

HOW VIEWS OF INSPIRATION HAVE IMPACTED SYNOPTIC PROBLEM DISCUSSIONS

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Second Corinthians 10:5 and Colossians 2:8 warn believers to examine their thought life carefully to guard against being taken prisoner by philosophical presuppositions that are hostile to the Bible. One can either take thoughts captive or have their thought life taken captive to the detriment of their spiritual lives. One place in particular where conservative evangelicals have been taken captive is in the historical-critical discipline of source criticism. The predominant view of the early church was that the Gospels were four independent witnesses to the life of Christ. Starting around the A. D. 1600-1700s, there occurred a philosophical and ideological shift in thinking about the origin of the Gospels, particularly in relationship to Synoptic Gospels. Due to the rise of Rationalism, Deism, Skepticism, the Enlightenment, and Romanticism (to name a few), the Independence approach was rejected and two qualitatively different approaches in explaining the Gospels resulted: the Two-Gospel hypothesis and Two-Source hypothesis. A careful investigation reveals that both approaches stemmed from the same errancy roots as modern unorthodox views of inspiration. Because of the history and philosophy behind source criticism, when evangelicals adopt either approach in their interpretation of the Gospels, they automatically tap into these errancy roots that inevitably lead to deprecating the historicity of the Gospels.

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INTRODUCTION

Philosophical and Historical Bases of Literary Dependence

For the first 1,700 years of the church, the Independence view regarding

synoptic origins prevailed.¹ That is, each Gospel writer worked independently of the others, i.e., without relying on another canonical Gospel as a source of information. Consequently, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John constitute four independent accounts of the life of Jesus. More specifically, no *direct* literary dependence exists among the Gospels, i.e., no Gospel writer directly used the work of another to compose his Gospel, as assumed by modern, source-dependence hypotheses. The four are separate, independent, eyewitness testimonies to the life of Jesus.² Since the eighteenth century, however, the concept of literary dependence has arisen, with many evangelicals today espousing either the Two-Source or the Two-Gospel (also called neo-Griesbach or Owen-Griesbach) hypothesis. The crucial question in Gospel discussion for evangelicals, therefore, must center on what factors changed this overwhelming consensus from literary independence to one of literary dependence. What caused this paradigmatic shift regarding synoptic origins? A careful examination of church history reveals that shifts about the nature of inspiration were decisive in the radical change, specifically shifts in historical-critical discussions of the Synoptic Problem related to the Two-Gospel and Two-Document hypotheses. Such significant departures from the orthodox view of inspiration were in turn influenced and/or motivated by philosophical assumptions stemming from Rationalism, Deism, and the Enlightenment, to name few.³

Qualitatively Different Ideological Approaches

As orthodox approaches to Scripture—especially regarding its inspiration (cf. 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20-21)—disappeared, a qualitatively different approach to explaining the origin and nature of the Synoptic Gospels, developed over time. Not only was the Bible reduced to a “handbook of morality” divorced from its claims of inspiration, but an inverse development between orthodox concepts of inspiration and literary-dependence hypotheses occurred. Specifically stated, as orthodox views of inspiration of the Gospels diminished, literary dependence hypotheses increased

¹For further information on the early predominance of the Independence approach, cf. Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998); F. David Farnell, “The Independence Approach to Gospel Origins,” in *Three Views on the Synoptic Gospels*, ed., Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, forthcoming); F. David Farnell, “The Synoptic Gospels in the Ancient Church: A Testimony to the Priority of Matthew’s Gospel,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10 (Spring 1999):53-86.

²Even opponents of Independence admit the validity of this evidence from church history. For example, evangelical Grant Osborne, an ardent proponent of the Two-Source hypothesis, has written, “It is true that the independence view predominated for 1700 years.” (Grant R. Osborne, “Historical Criticism: A Brief Response to Robert Thomas’s ‘Other View,’” *JETS* 43 (March 2000):113.

³For further philosophical and historical factors involved, cf. F. David Farnell, “The Philosophical and Theological Bent of Historical Criticism,” *The Jesus Crisis* 85-131; Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Biblical Errancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981); Norman L. Geisler, “Beware of Philosophy: A Warning to Biblical Scholars,” *JETS* 42 (March 1999):3-19; Eta Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 9-42; idem, *Historical Criticism of the Bible, Methodology or Ideology?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 83-159.

to a point of dominance in synoptic discussion. David Laird Dungan, an ardent supporter of the Two-Gospel hypothesis, identifies three significant factors that brought literary-dependence hypotheses into prominence in current NT studies. All three stemmed from philosophical ideologies and historical-critical developments that increased skepticism toward orthodox explanations of inspiration and Gospel origins. First, a skepticism toward, and rejection of, the historical and chronological value of the Gospel accounts arose—i.e., the Gospels could not be harmonized.⁴ Second, a “cult of objectivity” emerged, which sought a reductionist agenda of a purely mechanistic, rationalistic, naturalistic explanation based on philosophically motivated premises of scientific or mathematical proof (i.e., a “new breed of *natural philosophers*”).⁵ This factor caused “the demise of the Gospel harmony and led directly to the invention of the Gospel synopsis, an instrument intended to facilitate the objective investigation of the differences among the Gospels.”⁶ Third, the philosophy known as Romanticism developed, which posited dynamic historical development in terms of flux and change.⁷ Although Romanticism remained rationalistic and non-supernatural in its view of history as well as Scripture, it reacted against the mechanical metaphor of Rationalism, positing instead a dynamic continuum dominated by change. Its developmental view of nature and history produced a developmental approach to the differences among the Gospels which sought to explain them in terms of sources used in their writing. Dungan, who probably would not place himself within the conservative evangelical camp, frankly concludes that modern historical-critical approaches differ from previous Gospel study, since they “arose within an attitude of extreme hostility toward the Bible and traditional Christian beliefs and values.”⁸

This means that a philosophically motivated skepticism regarding the trustworthiness of the Gospels as historical documents lies at the very heart of literary-dependence hypotheses. The skepticism is traceable to Baruch Spinoza, the father of modern historical-criticism of the Bible. Spinoza was a rationalist and pantheist, who for personal reasons disdained the plain meaning of the biblical text because of the effect it had upon him and on society as a whole.⁹ Spinoza set in motion modern biblical criticism “*as a weapon to destroy or at least discredit the*

⁴David Laird Dungan. *A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition, and the Interpretation of the Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1999) 307.

⁵Ibid., 308.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., 345.

⁹Ibid., 171-76; 198-260; cf. also Norman L. Geisler, “Philosophical Presuppositions of Biblical Errancy,” in *Inerrancy*, ed., Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 316-20; F. David Farnell, “Philosophical and Theological Bent of Historical Criticism,” in *The Jesus Crisis* 89-92.

traditional metaphysics of Christianity and Judaism."¹⁰ It purposed to remove all influence of the Bible not only in the religious sphere but also in the economic and political areas of society. Commenting on the antecedent developments of historical-critical ideology, Dungan relates,

Spinoza and his followers multiplied questions about the physical history of the text to the point that the traditional theological task could never get off the ground. That, however, was precisely the intended effect of the first step: to create an endless "nominalist barrage" if you will, an infinitely extendable list of questions directed at the physical history of the text, to the point where the clergy and the political officials allied with them *could never bring to bear their own theological interpretations* of the Bible. In other words, Spinoza switched the focus from the *referent* of the biblical text (e.g., God's activity, Jesus Christ) to *the history of the text*. In doing so, he effectively eviscerated the Bible of all traditional theological meaning and moral teaching.¹¹

Dungan continues, "In short, the net effect of what historical critics have accomplished during the past three hundred years—apart from accumulating an enormous heap of data about the physical history of the text—has been to eviscerate the Bible's core religious beliefs and moral values, preventing the Bible from questioning the political and economic beliefs of the new bourgeois class [that arose in the modern historical-critical era]."¹²

This essay, therefore, will focus on reductionist—or more accurately unorthodox or aberrant—views of inspiration that resulted from historical antecedents and philosophical premises that had a role in the development of literary-dependence hypotheses. Space limitations will limit the focus to the Two-Gospel hypothesis as paradigmatic of this philosophical shift since it arose from the same roots before the Two-Source hypothesis. Specifically, J. J. Griesbach had an aberrant view of inspiration that directly contributed to his viewpoint for the priority of Matthew and the inferiority of Mark. He also disregarded the evidence from church history as to synoptic developments. Since this view is also known as the Owen-Griesbach hypothesis, the theory being that Griesbach received ideas regarding literary-dependence from Owen, the essay will also review Owen's literary approach to the Gospels.

