Challenging the two-source hypothesis: how successful are the commentaries?

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**ABSTRACT**

In view of the fact that the two-source hypothesis as solution to the synoptic problem is not generally accepted, and further in view of the fact that the proponents of the Griesbach hypothesis are literarily quite active, this article weighs up the two hypotheses against each other, making particular use of two commentaries on Mark which were written by Griesbach proponents, namely Mann (1986) and Riley (1989).

1 INTRODUCTION

Although there is a tendency to believe that the two-source or two-document hypothesis as the solution to the synoptic problem is now universally and unanimously accepted, this is not quite true. For many years now some scholars have been swimming against the stream, tirelessly trying to convince fellow scholars about the validity of the Griesbach or two-Gospel hypothesis instead. I have always felt that the ultimate test for the supporters of the Griesbach hypothesis would be the writing of a commentary on one of the synoptic Gospels. As far as I can ascertain at least two such commentaries have been written, namely by Mann (1986) and Riley (1989), both on Mark. I am not aware of any commentary on either Matthew or Luke by an advocate of the Griesbach hypothesis.

In this paper I first want to give a brief survey of aspects of research into the synoptic problem, then take a look at the two commentaries mentioned and their reception in the scholarly world, and lastly, by looking at a random test case, try to evaluate them as well as the hypothesis that they support.

2 ASPECTS OF RESEARCH INTO THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM

Until almost the middle of the nineteenth century New Testament scholars accepted without hesitation that Matthew was the oldest Gospel, as the church fathers reported. Especially Papias (second century, reported in the third century by Eusebius *HE* 3.39.15f), and Augustine of Hippo (fourth century) were responsible for this state of affairs, the former stating that 'Matthew composed the oracles (logia) in the Hebrew tongue, and each one translated them as he was able', and the latter stating that Mark was an abbreviated version of Matthew, and Luke was dependent on Mark and Mat-
thew, thus proposing the order Matthew-Mark-Luke (*De consensu evangelistarum* 1.2.4).

In 1789 Griesbach proposed a somewhat different alternative, still maintaining the priority of Matthew, but a different order, namely Matthew-Luke-Mark, and it is this version instead of the earlier one that was later to be revived as the strongest alternative to the two-source hypothesis.

In 1835 Lachmann however started questioning the priority of Matthew, proposing the priority of Mark, which led to Weisse (1838) proposing that apart from Mark, Matthew and Luke also made use of a collection of the sayings of Jesus, in order to account for the material in Matthew and Luke not found in Mark. By 1863 Holtzmann could formulate the so-called two-source hypothesis, stating that Mark was the first Gospel, and Matthew and Luke used Mark as well as a further source consisting of sayings of Jesus.

This hypothesis found more and more favour, and especially during the first half of the twentieth century it came to be almost generally accepted by scholars. In 1924 Streeter expanded the two-source hypothesis to the four-source hypothesis by identifying two more sources, namely M for Matthew's own material or *Sondergut* and L for Luke's *Sondergut*.

Yet, as the two-source hypothesis grew in favour among more and more scholars, a minority of dissenting voices were heard. Earlier in this century there were in this minority the voices of Schlatter, Zahn, Butler and Walker amongst others (cf Kümmel 1982:47). But it was the appearance of Farmer's book *The synoptic problem* (1964), propagating the Griesbach hypothesis, that gave such new impetus to the advocates of this hypothesis that their voices could no longer be ignored. Farmer was followed by Longstaff, Orchard and Dungan, amongst others.

In 1970 at the Pittsburgh Festival of the Gospels where the two-source hypothesis was discussed, besides a paper by Fitzmyer defending the two-source hypothesis there was also a paper by Dungan defending the Griesbach hypothesis (cf Buttrick 1970).

