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# Q or not Q?

The So-Called Triple, Double,  
and Single Traditions  
in the Synoptic Gospels



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## Introduction: The Q source and the so-called synoptic 'traditions'

The synoptic problem seems to be a very technical issue, which is studied with passion by a narrow group of scholars who seek a solution to a literary-historical riddle instead of studying the theology of the inspired Gospels. Such a perception of the synoptic problem is based on grave misunderstanding of its importance for the exegesis of the Synoptic Gospels and for the theology and hermeneutics of the New Testament as a whole. "When we recognize the solution to the Synoptic problem to be a central building block in our understanding of how to answer questions about the trustworthiness of the Gospels and the distinctive theologies of each evangelist, we cannot help but appreciate its importance."<sup>1</sup>

Let us ask a simple question, has Mark ever seen or heard the so-called 'Q source'? Every New Testament scholar realizes that any answer to this simple question is of crucial importance for interpretation of most probably the earliest Gospel and consequently also of the later gospels of Matthew and Luke.

If Mark knew the 'Q source', he must have given some response to the ideas expressed in that work. In such a case, what was his response? Did he value 'Q', or did he rather disregard it? Did he use that source in its entirety or only selected parts thereof? Did he follow its literary structure and wording, or did he rather thoroughly rework it? Did he quote it, or did he merely allude to it? Any response to these questions is in fact highly problematic. If Mark knew the 'Q source' and decided to use it in his own literary work, why did he preserve so few of its reconstructed contents? In case Mark knew 'Q' but decided to ignore it, why has it suddenly become so important for both Matthew and Luke, who, as it is usually assumed, worked independently of each other, and nevertheless they decided to reproduce 'Q' in its entirety in their respective Gospels?

Alternatively, if Mark did not know the 'Q source', how can we explain the origin of numerous Markan texts that are evidently closely related to their Matthean-Lukan counterparts and yet notably differing from them?

If the 'Q source' ever existed, it must have been one of the pillars of theology of early Christianity. In such a case, why was this pillar so underdeveloped theologically, especially in comparison to the Pauline ideas? Why did 'Q' completely disappear as a literary entity soon after the composition of the gospels of

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1 C. L. Blomberg, 'The Synoptic Problem: Where We Stand at the Start of a New Century', in *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem*, ed. D. A. Black and D. R. Beck (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, Mich. 2001), 17-40 (here: 40).

Matthew and Luke? Shall we believe that Christianity is based on sand of an unknown, lost, theologically problematic document?

It is therefore evident that the solution to the synoptic problem has fundamental importance for interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels and of the early Christian tradition as a whole. Every solution to the synoptic problem offers not only a more or less satisfactory explanation of the literary similarities and differences among the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It either gives or presupposes also an answer to a more general question, whether the Synoptic Gospels and other New Testament writings were based on one internally coherent gospel tradition or on numerous disparate, partially overlapping traditions and literary sources.

Consequently, every solution to the synoptic problem not only explains the origin of the so-called triple, double, and single traditions in the Synoptic Gospels but also gives an explicit or implicit answer to the more fundamental literary-hermeneutic question, in what sense we may call them 'traditions' at all. Were they channels of more or less faithful oral transmission of some pre-literary material or rather ways of literary-rhetorical formulation and reformulation of some particular theological ideas? Accordingly, shall we understand the synoptic 'traditions' as having (similarly to other scriptural traditions) mainly a historical-informative or rather an intertextual-performative nature?

The quest for the correct solution to the synoptic problem is therefore by no means a purely technical issue. Every solution to the synoptic problem to a considerable degree conditions understanding not only of the history of early Christianity but also of the literary character of the New Testament writings and consequently of adequate ways of their overall interpretation.