biblica 40; Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2010).

Testing the major hypotheses on the basis of contemporary compositional practice

An area where there has been significant exploration and methodological refinement has been that of a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary compositional practice in the period of the formation of the Synoptic Gospels. It was Mattila who issued the challenge of placing the evangelists within a credible context testing current hypotheses of synoptic relationships against what is known of the practice of scribes in this period. While this provides a benchmark it needs to borne in mind that the evangelists were atypical in their use and preservation of their sources.

The major utilization theories of synoptic relationships have been tested against what can be learned from compositional practices of the period of the formation of the gospels. The works of Downing, Derrenbacker, Neville, Mattila, MacEwen and Kirk have all examined the major hypotheses from this perspective.

Derrenbacker’s work has highlighted that either/or distinctions between literary and oral paradigms do not correlate with compositional practices in antiquity. This underscores Mattila’s call to put the evangelists’ work into a credible context, even if it pushes source critics into more complex compositional models than they might prefer. One of Derrenbacker’s observations regarding the major theories of

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synoptic relations is that they all have to contend with the problem of micro-
conflation, that is, the editorial activity required to combine the sources in the
ways that they propose. For proponents of the 2GH the difficulty is that of
Mark as an epitomizer, or one who condenses Matthew and Luke, which
Derrenbacker deems to be ‘mechanically problematic and unattested in ancient
literature’. MacEwen evaluates Mark’s use of sources according to the 2GH as
being both inconsistent and atypical, particularly since Mark’s individual pericopae
are longer than the same pericopae in Matthew and Luke. The FH fares better by
affirming Matthew’s use of Mark, but the problem then is Luke’s proposed com-
positional method in moving regularly from one source to another, with texts
stored in memory. While Derrenbacker deems this to be ‘technically correct’,
and it sounds as though it is both simple and consistent with contemporary prac-
tice, it would be extremely difficult to put into practice. Kirk notes that scrolls
were most naturally referred to sequentially rather than in some more random
fashion. While the 2DH has received support on compositional grounds James
Barker has recently argued that Tatian’s Diatessaron was the result of precisely
that sort of detailed and complex scribal activity involving movements backwards
and forwards in a scroll. He argues that a consequence of this is that no theory
should be considered as being in a privileged position on compositional grounds.
Given that Tatian set out to produce a harmony of the gospels, this may be prove
to be the exception to standard practice. At the very least it provides a note of
caution when evaluating synoptic hypotheses on compositional grounds.

Questioning the dominance of the literary paradigm

Attending to the ongoing impact of the oral tradition is an area of research that has
seen a resurgence in recent times. Precisely how the oral traditions developed and

32 Derrenbacker, Ancient Compositional Practices, 442. For an examination of duality in
2GH advocates argue that this proposed duality is evidence that Mark drew on both
Matthew and Luke. See pp. 257–258 for a brief treatment of the criteria of proximity,
redundancy, necessity, brevity and relatedness.
33 Derrenbacker, Ancient Compositional Practices, 442-443. MacEwen, Matthean
Posteriority, 170 agrees with this assessment.
34 Kirk, Q in Matthew, 55.
36 For helpful surveys see Rainer Riesner, ‘The Orality and Memory Hypothesis’, 90–94
and James D. G. Dunn, ‘Altering the Default Setting: Re-envisaging the Early
Transmission of the Jesus Tradition’, NTS 49 (2003), 139–175. In the same year
Dunn published Jesus Remembered. Christianity in the Making, 1 (Grand Rapids,
MI: Eerdmans, 2003). For a useful collection of Dunn’s research in this area from
1977 to the present, see The Oral Gospel Gospel Tradition (Grand Rapids, MI:
Eerdmans, 2013). See also Armin D. Baum, Der mündliche Faktor und seine
their dependability has been the subject of intense debate as Bultmann’s view of oral tradition being ‘informal and uncontrolled’ was then challenged by Gerhardsson’s suggestion of it being ‘formal and controlled’ and then that in turn being challenged by Bailey and Dunn who argue for it being ‘informal and controlled’.37 No doubt the debate will continue given that what is being described is not simply the ways that oral traditions were shaped and transmitted, but ultimately whether they are trustworthy. The increased attention paid to this area of research coincides with the renewed interest in the stability and reliability of the oral tradition on the part of those such as Eddy and Boyd and Bauckham and the ongoing quest for the historical Jesus.38

The literary paradigm has been expanded to include the ongoing impact of oral traditions, performance and long- and short-term memory in the compositional process. The processes are dynamic where one envisages oral performance impacting the written text, and then the written text interacting the ongoing development of the oral tradition itself.