UNORTHODOX ROOTS OF THE TWO-GOSPEL HYPOTHESIS

Griesbach's concept of inspiration and hermeneutics was a *decisive* factor in the development of his synoptic hypothesis. Concerning Griesbach's work, *A Demonstration That the Whole of the Gospel of Mark Was Extracted from the*

¹⁰Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 199 [emphasis original].

¹¹*Ibid.*, 172 [emphasis original].

¹²*Ibid.*, 174, cf. 171. Dungan says that "modern biblical hermeneutics [i.e., historical criticism] was an essential part of the main attack on the traditional institutions of Throne and Altar."

Commentaries of Matthew and Luke,¹³ in which he defended the priority of Matthew and Mark's use of Matthew as a primary source, Dungan comments, "It is striking to see the underlying modern historicist assumption just taken for granted—that these [Gospel] authors all wrote in an entirely human fashion. There is no mention of divine inspiration anywhere."¹⁴ The critical question surrounding Griesbach's synoptic approach, therefore, is, What historical and presuppositional factors influenced Griesbach in the development of his hypothesis?

Three main influences are important in explaining Griesbach's approach to the "synoptic"—a term he apparently coined¹⁵—Gospels and to theological thinking as a whole: Pietism, the Rationalism of Enlightenment, and the philosophy of Romanticism.¹⁶

Griesbach's Educational Background

Johann Jacob Griesbach (1745-1812) was the only son of a Lutheran Pietist minister, Konrad Kaspar Griesbach. He was further educated in Lutheran Pietistic orthodoxy during his five semesters at the University of Tübingen, although he would disassociate himself eventually from Pietism.¹⁷ He transferred to the University of Halle in 1764 where he came under the influence of two great rationalistic theologians, NT scholar Johann David Michaelis (1717-1791)—the inaugurator of the field of NT introduction¹⁸—and the renowned Professor of Theology, Johann Salamo Semler (1725-1791)—"founder of the historical study of

¹³The work was written in Latin, *Commentatio qua Marci Evangelium totum e Matthaei et Lucae commentariis decerptum esse monstratur* (published 1789-1790 and republished with additions in 1794). For an introduction to this work as well as the Latin text and English translation (reflecting the Gabler 1825 edition of Griesbach's work), see Bo Reicke, "Introduction to *Commentatio qua Marci Evangelium totum e Matthaei et Lucae commentariis decerptum esse monstratur*" [Johann Jakob Griesbach's *Commentatio*, trans. Bernard Orchard in *A Demonstration*], in *J. J. Griesbach: Synoptic and Text-critical Studies 1776-1976* (Cambridge: University Press, 1976) 68-135.

¹⁴Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 322.

¹⁵The term appears in Griesbach's *Libri historici Novi Testamenti graece* (1774-1775) where the first part has the title *Synopsis evangeliorum Matthaei, Marci et Lucae*. A reprint of this first part of the edition appeared separately in 1776 under the title *Synopsis evangeliorum Matthaei, Marci et Lucae. Textum graecum ad fidem . . .* (Halle, 1776). For further information, see Bo Reicke, "Introduction to *Commentatio*" 68-69; William Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, vol. 1, *From Deism to Tübingen* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992) 143; Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 7, 176, 310.

¹⁶These factors are identified as the major influences on Griesbach's thinking in such works as Gerhard Dellling, "Johann Jakob Griesbach: His Life, Work and Times," in *J. J. Griesbach: Synoptic and Text-critical Studies* 5-15; Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 308-26; Baird, *History of New Testament Research* 138-48.

¹⁷Dellling, "Johann Jakob Griesbach" 6.

¹⁸Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems*, trans. S. MacLean Gilmour and Howard Clark Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972) 69.

the New Testament” and in whose house Griesbach lived as a student.¹⁹ Michaelis and Semler originated modern “scientific study” of the NT, having been strongly influenced by English Deists in their conclusions regarding the NT, as Kümmel relates, “Both were directly dependent for the questions they asked, as well as for many of the answers they gave, on the writings of the English Deists.”²⁰ Baird labels Michaelis and Semler each as a “wunderkind” of the German Aufklärung [i.e., Enlightenment].²¹ Colin Brown has described the religion of the Enlightenment as “none other than Deism in slightly different dress.”²²

Another who strongly influenced Griesbach’s hermeneutical approach was Johann August Ernesti, with whom Griesbach studied from 1766 to 1767.²³ Thus, Griesbach received the best education in Pietist, Rationalist, Modernist, Enlightenment, biblical studies that Germany and other countries of his day had to offer.²⁴ Important also is the fact that through family contacts and his professorship at Jena in the neighborhood of the Weimar region, Griesbach met with leaders of Romanticism, such as Goethe and Schiller, who often stayed at Griesbach’s house.²⁵

Dungan summarizes,

Given his family background and academic training, Johann Griesbach’s approach toward the Bible and theology was complexed and nuanced. On one side, throughout his life he remained in close contact with Germany’s Romantic thinkers—Goethe and Schiller. . . . From his student days with Semler and Michaelis, Griesbach had been exposed to Europe’s skeptical, historicist interpretation of the New Testament and Church history. At the same time, he remained a true son of his religious heritage, never relinquishing in his lectures, publications, and ecclesiastical activities a marked Lutheran Pietism.²⁶

Griesbach as a Neologian

Griesbach (along with Michaelis, Semler, Eichhorn and Herder—to

¹⁹Kümmel, *The New Testament* 68. Not only did Griesbach live with Semler during his days as a student at Halle, but also lived with him after he returned from his extensive European tour which he undertook to acquaint himself with the methods of different professors and to examine the New Testament manuscripts in the great libraries of London, Oxford, Cambridge and other centers of learning. Griesbach was 23 years old at the time he set off in 1768 and returned home in 1770. See Colin Brown, *Jesus in Protestant European Thought 1778-1960* (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth, 1985) 175-76; Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 310; Delling, “Johann Jakob Griesbach” 7.

²⁰Kümmel, *The New Testament* 62.

²¹Baird, *History of New Testament Research* 1:127.

²²Colin Brown, *Christianity and Western Thought*, vol. 1, *From the Ancient World to the Age of Enlightenment* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990) 214.

²³For further information on Ernesti, see Kümmel, *The New Testament* 60-61, 473.

²⁴Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 310.

²⁵Delling, “Johann Jakob Griesbach” 14.

²⁶Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 311-12.

mention few) belonged to the *Neologie*, a movement that reached its zenith between 1740 and 1790.²⁷ Kümmel and Bray identify Semler as “the father” or “the founder of the movement,” but others dispute this identification.²⁸ The term “neology” has the meaning of “Teachers of the New.”²⁹ They were named thus because people believed that the way they read the Bible was fundamentally new. It consisted of combining the thinking of Rationalism, Pietism, and Romanticism into a new system of approach to Scripture.³⁰ Though the neologians did not deny the validity of divine revelation per se, they assigned priority to reason and natural theology. “While faith in God, morality, and immortality were affirmed, older dogmas such as the Trinity, predestination and the inspiration of Scripture were seriously compromised.”³¹ Their historical-critical method was virtually identical with Rationalism, but they remained perhaps nominally more receptive to the idea of miracles.³² Brown comments,

In general, the Neologians sought to transcend both orthodoxy and pietism by restating the Christian faith in the light of modern thought. To them [the Neologians], revelation was a confirmation of the truths of reason. They drew a distinction between religion and theology, and between dogmas and the Bible. In a sense they were pioneers of moderate biblical criticism, maintaining that Jesus deliberately accommodated his teaching to the beliefs and understandings of his hearers.³³

Griesbach admits this tendency in his own work, and also notes the dissatisfaction among some people caused by this melding of conflicting thoughts. In the Preface to the second addition (1786) of his *Anleitung zum Studium der populären Dogmatik, besonders für künftige Religionslehrer [Magistri verbi divini]*, he refers to “the precious ‘enlightenment’ of many dogmas” provided by modern scholars, so that certainly some of his readers “will shake their heads suspiciously at supposed heterodoxies—known now as neologies,” while others “will shrug their shoulders

²⁷Aner identifies both Griesbach and Eichhorn as “neologians,” but not Michaelis and Semler. See Karl Aner, *Die Theologie der Lessingzeit* (Hildesheim, Germany: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1964) 98-99.