In the eighties these dissenting voices really seemed to gather momentum. Orchard stressed the need for a new synopsis with Luke instead of Mark in the middle position, and in 1983 he published this synopsis. In 1984 a congress on the synoptic problem was held in Jerusalem, with Neirynck defending the two-source hypothesis, and Farmer defending the Griesbach hypothesis. Farmer mentions Clement of Alexandria (*Eusebius HE* 6.14.5-7) as the basic argument from the church tradition (cf Dungan 1990). As was mentioned above, the two commentaries presenting Mark as dependent on Matthew and Luke followed in 1986 and 1989. Although all the activity in this field helped create doubt in the minds of many scholars about the two-source hypothesis, it did not really convince many that the Griesbach hypothesis is a better working hypothesis than the two-source hypothesis.
So today the position still remains that the two-source hypothesis is by far the most favoured solution to the synoptic problem. It makes claims as to its relative simplicity of two or at most four sources. But this is exactly where the Griesbach advocates claim greater simplicity: only the Gospels were used by one another, and no hypothetical sources such as Q, M and L have to be brought into account. And yet, this simplicity is not always possible when one works with the texts themselves, as will be apparent below.

That is why there have always been more complicated attempts to explain the synoptic problem. A whole article could be devoted to these, but that is not the point of this article. I want to mention only a few of them in order to throw more light on the nature of the problem.

A classic illustration of how complicated matters could have been, is found in the contribution of Robinson (1976). His premise is that oral and written tradition underlies all three Synoptic Gospels. The most original form is at times to be found in Matthew, at other times in Luke, but most frequently in Mark. Each of the Gospels had gone through several stages of development, so that Matthew could be the first and the last of the Gospels at the same time. Between 30 and 40 CE the first collections were compiled, namely P (the preaching of Peter), Q, L, and M. Between 40 and 50 the protogospels came into being, of which Proto-Matthew was the earliest. Between 50 and 60+ came the last stage in the development of the Gospels, where Mark’s prototype of his Gospel, which contained Peter’s preaching, was available to the other gospel writers.

Also Sanders and Davies (1989) come to the conclusion that a complicated solution must be held to be the most likely. In contrast to that, Goulder (1989) claims a simple solution, suggesting that Luke used Mark and Matthew, thereby doing away with the existence of Q. He was severely criticised by Downing (1992), especially for the way he physically visualises Luke to have been working with the texts of Mark and Matthew. By the way, Downing’s criticism should also be taken seriously by any other literary dependence hypothesis.

It is interesting to note that the debate about alternative solutions to the synoptic problem has largely been going on outside the German speaking world. Most of the above mentioned works were from the English speaking world, but there has been activity in French in this field as well, which we often tend not to take note of. The names of Carmignac (1984) and Rolland (1984) especially may be mentioned in addition to that of Boismard, who advocates the multiple-stage hypothesis (cf Dungan 1990). Carmignac proposes the following scenario: Mark was written in 42, Deutero-Mark in 45, Matthew (Hebrew) roundabout 50 and Luke (Greek) shortly after 50. In 63 the Hebrew Mark was translated into Greek by John Mark. Rolland suggests
a ‘gospel of the twelve’ written in Jerusalem, which was expanded in Antioch and may now be found in the material which Mark and Matthew have in common. Luke was written in 62 and was not dependent on Mark. According to Boismard Proto-Matthew and Proto-Mark influenced all three synoptic Gospels.

From the German literature, the views of a few scholars may however be mentioned. Stoldt (1977) denies Marcan priority, but also Matthean priority. He does not suggest a solution, but instead states that the question is still an unresolved riddle. Schmithals (1985) is of the opinion that both Mark and Q had a predecessor, which he calls Grundschrift and Q1. Mark was influenced by Q1, and Q in turn by Mark, while the Grundschrift influenced the end redaction of Q. Niemand (1987) and Fendler (1991) both support the possibility of a Deutero-Mark. Linnemann (1992) denies that there is a synoptic problem. She rejects any literary or even oral dependence amongst the first three Gospels, and suggests that each Gospel was written independently, with similarities being due to things such as ‘linguistic fixings’ of the words and stories of Jesus.