Neville charged Dunn’s call to reset the exclusively literary paradigm with trying to have his cake and eat it too and as a sign of inconsistency and special pleading on the part of proponents of the 2DH.39 Whether that is the case remains to be seen, but it is worth noting that proponents of the 2GH and the FH acknowledge the continuing role played by the oral tradition in the formation of the Synoptic

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39 David Neville, ‘The Demise of the Two–Document Hypothesis? Dunn and Burkett on Gospel Sources’, Pacifica 19 (2006), 78–92. See p. 83 for his assessment of Dunn’s basic claim and p. 85 for his judgement concerning Dunn sitting on both sides of the fence. Neville’s point of view is that the 2DH is basically a literary paradigm.
Gospels. There has been much that has been done in examining the mechanics of oral traditions: signals, aids to memory, performance, etc., as well as the psychology of oral tradition and memory. The methodological difficulty that has yet to be resolved is how to make judicious use of what we know of later oral cultures without falling into the trap of retrojection and not paying sufficient attention to what can be known of the 1st-century context in terms of contemporary Greco-Roman and Jewish practice. Gerhardsson’s work in this area has received support by Riesner and Aune who have provided a timely reminder that contemporary practice already sheds light on this area of research that should not be ignored.

**Minor agreements**

The study of the agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark provides a fascinating point of entry into the complexity of the relationships between the Synoptic Gospels. As soon as Markan priority was postulated and came into prominence, the occasions on which Matthew and Luke corresponded against Mark demanded investigation and explanation. Prior to explaining the phenomenon of the minor agreements they need to be identified and what constitutes a minor agreement is itself subject to debate. Having determined what are to be

40 See Arnal, ‘The Synoptic Problem’, 431, where he observes that some advocates of the FH dispense with Q only to accept those same features by appealing to the oral tradition.


42 For a helpful survey of research in this area see M. Eugene Boring, ‘The “Minor Agreements” and Their Bearing on the Synoptic Problem’, in Foster et al., *New Studies*, 227–251.

43 See Boring, ‘The “Minor Agreements”’, 234–236 where he suggests that some 700 to 1000 need to be considered acknowledging that the number of agreements deemed to be significant for the Synoptic Problem is quite limited. From a FH perspective see Richard Vinson, ‘How Minor? Assessing the Significance of the Minor Agreements as an Argument against the Two-Source Hypothesis’, in Mark Goodacre and Nicholas Perrin (eds), *Questioning Q* (London: SPCK, 2004); Michael D. Goulder, ‘On Putting Q to the Test’, *NTS* 24 (1978), 218–234, was of the opinion that a ‘rump’ of cases was sufficient to expose the weakness and vulnerability of the 2DH. Also, ‘Is Q a Juggernaut?’, *JBL* 115(4) (1996), 667–681. See pp. 670–671, on the role of the minor
considered minor agreements other questions arise as to whether they are significant for the major synoptic hypotheses, and how they are to be explained. It is here that discussion then shifts to an examination of whether they are best explained by a global solution, or by multiple causes. From the perspective of the FH and 2GH a global solution is offered where they are explained as principally due to Lukan dependence on Matthew. Goulder has argued that the minor agreements are the Achilles Heel of the 2DH.\(^{44}\) This has not proved to provide the knockout blow that he hoped given that the opening the 2DH to allow for the impact of the oral tradition provides a more than viable counter argument. For the 2DH multiple solutions are proposed where the agreements are judged to be either the result of independent and coincidental redaction, their shared use of a recension of Mark that diverges from our text of Mark, through some impact of the oral tradition, or some combination of these factors.\(^{45}\)

**The ongoing quest for Q**

Q continues to be the subject of intense debate where opinion ranges on a number of questions concerning its existence, extent, order, form and message.\(^{46}\) The publication of a critical edition of Q and the continued exploration of various strata in agreements in exposing the vulnerability of the 2DH, especially with regard to agreements in the passion narrative.