²⁸Kümmel, *The New Testament* 490; Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation, Past & Present* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996) 257. Aner notes that Semler as well as Michaelis are sometimes classified as neologians, but feels that they were independent historically, not belonging to any party. Instead, Aner argues that the neologians appropriated the historical-critical work of these two figures. However, Aner does classify Griesbach and Eichhorn as neologians (Aner, *Die Theologie der Lessingzeit* 98-99, 138-39).

²⁹The German term is “Lehrer des Neuen”; s.v. “Aufklärung II,” by Martin Schmidt, in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Studienausgabe, Teil I, Band IV (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979) 600.

³⁰Bray, *Biblical Interpretation* 257.

³¹Baird, *History of New Testament Research* 1:116.

³²Bray, *Biblical Interpretation* 257.

³³Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought* 8.

indulgently at the author's attachment to old-fashioned orthodoxy."³⁴ Dungan relates, "Griesbach was a perfect example of such a hybrid or mediating position. . . Judging from his more popular writings, Griesbach's Bible became—in good Enlightenment, i.e., Spinozist, fashion—a handbook of morality whose doctrines were acceptable to any reasonable person."³⁵

Thus, neology was an unsuccessful attempt at synthesizing contemporary thought. Affirming Rationalism's critical spirit, it refused to recognize the Bible as divinely inspired, but modified Rationalism's ideology that interpreted Scripture entirely based on natural science. From the Romantics, it interpreted the Bible in literary categories as developing and changing; from the tradition of textual criticism, it sought a detailed analysis of the text.³⁶ Neology's attempted synthesis failed and lasted only a generation. A renewed, rigorous rationalism on one hand and a renewed supernaturalism on the other replaced it. Bray comments on neology's demise:

The accusation that neology was little more than rationalism with a human face may be somewhat harsh, but it is true that the neologists were unable, and probably unwilling, to move away from rationalistic presuppositions in any decisive way. In the end, they could not separate critical methods from the ideology that lay behind them, and their attempts to do so made them appear inconsistent with their own principles. . . .

Perhaps the best judgment on neology is to say that it was not so much a failure at synthesis as a first attempt . . . but [a system] which established basic principles that still play their part in biblical interpretation today.³⁷

Reflecting the mentoring of his teachers Semler and Michaelis, Griesbach attempted to accommodate traditional Christianity to the mind of the Enlightenment, and thus he was plagued by the same tension between faith and criticism that troubled his predecessors.³⁸

Mentoring for Griesbach

Theologically, Michaelis and Semler had a profound impact on their student Griesbach while he studied at Halle. Baird notes, "Their two most famous students, J. J. Griesbach and J. G. Eichhorn, carried on the tradition of their teachers."³⁹ In his student days with Semler and Michaelis, Griesbach had been exposed to Europe's skeptical historicist (rationalistic) interpretation of the NT and

³⁴Cited by Dellinger, "Johann Jakob Griesbach" 9, 17.

³⁵Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 314.

³⁶Bray, *Biblical Interpretation* 258.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 258-59.

³⁸Baird, *History of New Testament Research* 1:147.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 1:117.

Church history.⁴⁰ Hurst relates, “Griesbach pursued his [Semler’s] skeptical investigations for the establishment of natural religion and others aided him in his undertaking.”⁴¹ Semler was reared in the atmosphere of Pietism, but eventually his theological assertions rejected his Pietistic heritage. Under his leadership, Halle became the leading and dominant center of liberal, critical theology in the eighteenth century.⁴² Hurst uses little diplomacy in noting, “[T]here have been few men who have shown greater boldness in assaulting the Christian faith than Semler, the father of the destructive school of Rationalism.”⁴³ His further description is even more biting:

His work, though destructive, was in conflict with the pure beauty of his private life. And here we look at him as one of the enigmas of human biography. True to his tenet that a man’s public teachings need not influence his personal living, he was at once a teacher of skepticism and an example of piety. . . .

It was astonishing that a man could live as purely and devotedly as Semler, and yet make the gulf so wide between private faith and public instruction. We attribute no evil intention to him in his theological labors; these were the results of his own mental defects.⁴⁴

As a true child of the Enlightenment,⁴⁵ he demonstrated contempt for the history and doctrinal authority of the church, Hurst again noting that

his [Semler’s] chief triumph was—against the history and doctrinal authority of the church. His mind had been thoroughly imbued with a disgust of what was ancient and revered. He appeared to despise the antiquities of the church simply because they were antiquities. What was new and fresh, was, with him, worthy of unbounded admiration and speedy adoption.⁴⁶

Semler opposed the biblicism of the orthodox, rejecting the traditional doctrine of inspiration.⁴⁷ Semler was a chief catalyst in the hermeneutical revolution

⁴⁰Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 311-12.

⁴¹John Fletcher Hurst, *History of Rationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Eaton & Means, 1901) 137-38.

⁴²Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought* 10.

⁴³Hurst, *History of Rationalism* 128. Baird notes, “Semler, with considerable despair, was never able to experience the new birth which Pietists thought essential to authentic faith, a point of increasing tension with his father” (Baird, *History of New Testament Research* 1:117).

⁴⁴Hurst, *History of Rationalism* 133, 136.

⁴⁵For an excellent summary of the Enlightenment’s effect on the inspiration and authority of Scripture, cf. Bruce Demarest, “The Bible in the Enlightenment Era,” in *Challenges to Inerrancy, A Theological Response*, eds., Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest (Chicago: Moody, 1984) 47.

⁴⁶Hurst, *History of Rationalism* 132.

⁴⁷Gerhard Hasel, *Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 20 n. 36.

that was occurring. His four-volume *Treatise on the Free Investigation of the Canon* (1771-75) [*Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canon*] fought the orthodox doctrine of inspiration, and claimed that the Word of God and Holy Scriptures are not identical, thus implying that not all parts of the Bible are inspired. He also claimed that the question of whether a book belongs to the canon is purely a historical one. That is, the Bible is purely a historical document and to be investigated like any other document through historical-critical methodology.⁴⁸ In light of historical development of Scripture, Semler maintained that one could no longer appeal to the doctrine of inspiration as a guarantee of the text of Scripture as the Word of God and that the Gospels themselves were not universally valid, definitive histories, but each grew out of a particular historical context.⁴⁹ Semler prepared the way for a “free investigation” of the Scripture unencumbered by dogmatic or theological restraints. He also asserted that the Scriptures are to be interpreted by the same method whereby any other book would be interpreted, i.e., historically (i.e., rationalistically).⁵⁰ Gerhard Maier strikes at the heart of the matter: “The general acceptance of Semler’s basic concept that the Bible must be treated like any other book has plunged theology into an endless chain of perplexities and inner contradictions.”⁵¹

Another significant feature of Semler’s exegesis was his use of the theory of accommodation. According to Semler, the truths of revelation were accommodated to people’s ability to appropriate them. In discussing the relation of Jesus to demons, he asserted that Jesus Himself did not believe in the existence of demons but trimmed his teaching to fit the unenlightened minds of His hearers.⁵² Semler argued, “That teachers, after the undeniable example of Jesus and the apostles, condescended to their listeners’ mode of thought, or accommodated themselves to their own circumstances, is historically certain and was done at that time as the matter required.”⁵³

Semler, however, reacted strongly against the Wolfenbüttel Fragments

⁴⁸Hasel, *Basic Issues* 21; Kümmel, *The New Testament* 63; Baird, *History of New Testament Research* 1:118.

⁴⁹For an overview of Semler’s assertions, cf. Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought* 10-16.