Beside the modernisations of different utilisation and source theories; a revival of Herder’s and Gieseler’s oral tradition hypothesis is also discernable in contemporary synoptic discussions, with analogies being collected from contexts outside the New Testament, partly from Judaism and partly from folklore (cf. Reicke 1990:313). Kelber (1983) among others made a contribution on orality and literacy, and although he probably does not intend to make a contribution towards the synoptic problem in the first place, because he takes the Q hypothesis for an established truth, it is nevertheless a contribution that should be taken into account in future synoptic studies.

From this brief survey it is clear that, although the vast majority of scholars accept the two-source hypothesis without hesitation, the tendency is by no means unanimous, and there are constantly other voices going up in favour of other solutions or at least a rethinking of the whole position. Combrink (1985:50) states that the ongoing debate about the synoptic problem revolves especially around three themes, namely further investigation of the data supporting the two-source hypothesis or the indication of more sources as an extension of that hypothesis; the priority of Matthew, and thirdly the querying of the existence of Q. To this may probably be added the revival of the oral tradition hypothesis.

For New Testament scholars to blindly accept the two-source hypothesis as if it has definitively been proven as the final answer, would surely not be the right attitude. And yet that often seems to be the case. Therefore, many commentaries on the synoptic Gospels accept the two-source hypothesis as an accomplished fact, without even discussing the matter.
As pointed out above there have been very few attempts to explain a whole Gospel in terms of one of the alternative hypotheses. But two commentators had the courage and conviction to attempt this, both on Mark and both supporting the Griesbach hypothesis. They are Mann (1986) and Riley (1989). I shall now go on to give a brief discussion of both, and also take a look at the way they were accepted in the scholarly world.

3 C S MANN: MARK: A NEW TRANSLATION WITH INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY (1986)

This is Mann's second contribution in the Anchor Bible series, following Matthew (1971), the latter which was written in collaboration with Albright. At the time of publication his Mark was so newsworthy that it was reported in Time magazine (Time, December 8, 1986:74). His introduction consists of no fewer than 190 pages, which is an indication of how much attention he devotes to explaining his viewpoints.

His two most basic assumptions are that synoptic relationships are best explained by the Griesbach hypothesis, namely that Mark is a digest and conflation of Matthew and Luke, and that Mark's Gospel was written by Mark in two drafts, namely the first in Rome around 55, drawing on among others the reminiscences of Peter, and the second in Palestine around 65, drawing on Matthew and Luke. In Mann's view the Gospel best suits this setting because its urgency reflects the chaotic climate of pre-war Palestine, and the redactional tendencies of Mark (especially chapter 13) assume the state of affairs in the Palestinian Christian community in that period. Mann's actual commentary on Mark consists of his own translation, then an often brief section named 'Comment' and after that an often long section named 'Notes'.

For each of these different parts of his work Mann has been severely criticised by other scholars. With regard to his view that Mark used Matthew and Luke, it was pointed out that it is difficult to understand why Mark was written at all, since Matthew and Luke were already known and used in Palestine, and they address the concerns which Mann identifies behind Marcan redaction (Bauer 1988:90f). For his view of different drafts of Mark he did not find many who would agree, and he was criticised that the majority views were not rigorously and convincingly debated (Malbon 1988:142).

According to Mann, Mark had Matthew and Luke at hand, but in the vast majority of pericopes he does not merely follow them, but also has access to other traditions. So almost all the miracles are derived from eyewitness accounts or other sources, independent of Matthew or Luke, as are also narratives such as the temptation and the transfiguration. Mark turns to Matthew primarily for the order of events, and less often to Luke for details. Therefore, what Mann has presented according to Donahue (1988:155) is an
‘internally inconsistent appropriation of the Griesbach hypothesis, and, in
effect, has argued for sources and traditions used by Mark which are both ear­
erlier than his Gospel and independent of Matthew and Luke’.