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\(^{44}\) For the view of FH adherents see Michael D. Goulder, ‘Two Significant Minor Agreements (Mat.4:13 Par.; Mat.26:68 Par.)’, *NT* 45 (2003), 365–73. For Neirynck’s response to Goulder see ‘Goulder and the Minor Agreements’, *ETL* 73 (1997), 84–93.


\(^{46}\) Dennis R. MacDonald, *Two Shipwrecked Gospels: The Logoi of Jesus and Papias’ Exposition of Logia about the Lord* (Early Christianity and Its Literature 8; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012). In this stimulating work Macdonald sets out to reconstruct two lost gospels. The first is the *Logoi of Jesus* that he argues Matthew, Mark and Luke drew on in the writing of their gospels. He identifies these *Logoi* with the sayings source Q that he calls Q+ because it is larger than Q as it is usually delimited. In this hypothesis Q+ precedes the Synoptic Gospels and this has consequences for historical Jesus research, see pp. 543–553. The second Gospel to be reconstructed is Papias’ *Exposition of the Logia about the Lord*, which was a multi-volume work commenting on Matthew, Mark and the *Logoi of Jesus*. See pp. 555–560, for explanations as to why these two texts were left ‘shipwrecked’, namely, the Logoi limited Jesus’ mission to Israel, and failed predictions about the future which the
its proposed development provide ample testimony that this hypothesis has not run out of supporters.\textsuperscript{47} At the same time, those who argue for a solution to the Synoptic Problem without recourse to the Q source are not lacking.\textsuperscript{48}

2GH theorists argue for Matthean priority and would not see any compelling reason to posit the existence of Q, though they admit the impact of the oral tradition. While supporters of the FH argue for Markan priority they agree with 2GH theorists in that there is no need for Q given Luke’s dependence on Matthew.

Even if there was universal agreement that Q existed, determining the extent of Q is made difficult because of the instances where Mark–Q overlaps, and the likelihood that Luke and Matthew would not have incorporated all Q passages.\textsuperscript{49} A consequence of this is that it is not unlikely that some materials have been mistakenly identified as either special Lukan or Matthean material. Luz suggests that that Q materials themselves presume that the audience knew more about Jesus than was recorded.\textsuperscript{50}

Jewish War proved to be false. Failed predictions about the future is also suggested as a reason that Papias’ work also failed to be preserved.

\begin{thebibliography}{100}
\bibitem{Fleddermann} Harry T. Fleddermann, \textit{Q: A Reconstruction and Commentary} (Biblical Tools and Studies 1; Leuven, Peeters, 2005).
\bibitem{Fleddermann2} Harry Fleddermann, \textit{Mark and Q: A Study of the Overlap Texts} (BETL 122; Leuven: Leuven University Press/Peeters, 1995). Fleddermann’s study of the overlap texts leads him to conclude that the 2DH needs to be modified in order to accommodate Mark’s knowledge, redaction and use of Q. He also argues that Mark uses Q as freely as Matthew and Luke redact the Markan text. See pp. 209–218 for his conclusions and pp. 263–303 for a detailed assessment by Frans Neirynck.
\bibitem{Luz} Ulrich Luz, ‘Looking at Q through the eyes of Matthew’, in Foster et al., \textit{New Studies}, 570–590, see pp. 587–588.
\end{thebibliography}
If Q exists was it oral, written or both? As Kirk notes it is understandable that there is some degree of uncertainty since it exhibits ‘extensive variation, a marker of oral tradition, commingled with extensive agreements in wording and order, markers of written transmission’.\(^{51}\) It is not unlikely that it was both an oral and written source at different stages of its development, especially if the concept of various strata turns out to be correct. Ra’s recent work has expanded on the suggestions of Kloppenborg, Sato, Allison and Jacobson that the final form of Q is the result of three redactions.\(^{52}\) His own suggestion is that there were four with each redaction adding to the previous one.\(^{53}\) The degree of variation and agreement in Q passages, ranging between 85 per cent and 5 per cent, may be due to this interaction between oral and written, as much as due to redaction on the part of the evangelists.