⁵⁰J. S. Semler, *Vorbereitung zur theologischen Hermeneutik*, vols. 1 and 2 (Halle: C. H. Hemmerde, 1760-61), 1:129; Baird, *History of New Testament Research* 1:125.

⁵¹Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, trans., Edwin W. Leverenz and Rudolph F. Norden (St. Louis: Concordia, 1974, 1977) 11.

⁵²J. S. Semler, *Versuch einer biblischen Dämonologie, oder Untersuchung der Lehre der heil. Schrift vom Teufel and seiner Macht* (Halle: C. H. Hemmerde, 1776) 341; Baird, *History of New Testament Research* 1:124.

⁵³Quote taken from Semler’s *Versuch einer freieren theologischen Lehrart* (Halle, 1777) and cited by Trutz Rendtorff, *Church and Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 47-48.

published by Lessing.⁵⁴ Baird relates, “Although both [Lessing and Semler] had rejected the faith of their youth, Semler was never fully free from his pietistic legacy. . . . Semler thought the Fragments to be an impious assault on Christianity.”⁵⁵ Semler’s approach upheld a generally reverent and judicious acceptance of new, historical-critical approaches while Lessing’s approach, though essentially supporting Semler, appeared to Semler to be malicious and sarcastic in tone. Thus, the difference between Lessing and Semler was in part a matter of temperament and tone rather than in substance.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, the aggregate results of Semler’s approach was the destruction of biblical authority as well as its inspiration.⁵⁷ Such views earned for Semler the title of “father of historical-critical theology.”⁵⁸

Michaelis, another mentor of Griesbach who also influenced him, was relatively more conservative than Semler, although strong Deistic influences alienated him from Pietism. Michaelis expressed his ideas in his *Einleitung in die göttlichen Schriften des Neuen Bundes*, of which the fourth edition of 1788 carried Semler’s historical approach to the New Testament.⁵⁹ He also advanced some ideas that influenced Griesbach, some of which deserve special mention. First, only books written by apostles should be accepted as inspired. Michaelis argued regarding the Gospels of Mark and Luke (as well as the book of Acts), “I must confess, that I am unable to find a satisfactory proof of their inspiration, and the more I investigate the subject, and the oftener I compare their writings with those of St. Matthew and St. John, the greater are my doubts.”⁶⁰

Second, a book could be genuine (i.e. authentically written by the individuals who are purported to have written them) but not necessarily inspired: “The question, whether the books of the New Testament are inspired, is not so important, as the question whether they are genuine. The truth of our religion

⁵⁴For further information regarding Reimarus and Lessing, consult Charles H. Talbert, ed., *Reimarus: Fragments*, trans., Ralph S. Fraser (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

⁵⁵Baird, *History of New Testament Research* 1:175.

⁵⁶Brown notes, “What Semler urged—and in no small measure achieved—was a general, reverent and judicious acceptance of the new critical approach to Scripture” (Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought*, 11; cf. Baird, *History of New Testament Research* 1:175).

⁵⁷Baird, *History of New Testament Research* 1:126.

⁵⁸Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 19.

⁵⁹Johann David Michaelis, *Einleitung in die göttlichen Schriften des Neuen Bundes*, 4th rev. ed., 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1788); English translation: John David Michaelis, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 4 vols., trans. from the 4th ed. of the German, and considerably augmented with Notes, Explanatory and Supplemental by Herbert Marsh, 2nd ed. (London: F. and C. Rivington, 1802). See also F. F. Bruce, “The History of New Testament Study,” in *New Testament Principles of Interpretation*, ed., I. Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 37; Baird, *History of New Testament Research* 1:131.

⁶⁰Michaelis, *Introduction to the New Testament* 1:87.

depends on the latter, not absolutely on the former.”⁶¹

Michaelis's distinction between inspiration and reliability called into question the belief that the whole Bible was equally inspired and infallible. Baird remarks, “Although Michaelis had written impressive works on dogmatics and reflected profoundly about the meaning of language, his weakness was a failure to think theologically about his historical criticism.”⁶²

Third, Michaelis raised the possibility of contradictions in the Gospels so that the harmonization was questioned, although, admittedly, he did not take this to mean that the main substance of their accounts were false for the evangelists were on the whole good historians.⁶³ Neill and Wright comment,

[T]he orthodoxy of the time [Michaelis' day] took it for granted that, because the NT is divinely inspired in every part, it is *a priori* impossible that there should be any contradictions between the Gospels; any apparent contradiction must be due only to the imperfection of our understanding, and must be susceptible of resolution into harmony. Michaelis was prepared to face the possibility that there really might be contradictions.⁶⁴

Thus, for Michaelis, as well as for his student, Griesbach, the Gospels of Matthew and John are inspired; the other two, Mark and Luke, are not. Baird notes that “Michaelis intended to use the new historical-critical method to support authenticity. . . . Michaelis . . . was concerned to defend the apostolic authorship and canonicity of most of the NT books.”⁶⁵ Others during Michaelis's time, however, recognized the real effect of Michaelis's work in deprecating the inspiration of the New Testament books.⁶⁶ Unlike his student Griesbach, Michaelis rejected the idea of literary dependence, instead presenting for the first time the hypothesis of an *Urevangelium* or “original lost gospel” whereby he traced their similar characteristics to common use of several apocryphal gospels.⁶⁷

⁶¹Michaelis, *Introduction to the New Testament* 1:72.

⁶²Baird, *History of New Testament Research* 1:138.

⁶³Michaelis argued, “If the word inspiration therefore be taken in such a sense as to include infallibility, we can scarcely believe, that St. Mark and St. Luke were inspired. The violent methods which have been used to reconcile their accounts with those of the other Evangelists, and the insuperable difficulty, which has hitherto attended the harmony of the Gospels, have cast a dark shade on our religion, and the truth and simplicity of its history have been almost buried under the weight of explanations” (Michaelis, *Introduction to the New Testament* 1:96).

⁶⁴Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: University Press, 1988) 6.

⁶⁵Baird, *History of New Testament Research* 1:137.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*; cf. John Randolph, Remarks on “Michaelis's Introduction to the New Testament, Vols. III IV. Translated by the Rev. Herbert Marsh, and Augmented with Notes,” By way of caution to students in Divinity, Second Edition, with Preface and Notes, In Reply to Mr. Marsh (London: T. Bensley, 1802).

⁶⁷Kümmel, *The New Testament* 69.

German Pietism and Griesbach's Rationalism

Pietism, whose central figure was Philipp Jacob Spener (1635-1705), was essentially a reaction against the development of Scholastic Lutheranism that developed in Germany after the Reformation. Though Scholastic Lutheranism was based on the Scriptures, it assumed the form of a fixed dogmatic interpretation, rigid, exact, and demanding intellectual conformity. Emphasis was on pure doctrine and the sacraments. A faith that consisted in the acceptance of a dogmatic whole very largely replaced the vital relationship between the believer and God that Luther had taught. Although some evidences of deeper piety existed, the general tendency was external and dogmatic.⁶⁸

Spener reacted against such externals, asserting the primacy of feeling in Christian experience.⁶⁹ Although at first Pietists adhered to the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture in the same manner as did the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anabaptist, Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, and Westminster traditions, they stressed subjective, personal experience rather than biblical doctrines or catechism.⁷⁰ August Hermann Francke (1663-1727), Spener's close associate, argued, "We may safely assure those who read the word with devotion and simplicity, that they will derive more light and profit from such a practice, and from connecting meditation with it . . . than can ever be acquired from drudging through an infinite variety of unimportant minutiae."⁷¹ In 1694 Spener founded the University of Halle, which quickly became the main eighteenth-century center of the Pietistic Movement, with Francke dominating the theological methods and instruction.⁷²

Francke took Spener's emphasis on personal experience further, even to the point where, although he emphasized the importance of reading Scripture, at times he appeared to oppose the need for intellectual and doctrinal pursuits. This led to attacks on Pietism by orthodox Lutherans. Gonzalez notes, "The emphasis here [by Francke] falls entirely on individual believers and their relationship with God, and the church seems to be entirely bypassed."⁷³ This acute subjectivism actually

⁶⁸For further information on Protestant Scholasticism, as well as its counter-reaction in German Pietism, see Williston Walker and Richard A. Norris, David W. Lotz, Robert T. Tandy, *A History of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985) 526-29, 587-92.