For his own translation of the text of Mark he received considerable
criticism (cf for instance Malbon 1988:142, Donahue 1988:155f), which I shall
not elaborate on here, because it is somewhat beside the point for the sake of
this paper. The criticism on his ‘Comments’ and ‘Notes’, however, is very
relevant for the purpose of this paper.

He is criticised, for instance, for his view of the Marcan sections where
Mark appears to be more primitive or more rich in details than the Matthean
text that he is supposedly abbreviating. Often in such cases Mann explains
such sections with a reference to Mark’s preference for an eyewitness account
or a Petrine reminiscence. The result is that Mann denies Marcan priority,
but often holds to Marcan historicity (Malbon 1988:142). He is also criticised
for giving too much commentary on the possible sources of the Gospel and
not enough on the Gospel itself (Malbon 1988:143). Furthermore, Mark’s
redaction of his sources is essentially a redaction of omission, and it is diffi­
cult to discern theology primarily on the basis of omission of material (Bauer
1988:91). And, if Mark was an abbreviator, why has he consistently expanded

All in all, Mann’s work was not received well in the scholarly com­
munity. Some reviewers were rather harsh in their rejection of Mann’s view­
points. However, I am of the opinion that we should appreciate the fact that
Mann had the courage to publish his commentary. To say that it does not
make a contribution in the field of Marcan scholarship or synoptic studies is
to my mind not correct. Despite its weaknesses it does make a contribution
in the sense that it actually demonstrates the weaknesses of the Griesbach
hypothesis (or at least Mann’s version of it). But in view of the hypothesis
character of even the two-source theory, Mann’s attempt is very valid and
should be welcomed.


In contrast to Mann’s commentary, Riley’s commentary consists of a very
brief ‘Introduction’ (14 pages), and then the commentary, the purpose of
which is to ‘explore how Mark wrote and put together his material; it does
not attempt further exegesis’ (x). Riley wants to test the validity of the
Griesbach hypothesis, both in his ‘Introduction’ and his ‘Commentary’. In
the ‘Introduction’ he wants to determine whether the sequence of pericopes
is best accounted for by this hypothesis. His conclusion is as follows: ‘The
evidence from the relative order of the episodes in the Synoptic Gospels con­
stitutes a strong case for the hypothesis that Mark used Matthew and Luke as
his sources. It provides a single, understandable, and complete explanation of the order that the episodes have in Mark' (xviii).

As far as authorship and dates are concerned, Riley argues for the traditional authorship of each of the Synoptic Gospels, and dates them Matthew circa 50, Luke no later than 60, and Mark circa 65, with successive revisions of Matthew before as well as after its use by Luke and Mark. For this latter assumption Riley may be criticised, because he warns against the unwarranted appeal to other sources in his critique of other theories (cf Walker 1991:348).

In the 'Commentary' proper he aims to determine whether the Griesbach hypothesis explains specific details of Mark's text more satisfactorily than other theories. His conclusion is that the hypothesis stands the test (209). Matthew and, to a lesser extent Luke, were Mark's principal sources.

Riley was criticised for the following points: first, when it comes to key questions and texts, Riley often ends up saying what Mark did to his sources, but not why he did it (cf Tuckett 1991:193). For instance, the fact that Mark omitted so much of the teaching of Jesus is one of the most important problems for the Griesbach hypothesis to explain. But Riley more often than not fails to do this. Likewise, the minor agreements not only cause problems for the two-source hypothesis, but also for the Griesbach hypothesis. The question for the advocates of the Griesbach hypothesis to answer is namely: Why would Mark change his sources? Again Riley often fails to do this. Further, Mark is said to have failed to recognise Matthew's structure, with the result that sequences and structures make sense in Matthew but not in Mark. The result is that Mark is left without a clear structure or even theology of its own, and theological traits such as the secrecy motif and the picture of the disciples are mere aspects of texts taken from Matthew and Luke. Lastly, it should be noted that whereas the proponents of the Griesbach hypothesis propagate the simplicity and economy of the hypothesis, Riley sometimes accepts a second independent account available to Mark, for instance in the case of Mark 9:14-29, as well as a multi-stage development in the text of Matthew.