Interest in Q is not only in terms of outlining and evaluating the source on its own terms, but also has consequences for the search for the historical Jesus.\(^{54}\) Some Q theorists have proposed that Q, or the earliest strata, represented the Jesus tradition as it was preserved by Jewish Palestinian Christians in 50s and that these traditions predate Mark. If this is the case it is important to identify the earliest strata, if that is possible. Luz and Boring suggest the Matthean community was in its origins a Q-community formed in Galilee that had to flee to Syria after the Jewish war and there encountered the Markan tradition.\(^{55}\) Once again creating a resilient methodology that will produce credible results is required. The different strata, if accurately identified, become a means of plotting a dynamic process of development of the Jesus tradition as it moves from a Palestinian context into the wider context of the Greco-Roman world.

**Conclusion**

To quote Rumsfeld\(^{56}\) we have a better knowledge of what we don’t know and studies in the future will continue to move away from an exclusively literary approach when

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52 Yoseop Ra, *Q, the First Writing about Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), see pp. 3–10 for a summary of the work of these scholars.
53 Ra, *Q, the First Writing about Jesus*, see pp. 238–245 for his conclusions and epilogue.
54 Ra, *Q, the First Writing about Jesus*, 245 argues that the final redaction of Q was completed in Jerusalem about 41 CE. Christoph Heil, *Das Spruchevangelium Q und der historische Jesus* (Stuttgarter Biblische Aufsatzbände Neues Testament 58; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2014).
55 Ulrich Luz, ‘Looking at Q through the eyes of Matthew’, 585. See p. 589, where Luz makes the point that one should not overemphasize the differences between these two streams as though they were so different that they would not have recognized one another as theological siblings. That Matthew is the result of these two streams being combined is taken to be evidence for this conclusion. See Boring, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 537–539 for his reconstruction of the process.
56 US Department of Defence news briefing: ‘We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also
articulating the relationship of the Synoptic Gospels to one another. The two major lines of investigation have come much closer than they were and it is now more generally recognized that they cross over and intersect in the development of the Jesus tradition. As Gregory has argued this means that positing literary dependence doesn’t thereby eliminate the ongoing contribution of the oral tradition, nor do appeals to the impact of the oral tradition diminish the creativity or redactional activity of the Gospel writers.\(^{57}\) While we may long for simple solutions we will have to deal with the challenges posed by complex and dynamic and interactive processes. Work will continue in order to better understand the ongoing impact of the oral tradition, but more work will need to be done on a methodological level to develop resilient methodologies that are not so vulnerable to the challenge of anachronism and retrojection of what is known of oral societies. Q will continue to be denied on one hand and streams of tradition identified on the other - too much is at stake for it to be otherwise given that proponents of Q are convinced that it provides us with the earliest and most direct access to the Jesus tradition.

Some debates will continue given that there is no lack of enthusiasm for the major hypotheses. The lines of the debate have become so well established that it is difficult for it to be otherwise. This indicates that among synoptic theorists there is recognition that the processes involved in the formation of the Synoptic Gospels are much more complex than we can accurately describe. I for one can live with that. Does this diachronic study matter? Yes, if we want to attend to the complex and dynamic processes that formed the Gospels, listening to the ways in which the Jesus tradition in its various forms sounded and re-sounded within the life of early Christian communities.

**Author biography**

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\(^{57}\) Andrew Gregory, ‘What is Literary Dependence?’, in Foster et al., *New Studies*, 87–114, here p. 104. See also Christoph Heil, *Das Spruchevangelium Q und der historische Jesu*, 38, where he speaks of the written text imprinted by the oral traditions that continued to resonate in ongoing performance.