⁶⁹See Philipp Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans., ed., and with an Introduction by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964).

⁷⁰Tappert notes, "He [Spener] did not deny the scholastic doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures, but he was more interested in their content than in their form and in their effect than in their origin." Spener's emphasis was on the more subjective impact of the doctrine of inspiration on the individual's life (Tappert, "Introduction," in *Pia Desideria* 25).

⁷¹Hermann Francke, *A Guide to Reading and Study of the Holy Scriptures*, trans. from the Latin, and augmented with notes by William Jaques (Philadelphia: David Hogan, 1823) 83.

⁷²F. Ernest Stoeffler, *German Pietism During the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973) 39-87.

⁷³Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, rev. ed., vol. 3, *From the Protestant Reformation to the Twentieth Century* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975, 1987) 304.

prepared the way for the rise of rationalism among later Pietists, like Semler, Michaelis, and Griesbach.⁷⁴ Nix summarizes well:

Although Pietists adhered to the inspiration of the Bible, they advocated individual feeling as being of primary importance. That may have been an adequate method for avoiding cold orthodoxy of "Protestant scholasticism," it opened the door for the equally dangerous enemy of "subjective experientialism." The first generation of Pietists could recall and reflect on its grounding in Scripture while validly advocating the need for individual experience. A second generation would stress the need for individual experience, but often without a proper Biblical or catechetical basis. This would leave a third generation that would question individual experience with no Biblical or doctrinal "standard" to serve as an objective criterion. In turn, their unanswered questions would tend to demand an authority. When the Scriptures were neglected, human reason or subjective experience would fill the need as the required "standard." Thus while not causing other movements Pietism gave impetus to three other movements in the post-Reformation church: deism, skepticism and rationalism. Although these movements were not limited to any particular country prior to the revolutions in America and France, deism was most dominant in England and America, skepticism in France, and rationalism in Germany.⁷⁵

As a consequence, rationalism had strongly influenced the Pietism of Griesbach's day.

Griesbach's Historical and Presuppositional Context

Griesbach's approach to the New Testament, especially his synoptic approach, strongly attests these background influences of his mentoring, his pietistic religious background, as well as the Enlightenment's rationalistic methods of historical criticism expressed in his day. Only by placing Griesbach into this historical and presuppositional context can he properly evaluate his literary-dependence hypothesis.

Historical-Critical Presuppositional Influence. Reflecting Semler's and Michaelis's approach, Griesbach asserted that although the Bible is a unique book, "The NT must be explained as every other ancient book is explained."⁷⁶ Moreover, Griesbach believed, along with them, that "The accuracy, especially in the case of

⁷⁴Hurst writes, "[T]he evils of Rationalism were partially anticipated by the practical teachings of the Pietists" (Hurst, *History of Rationalism* 102).

⁷⁵William E. Nix, "The Doctrine of Inspiration Since the Reformation, Part II: Changing Climates of Opinion," *JETS* 27 (December 1984):442.

⁷⁶The German reads: "Das N.T. muß erklärt werden, wie jedes alte Buch erklärt wird." See Johann Jacob Griesbach, *Vorlesungen über die Hermeneutik des N.T. mit Anwendung auf die Leidens- und Auferstehungsgeschichte Christi*, Herausgeben von Johann Carl Samuel Steiner (Nürnberg: Zehschen Buchhandlung, 1815) 53.

the NT writers, often errs.”⁷⁷ Reflecting Semler’s accommodation hypothesis, Griesbach believed that the people of the ancient Near East were limited in their worldview and ascribed to divine intervention what was the result of natural causes.⁷⁸

As a result, Griesbach asserted, “The truth of the Christian religion . . . rests not on miracles, but partly on its excellence, partly on its history.”⁷⁹ Reflecting Semler’s concept that the Word of God and the Scriptures are not identical, Griesbach asserted that much of the NT (e.g., the temporally conditioned data, the limited perspective of the original readers) belongs simply to the garment which clothes the universal truth. Hence, Griesbach held that the Bible is not to be identified as the Word of God, but “it is merely the history of revelation, the presentation of the revealed truth.”⁸⁰

Griesbach’s unorthodox view of the canon as erring and limited in inspiration helped foster the concept of valuing of some Gospels as more reliable or “inspired” (Matthew, John) while others were not (Mark, Luke), and hence, the more reliable ones could serve as possible “sources” for the others. Since the Scriptures were to be approached like any other book, such an idea also disposed him toward a totally naturalistic, mechanistic explanation for the Gospel phenomena. That agreed with the rationalism of Enlightenment thinking, with no guidance of the Holy Spirit for the writers, especially since his synoptic approach never referred to inspiration.⁸¹

Rationalistic, Pietistic Presuppositional Influence. Griesbach’s unorthodox presuppositions regarding inspiration reflected the rationalism that imbued the Pietism of his day. He believed that the NT writers were not inspired by the Holy Spirit *in the act of writing*.⁸² That is, Griesbach opposed the orthodox idea that the NT Scriptures were plenary, verbally inspired by God.⁸³ Instead, he maintained that the apostles received a onetime gift of the Spirit at Pentecost which made it possible for them later both to understand and transmit doctrine.⁸⁴ Such a

⁷⁷Griesbach’s comment, “Die Genauigkeit, besonders bei den N.T. Schriftstellern, fehlt oft” (Griesbach, *Vorlesungen* 139); cf. Baird, *History of New Testament Research* 1:140.

⁷⁸Griesbach, *Vorlesungen* 139-44; Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 312; Baird, *History of New Testament Research* 1:140.

⁷⁹The German reads, “Die Wahrheit der christlichen Religion behurt ja nicht auf den Wundern; sondern theils auf ihrer Vortrefflichkeit, theils auf ihrer Geschichte” (Griesbach, *Vorlesungen* 144).

⁸⁰The German reads, “Muß man die irrige Vorstellung fallen lassen, die Bibel selbst sei das Wort Gottes; nein, sie ist blos die Geschichte der Offenbarung, die Darstellung der geoffenbarten Wahrheiten” (Griesbach, *Vorlesungen* 164; cf. Baird, *History of New Testament Research* 1:141).

⁸¹Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 322.

⁸²Ibid., 313; Baird, *History of New Testament Research* 1:139.

⁸³See Delling, “Johann Jakob Greisbach” 11.

⁸⁴Cited in Delling, “Johann Jakob Griesbach” 11.

stance automatically deprecated and left out the Gospels of Mark and Luke, as well as some other NT books, because they were not written by apostles themselves but by associates. Reflecting Michaelis' concept that only books written by apostles are inspired, Griesbach argued, "Those who argue that Mark wrote under the influence of divine inspiration must surely regard it as being a pretty meagre one!"⁸⁵ According to Griesbach, the Holy Spirit worked through two apostles, Matthew and John, who were of preeminent importance in giving reliable testimony to the historical facts of Jesus' ministry. This became key for his acceptance of Matthew as the Gospel that would have literary primacy in his synoptic hypothesis.

Combined with his unorthodox view of inspiration also was Griesbach's skepticism regarding the general historical reliability of the Gospels, a belief that the synoptics could not be harmonized or offer a reliable chronological account of Jesus' life. Brown perceptively comments, "Griesbach's separation of the first three Gospels from the fourth [i.e., John's Gospel] gave rise to the classification of the former as the Synoptic Gospels."⁸⁶ This historical skepticism led him to develop a synopsis rather than pursue a traditional harmony, which he rejected.⁸⁷ Moreover, Griesbach was very skeptical of the Gospel of John's chronological reliability, omitting it from his synopsis. He also maintained that Mark in particular was not interested in chronological order of events, commenting, "I have serious doubts that a harmonious narrative can be put together from the books of the evangelists, one that adequately agrees with the truth in respect of chronological arrangement of the pericopes and which stands on a solid basis. . . . I confess to this heresy!"⁸⁸ He hypothesized that through critically observing synopsis presentation of the Gospels, the "correct" original order of composition could be discovered by comparing the Gospels to one another, thus also determining the most reliable historical facts in the Gospels.