It is clear that Riley was criticised for more or less the same matters as Mann. But again, to my mind, it was not an exercise in futility to write this commentary. It rather shows us where the problems with the Griesbach hypothesis lie, so that advocates of the hypothesis may see whether they are able to come up with solutions to these problems. It is a fact that every commentary, regardless of the method or hypothesis it proposes can be criticised, and this commentary once again underscores the tentativeness of all commentaries. For what other reason are new commentaries being written all the time?
By way of illustration of the above, I want to take a passage from Mark and examine the way it is treated by both these commentaries. I did not look for an exceptionally problematic passage, but took the first passage that came to mind. It should not therefore be seen as a passage that might illustrate any specific problem from either the commentaries or the hypothesis, but rather as a random test case.


Matt 8:1-4
1 When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; 2 and behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean."
3 And he stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.
4 And Jesus said to him,
   "See that you say nothing to any one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to the people."

Mark 1:40-45
40 And a leper came to him beseeching him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." 41 Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I will; be clean." 42 And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43 And he sternly charged him, and sent him away at once, 44 and said to him, "See that you say nothing to any one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to the people."
45 But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

Luke 5:12-16
12 While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy; and when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and besought him, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean."
13 And he stretched out his hand, and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." 14 And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 15 But so much the more the report went abroad concerning him; and great multitudes gathered to hear and to be healed of their infirmities. 16 But he withdrew to the wilderness and prayed.
5.1 Mann's commentary on Mark 1:40-45

Mann's comment on this pericope contains the following points (:218): Mark is following Matthew and, having omitted Matthew 5-7 because extended notes of Jesus' teaching are no part of his purpose, picks up the Matthean account from Matthew 8:2 without any note of setting. In his view, Mark isolates one of the three-healings group of Matthew 8:1-18. There are no details of place or time in Mark, and the incident is chosen as a 'typical' healing. The incident may serve, by details lacking in Matthew, to illustrate Jesus' attitude to the law.

To assert, from an assumed Marcan priority, that Matthew and Luke omit the healed man's disobedience and the indignation of Jesus in the interests of an increasingly reverential attitude to Jesus, is to overlook the fact that the evangelists saw moral or theological questions involved in miracle narratives. And lastly, Mark's version, with its vivid detail, may owe far more to an original oral reminiscence than to the other evangelists.

5.1.1 Reaction to Mann's commentary

In reaction, literally every assumption of Mann may be questioned. I would like to point out the following: Firstly, if Mark is an abbreviation of Matthew and Luke, why is Mark's story in this case longer than Matthew's and Luke's? If Mark took this story over from Matthew 8, why would he not give it a new setting, having omitted Matthew 5-7 and in light of the fact that all the surrounding stories have their own settings? Why would Mark, working with the three miracles in Matthew 8:1-18 in front of him and being fond of presenting miracles in groups, have selected this incident as a 'typical' healing, omitted the second and moved the third to a place before the present miracle? Why would Mark use this story to illustrate Jesus' attitude to the law by details lacking in Matthew? Are there not enough stories in Matthew which could be used to illustrate this?

Are moral and theological questions satisfactory reasons to explain the man's disobedience and the indignation of Jesus? Is the reverse assumption of dependence (Matthew and Luke dependent on Mark) not a better explanation for these aspects? And what about the messianic secret (or rather Wundergeheimnis) that comes to light in verse 44 and that Mann hardly touches on? And lastly, if other sources than Matthew and Luke are accepted the Griesbach hypothesis loses the simplicity and economy that its advocates propagate.
5.2 Riley's commentary on Mark 1:40-45

Riley's commentary contains the following points in brief: Mark is following Luke's order up to the Great Sermon (Luke 6:17ff). Luke has described a miracle corresponding to that of Elijah, which Mark has omitted. The present miracle story is taken over by Mark, one that corresponded to that of Elisha. Luke has moved the story from its setting in Matthew, and therefore removes the reference to Jesus coming down from the mountain. Luke's account is entirely dependent on Matthew, but rewritten in his own style. Luke's paraphrase has omitted 'approaches'; Mark goes still further and omits 'Lord'. Luke changes 'a leper' to 'a man full of leprosy'. Mark, who follows Luke, however, has 'leper' like Matthew.

The action of the man is described by Matthew as 'prostrated' (a suggestion of worship), by Luke as 'fell on his face', thus removing the suggestion of worship, while Mark has 'kneeling', describing only an external action. With regard to Jesus' response to the leper, Mark says that Jesus was moved with pity, or, according to some manuscripts, moved with anger. Riley is of the opinion that it is a Marcan interpretation of the text, and does not affect the question of the relationship between the Gospels. Examples of Mark's conflation of Matthew and Luke occur in verse 42 and verse 43-44a, where Mark combines the expressions of both. In verse 45 Mark has read more into Luke's words than they actually say, and has missed the point of Luke's reference to prayer.

5.2.1 Reaction to Riley's commentary

The following questions come to mind when looking at Riley's explanation: why would Mark omit the miracle that corresponded to that of Elijah, seeing that it is one of his concerns to show that Jesus was bigger than Elijah and bigger than Elisha. Why does Mark agree with Matthew in some cases against Luke if he is dependent on Luke? Why would Mark omit 'Lord', if he does not shy away from it in other instances? Are not the different descriptions of the action of the man more understandable if Mark is seen as the first and the others to have followed him? Is the same not true of the description of the emotion of Jesus?

Is it really possible that Mark, who was a contemporary of Matthew and Luke, would have misinterpreted them and missed their points, while readers two millennia later can understand these texts better?

6 CONCLUSION

In summary, I, like most other scholars, am of the opinion that Mann's and Riley's explanations are found wanting in many instances. They often leave
one with more questions than in the case of the explanations given by the advocates of the two-source hypothesis. But that does not mean that these two attempts were futile. In my opinion they definitely made a contribution to scholarship in spite of their shortcomings. However, one often feels that they simply did not concern themselves enough with Mark's end product itself, but rather more with the way he changed his sources. And this is where one (or more) of the Griesbach advocates might try to make a further contribution. As they stand, I do not think that the two commentaries under discussion really concerned themselves enough with Mark in its totality to make a difference to Mark's message. And that may leave one with the question whether it really makes a difference who used whom.

In view of the fact that writing a commentary is no small task and further in view of the fact that the attention in Gospel studies has lately shifted to a literary approach, it is a valid question whether more time should be devoted to discussing the question of synoptic relations and writing commentaries from a literary dependence point of view. To my mind, this seems to be essential for two reasons.

Firstly, because it is obvious that there is as yet no consensus about the way and the order in which the Gospels originated. Obviously the more we know about these matters, the more we can know about the circumstances of the early church. And the more differing attempts we have at explaining the literary dependence, the better the chances are that one day we might reach consensus.

Secondly, the stance one takes with regard to the order of the Gospels influences the existence or non-existence of Q. With the present interest in the quest for the historical Jesus and the role Q plays in this quest, it is absolutely essential that these matters receive further investigation. Should it definitively be proven that Q never existed, or that the Gospel of Thomas is later than the synoptic Gospels, this would play a major role in the way the historical Jesus is viewed.

For the time being, though, I am still more attracted to the two-source hypothesis than to most of the other hypotheses. A few things should be added at the same time, however. Firstly, an hypothesis is a way of testing evidence, and is subject to modification and revision. In addition to this it must be said that the Marcan hypothesis can function effectively only when full account is taken of the oral tradition—before and after the Gospels were written—and of the creativity and special interests of the evangelists (cf Kee 1979:143). Secondly, it is becoming more and more obvious that one cannot assume that the redactors of Matthew and Luke had exactly the same copy of Mark available or that there even existed two identical copies of the text (cf Lindemann 1994:77).
WORKS CONSULTED


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