In sum, Griesbach's aberrant position on inspiration combined with rationalistic skepticism regarding the historical and chronological reliability of the Gospels caused him to view one Gospel, Matthew, as superior to the other synoptics. This led him to prefer Matthew, while Mark and Luke were *a priori* placed in a posterior position of deriving information from their "source," i.e., Matthew. Dungan, a staunch supporter of the Two-Gospel hypothesis, admits that both Griesbach's rejection of the possibility of harmonizing the Gospels and Griesbach's view of inspiration influenced his synoptic approach:

As long as the Gospels were viewed as a divinely inspired, inerrant, timeless block,

⁸⁵Griesbach, *A Demonstration* 135.

⁸⁶Brown, *Jesus in Protestant European Thought* 177.

⁸⁷See Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 318-19.

⁸⁸For this quote from the preface to Griesbach's 1797 second edition of his *Synopsis Evangeliorum Matthaei, Marci et Lucae*, see Heinrich Greeven, "Gospel Synopsis from 1776 to the Present Day," in *J. J. Griesbach: Synoptic and Text-critical Studies 1776-1976* 27, 190-91.

or, more precisely, as four accurate but incomplete chronologies of the original events, the obvious gaps and apparent chronological inconsistencies among the Gospels had to be explained. . . .

As soon as the Gospels were seen to be *human* books written at *different* times for different *audiences*, their differences and inconsistencies took on a wholly new significance; they were important clues to the shifts and changes in the vital development of the early Christian church.

.....
 One immediate result of this approach was to open the door to the possibility that not all of the Gospels were equally reliable. The big question then became how to distinguish the more reliable from the less reliable Gospels. . . .

Griesbach resolved this riddle by pointing to the Gospel of Matthew and John as the most reliable historical accounts, since they had been written by the Apostles who had received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.”⁸⁹

Influence of Historical Skepticism on Griesbach’s Synopsis. Because Griesbach’s view of inspiration, as well as his negative attitude toward harmonization, differed qualitatively from the position of the church from its beginning through the time of the Reformation,⁹⁰ he developed a different approach, the synopsis, that placed the Gospels into parallel columns, not with a view to harmonizing them, but so that minute differences and alleged contradictions could be magnified. In its historical development, therefore, the synopsis developed from historical skepticism regarding the Gospels. Dungan is right when he notes that at heart of all modern discussion of modern synoptic dependence hypotheses is a “skepticism regarding the chronological value of the gospels.”⁹¹ Important also is the fact that Gospel synopses played a decisive role in the development of modern synoptic dependence hypotheses that arose from modern skepticism regarding the Gospels. This vehicle greatly facilitated the rise of both the Two-Source and the Two Gospel hypotheses.⁹² More significantly, neutrality of synopses in dealing with the synoptic question comes under strong suspicion, since they are circular at core, being constructed to prove dependence hypotheses already chosen on an *a priori* basis. Dungan comments that most modern synopsis are highly biased toward the Two-/Four-Source hypothesis:

⁸⁹Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 321.

⁹⁰Dungan comments, “[T]raditional Gospel harmonists proceeded on the basis of Augustine’s assumption that all four Gospels were uniformly true and without admixture of the slightest degree of error. . . . The Augustinian approach remained the model for more than a thousand years” (Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 304 ; cf. also 123-41, 171-90). Through the time of the Reformation until the modern philosophical presuppositions (Rationalism, Deism, Romanticism, etc.) created the historical-critical ideology, the orthodox position of the church was that the Gospels were without error and could be harmonized into a unified whole. For harmonization during the time of the Reformation, cf. Harvey K. McArthur, “Sixteenth-Century Gospel Harmonies,” in *The Quest Through the Centuries: The Search for the Historical Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 85-101.

⁹¹Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 307.

⁹²Ibid., 332-41.

[T]he same circular process of argument emerged in Germany that later appeared in England. A source theory was invented and a synopsis created to illustrate it. Charts were then created based on that synopsis which were held to “prove” the theory. This *circulus in probando* was camouflaged in Germany by Huck’s claim that his synoptic arrangement was “neutral” with respect to all source theories.⁹³

Romanticism’s Influence. The Romanticism and its concept of development influenced Griesbach’s synoptic approach.⁹⁴ Dungan observes, “Griesbach was unable to adopt the traditional harmony since he felt drawn toward the modern Romantic notion of a development view of the Gospels’ history, a conception that was intrinsic to the epistemological rationale of the synopsis, as distinguished from the harmony.”⁹⁵ He lived at the rise of Romanticism’s influence in Germany, which greatly affected his approach to the Gospels.⁹⁶ Its concepts of change caused him to move toward developmental ideas in how the Gospels were created. At heart, however, Romanticism was rationalistic, seeking naturalistic, mechanistic ways of explaining Scripture rather than recognizing an orthodox viewpoint of inspiration. Brown comments,

The Romantic movement created great interest in the Bible as literature and consequently reduced it to one among many documents to be studied by scholars in comparative literature and religion. . . . If the Bible could be damaged by placing it alongside other supposedly early documents, some genuine, some less so, and suggesting that it has no more authority than they do, it could also be reduced in influence by placing other documents alongside the Bible and implying that they have an authority similar to the Bible’s.⁹⁷

Griesbach’s Enlightenment Prejudice Against Ancient Traditions. In 1771 Griesbach prepared a treatise on the importance of the church fathers (especially Origen) for the original text of the NT. Yet, in regard to his synoptic hypothesis, like his mentor, Semler, he exhibited the characteristic Enlightenment disrespect for them and their writings. Linnemann aptly notes,

What about the traditions from the early church that give information about the

⁹³Ibid., 336.

⁹⁴Ibid., 302-26.

⁹⁵Ibid., 320.

⁹⁶For information on Romanticism, consult Crane Brinton, “Romanticism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967) 7:206-9. Contemporary scholars differ regarding exact definitions of Romanticism, but agree on general characteristics (R. V. Pierard, “Romanticism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed., Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 960.

⁹⁷Harold O. J. Brown, “Romanticism and the Bible,” in *Challenges to Inerrancy*, eds., Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 58.

origins of the Gospels? Griesbach focused only on those in which he found supporting evidence for his hypothesis. The rest he arbitrarily declared to be “sheer fabrication” and “worthless fables.”

How scientific “scientific” theology is becomes obvious as we consider what Griesbach was really saying: Historical church tradition—which possessed incontrovertible validity for friend and foe alike in the second century, when some were still alive who could declare what was bogus—was branded a lie by a “scientist” at the end of the eighteenth century. Yet this view so thoroughly discredited the tradition that its claim to truth no longer was taken seriously by historical-critical theology.⁹⁸

Orchard and Riley concur: “Griesbach . . . accepted the authenticity of the Gospels but at the same time denied the value of the historical evidence.”⁹⁹ For further information on Enlightenment dismissal of patristic evidence, see how Griesbach deprecated Papias: “The things that Papias (Eusebius H.E. III. 39) records about the Gospel of Mark are figments very far from the truth, although he produces the Presbyter John as a witness.”¹⁰⁰ Griesbach would need to deprecate Papias since Papias relates that Mark was dependent on Peter, not Matthew, as the “source” for his Gospel. Griesbach summarily dismissed other evidence by arguing, “The most ancient Fathers, who recorded that Mark wrote the life of the Lord under the auspices of Peter, either narrated their own conjectures (not history drawn from trustworthy documents), or were deceived by false rumours.”¹⁰¹ Regarding the evidence of the Petrine source behind Mark, he states that Tertullian (*Against Marcion* IV.5) relied on “vague rumors and arguments with little foundation”; that the authority of Justin (*Dialogue with Trypho* §106) in historical matters “amounts to nothing;”¹⁰² that Clement of Alexandria is “not quite consistent with himself” and trumps up artificial differences in statements capable of more viable alternatives.¹⁰³

His dismissal of Clement as a source is evidence of Griesbach’s Enlightenment prejudice against ancient tradition, especially since a closer examination of Clement reveals that he received information on the Gospels through personal contacts from a wide network of church elders from different parts of the Mediterra-

⁹⁸Linnemann, *Is There A Synoptic Problem?* 28.

⁹⁹Bernard Orchard and Harold Riley, “The State of the Question,” in *The Order of the Synoptics: Why Three Synoptic Gospels?* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University, 1987) 112; cf. also 111-17. For further information on Enlightenment dismissal of tradition, consult Hayden White, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *The Enlightenment Tradition*, ed., Robert Anchor, reprinted and updated (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California, 1979) ix; Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment, An Interpretation: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966) 374-75.

¹⁰⁰Griesbach, *A Demonstration* 134.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Ibid., 116.

¹⁰³Ibid., 135.

nean world.¹⁰⁴ Eusebius quotes him as citing “a tradition of the primitive elders with regard to the order of the Gospels as follows. He said that those Gospels were first written which include the genealogies.”¹⁰⁵ Here Clement, based on widespread information, related that Matthew or Luke was first composed, then Mark and John. While part of the evidence from Clement supports Matthean priority in terms of time of composition, Griesbach summarily dismissed any evidence that ran contrary to his hypothesis, especially the early fathers’ assertions that Mark depended on Peter, not Matthew, as his source.¹⁰⁶

Interesting also is the tone of Griesbach’s handling of evidence that contradicted his hypothesis. It closely resembles Streeter’s high-handed and cavalier dismissal of the “minor agreements” as “irrelevant” and “deceptive” of Matthew and Luke against Mark.¹⁰⁷ Yet sound reasoning dictates that those closest to the composition of the Gospels should be taken more seriously than advocates of late-developing synoptic hypotheses. Influenced by the contemptuous attitude of Enlightenment scholars, current German and British scholars have continued to ignore or dismiss such evidence.¹⁰⁸

HENRY OWEN AND THE TWO-GOSPEL HYPOTHESIS¹⁰⁹

Some evangelicals who adopt literary-dependence have attempted to point out the influence of Henry Owen (1716-1795) on Griesbach’s literary-dependence approach. Owen was a practicing physician by profession (M.D. degree earned in 1753 at the age of 37; in practice for three years), who later took clerical vows in the Church of England. He became rector of St. Olave, Hart Street, in 1760, and vicar

¹⁰⁴Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 5.11.3-4; cf. also F. David Farnell, “The Synoptic Gospels in the Ancient Church,” *TMSJ* 10 (Spring 1999):53-86.

¹⁰⁵Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.5-7.

¹⁰⁶More recent supporters of Griesbach have attempted to correct his after realizing the importance of the evidence from the fathers; cf. William R. Farmer, “The Patristic Evidence Reexamined: A Response to George Kennedy,” in *New Synoptic Studies*, ed., William R. Farmer (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University) 3-15; cp. George Kennedy who encouraged NT scholars to take patristic evidence more seriously: George Kennedy, “Classical and Christian Source Criticism,” in *Relationship Among the Gospels: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, ed., William O. Walker, Jr. (San Antonio: Trinity University, 1978) 147-52.

¹⁰⁷See B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels* (London: Macmillan, 1924, 1953) 295-331.

¹⁰⁸Orchard and Riley, “The State of the Question” 112-13; Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 380-81.

¹⁰⁹The Two-Gospel hypothesis is sometimes called the Owen-Griesbach hypothesis. Agnew argues, “The contemporary scholars who work with the gospel order Matthew-Luke-Mark, first propounded by Owen (1764) and later (1789) expounded by Johann Jacob Griesbach, have brought up to date Griesbach’s arguments; thus, the hypothesis has grown beyond its origins and is best characterized by a descriptive, rather than proper name,” i.e., the Two-Gospel hypothesis (Peter W. Agnew, “The Two-Gospel Hypothesis and a Biographical Genre for the Gospels,” *New Synoptic Studies*, ed., William R. Farmer (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University, 1983) 487 n. 22.

of Edmonton in Middlesex in 1775. Some evangelicals assert that Owen, not Griesbach, originated the first defense of literary dependence. Owen wrote 19 years before Griesbach (1764 and 1783)¹¹⁰ and reflected a view very similar to Griesbach's. The assumption is that Owen may have influenced Griesbach's later thinking. As the thinking goes, some evangelicals consider Owen to be a defender of biblical accuracy and literary-dependence in his work and draw the conclusion that evangelicals who support literary-dependence in emulating Owen's approach may hold a high view of Scripture.¹¹¹ Therefore, a review of Henry Owen and his treatise, *Observations on the Four Gospels*, is in order to determine the validity of that position.¹¹²

Circumstantial Evidence of Owen's Influence on Griesbach

Theories of Owen's influence on Griesbach are not new. Herbert Marsh (1758-1839), Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge (1807), who translated Michaelis's *Introduction to the New Testament* (1801-1802), appended an essay entitled "Dissertation on the Origin and Composition of the Three First Canonical Gospels." In it he proposed that Griesbach had been influenced by Owen as well as Büsching and Stroth in the development of his hypothesis.¹¹³ Also in 1897, Weiss, in his *Einleitung*, calls it the "Owen-Griesbach'sche Hypothese" (1897).¹¹⁴ On the basis of this assumption, Neiryck argues, "Griesbach's personal contribution is not in suggesting Mark as a combination of Matthew and Luke, but in arguing with new "*gravissimae rationes*, especially the relative order of episodes."¹¹⁵

The idea that Owen influenced Griesbach in the development of his approach is purely circumstantial, being based on inference and speculation. No evidence exists that Griesbach ever met Owen. Griesbach never mentioned Owen (or Büsching) by name. Griesbach, however, did obtain Owen's work at some point,

¹¹⁰In 1783 Griesbach published a lecture entitled *Paschatos solemnia pie celebranda* ["That Easter may be celebrated with solemn piety"], in which he set forth the basics of his approach (cited by Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 317).

¹¹¹For a defense of this evangelical position, see Matthew C. Williams, "The Owen Hypothesis: An essay showing that it was Henry Owen who first formulated the so-called 'Griesbach Hypothesis,'" *Journal of Higher Criticism* 7 (2000):109-25.

¹¹²See Henry Owen, *Observations on the Four Gospels; tending chiefly to ascertain the Times of their Publications; to illustrate the Form and Manner of their Composition* (London: T. Payne, 1764).

¹¹³See Michaelis, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. III, part II 161-409, esp. 174-75. While Owen adopted the literary-dependence order of Matthew-Luke-Mark, Büsching's order was Luke-Matthew-Mark. See also Anton Friedrich Büsching, *Die vier Evangelisten mit ihren eigenen Worten zusammengesetzt und mit Erklärungen versehen* (Hamburg, 1766).

¹¹⁴Cited by F. Neiryck, "The Griesbach Hypothesis: The Phenomenon of Order," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* (April 1982):116 n. 24.

¹¹⁵Neiryck, "The Griesbach Hypothesis" 117.

the catalogue of his library prepared for sale after his 1813 death lists it.¹¹⁶ Because Owen published his work before Griesbach (1764) and Griesbach visited England prior to the publication of his source hypothesis (1776), the assumption is that he may have met Owen or purchased this work while visiting Oxford and London (1769-1770) and gathering materials for his text-critical research. The precise time he obtained Owen's work, however, is unknown. Moreover, Griesbach made a veiled reference in his *Demonstration* that "more recently some have shrewdly observed that the conformity of Mark with Luke is also so great that he [Mark] would seem to have had his [Luke's] Gospel at hand."¹¹⁷ Oddly, Griesbach does not mention whom he had in mind here, but he does mention others such as Lardner, Koppe, Michaelis, and Storr, who opposed the idea. This statement regarding shrewd observers can be interpreted in different ways: perhaps Griesbach did not want his readers to know who influenced him or whose ideas he borrowed so he made only a veiled reference to them; perhaps he merely wanted to suggest to his readership that his conclusions are not unusual since other shrewd observers have come to the same conclusion. This latter possibility finds support in the immediate context, whose purpose focuses on listing and refuting those who oppose the idea of Mark as the abbiator of Matthew or who dissent from his own synoptic approach and pointing out "such extensive disagreement of these scholars" rather than mustering a list of names who support his approach.¹¹⁸

Still, the case for Owen's influence on Griesbach must remain inferential at best. Though others may have influenced Griesbach and his major mentors (Michaelis, Semler, Ernesti, and Le Clerc) did not espouse this synoptic hypothesis, in terms of his philosophical background and theological approach all the essential elements were present in Griesbach's thinking to develop such a literary hypothesis apart from Owen.¹¹⁹ For the sake of argument, however, this essay will assume that Owen may have influenced Griesbach's approach. The next step is to look at influences on Owen to see if he was free of philosophical and theological aberrations in developing his own synoptic approach.

Owen's Literary Approach to the Synoptics

In sum, Owen's synoptic approach was one of literary dependence. Specifically, that the Gospel of Mark is a compilation of Matthew and Luke. He wrote,

In compiling this narrative, he [Mark] had but little more to do, it seems, than to abridge the Gospels which lay before him—varying some expressions, and inserting some

¹¹⁶Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 484 n. 48.

¹¹⁷Griesbach, *A Demonstration* 104.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, 106.

¹¹⁹Dungan feels that since nothing in the doctrines of these four resemble Griesbach's source approach, Griesbach must have been influenced by Owen (Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 484).

additions, as occasion required. That St. Mark followed this plan, no one can doubt, who compares his Gospels with those of the two former Evangelists. He copies largely from both: and takes either the one or the other almost perpetually for his guide. The order indeed is his own, and is very close and well connected.¹²⁰

To Owen, the literary (and chronological) order is Matthew, Luke, Mark, with Mark reduced merely to a slavish abridgement of Matthew and Luke.¹²¹ Hence, Owen's view closely reflects Griesbach's approach. Stoldt suggests, "They [Owen and Griesbach] were of the opinion that, in view of the texts, the Gospel of Mark had to be considered an abbreviated compilation of the kerygmatic work of Jesus drawn from Matthew and Luke, in which the prehistory (the nativity legends, *Evangelium infantiae*, and genealogy) was deliberately foregone."¹²² Owen argued that Mark wrote so that "his Gospel should stand clear of all objections."¹²³

An examination of Owen's treatise reveals that, based on an acutely *selective* as well as arbitrary treatment of internal evidence, corroborated by *selective and arbitrary* citation of external evidence designed to support his *a priori* internal conclusions, he asserted that Matthew was written in A.D. 38 (from Jerusalem), Luke in A.D. 53 (from Corinth), Mark in A.D. 63 (from Rome), and John (from Ephesus) in A.D. 69.¹²⁴

Owen's Profession of a High View of Scripture

Evangelicals who practice literary dependence find solace in Owen's profession of a high view of Scripture. Owen thought that his newly developed literary dependence would function as an apologetic answer to growing skepticism regarding the Gospels during his day: "[H]ow, then, came they not to avoid the many contradictions observable among them? These are only *seeming* contradictions; and vanish most of them, on a close comparison of the several passages."¹²⁵ He argued, "[T]hese Gospels are by no means to be looked upon as so many detached pieces, composed by persons totally ignorant of each other's Intentions; but rather as one complete system of Divinity, supported by the strongest proofs that the subject is capable of, and defended against all the objections [its critics] . . . could make to the truth and certainty of it."¹²⁶ Owen also maintained traditional authorship

¹²⁰Owen, *Observations on the Four Gospels* 51-52.

¹²¹Hans-Herbert Stoldt, *History and Criticism of the Marcan Hypothesis*, trans. and ed., Donald L. Niewyk (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University, 1977) 6.

¹²²*Ibid.*, 7; cf. Owen, *Observations on the Four Gospels* 50, where he argues that "some of its [Christianity's] most faithful and serious Professors might wish to see the Gospel exhibited in a more simple form" and "delivered in a manner suitable to the condition of the world at large."

¹²³Owen, *Observations on the Four Gospels* 52.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*, 16-114; note "Appendix" 115 for summary.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 83 [emphasis original].

¹²⁶*Ibid.*, 108.

of the four Gospels.¹²⁷

If these statements are taken in isolation without a careful examination of his entire treatise, one might use them as evidence that Owen's literary-dependence hypothesis was compatible with a high view of Scripture, uncontaminated by any negatives. Such a conclusion, however, is hasty for two important reasons. First, to present Owen as a pre-Griesbachian literary-dependence advocate free from modern philosophical or theologically unorthodox practices is tenuous. As will be demonstrated, evidence from his treatise shows that Owen contradicted his own profession of a high view of Scripture in his practice of a literary approach.

Second, complicating the issue for evangelicals who present Owen as a paradigm for their literary-dependence practice is Owen's own admission that he did not thoroughly work out the practical implications of his hypothesis. He states that he has merely formulated his approach, and admits that he never completely thought it through. This practical outworking he leaves to others:

If the plan here exhibited be just in the main. . . . Some few specimens . . . the Reader will find inserted in the Notes. More could not conveniently be added, though they spring up thick in the Author's way. This superstructure he leaves to others and to future time: his present concern is for the goodness of the foundation, which he intreats the public to examine with care; and to judge of with candour and impartiality. Whatever is defective in it, he heartily wishes to see supplied, and whatever is exceptional, corrected. The whole aim of his research is the acquisition of truth, to which he is ready to sacrifice any of the fore-mentioned opinions, whenever they are proved to be false.¹²⁸

Clearly from the above, Owen had not thoroughly analyzed the long-term implications of his literary-dependence approach. Using him as a paradigm is thus precarious. The practical implications of the theory he formulated argue against his being a valid early example of literary dependence co-existing with a high view of Scripture. His theory displays certain characteristics that demonstrate his method and practice directly contradicted his statements of a high view of Scripture.

Owen's Literary-Dependence Versus His High View of Scripture

Several indications in Owen's writings show that profession did not match practice. First, they indicate that he realized his approach differed qualitatively from the orthodox approach in vogue in his own time. He wrote, "If the plan here exhibited be just in the main . . . then there is a *new* field of Criticism opened, where the learned may usefully employ their abilities, in comparing the several gospels together, and raising observations from that comparative View."¹²⁹ Notice the word "new." It was a qualitatively different approach that had not previously been displayed among the orthodox that surrounded Owen. Owen goes on:

¹²⁷Ibid., 9.

¹²⁸Owen, "Preface," *Observations on the Four Gospels* vi-vii.

¹²⁹Owen, *Observations on the Four Gospels* vi [emphasis added].

[T]he Evangelists not only perused, but also transcribed, each others Writings; and consequently, that the argument *commonly* urged in support of the credibility of the Gospel-History, and founded on contrary opinion, is at last founded on a common mistake. For thus they reason. “The sacred Historians agree in their accounts, and yet knew nothing of each other’s Writings; they did not therefore write in concert, and forge these accounts, but were severally guided by the real existence of the facts related.”¹³⁰

By these words, Owen admits that the orthodox or standard view (i.e., “commonly urged”) in defense of the Gospels was that each Gospel writer was an independent eyewitness and writer of his account. Instead, he called this thinking a “common mistake” and admitted his approach differed (qualitatively) from current practice. He goes on to note, “True indeed it is, that they neither forged their accounts, nor wrote in concert; for they wrote at different times, in different places, and with different views; yet, so far is it from being true, that the later Evangelists never consulted what the former had written before them. . . . They perused, recommended, and copied each other.”¹³¹ Owen admitted that he had departed from prevailing orthodox opinion that was commonly held, and adopted a qualitatively new approach.

Second, Owen’s writings reveal that though he was aware of the dangers of ancient philosophy—he mentioned the heresy of the “Nicolaitans” labeling it “heretical” and “founded on Philosophy and vain learning” in reference to John’s Gospel—he does not show an awareness of the philosophies of his own times that controlled his thinking on the Synoptic Gospels.¹³² His synoptic approach reflects Spinoza’s influence in searching behind the text for sources rather than starting with the text of the Gospels themselves. In other words, he changed the referent from the text to sources behind the text. If indeed Griesbach traveled to Great Britain for research and somehow met Owen, his travels to England were motivated by the fact that its institutions were famous cutting-edge, learning centers, well aware of philosophical speculations and *Zeitgeist* of the time.¹³³

Like Griesbach, Owen was a child of rationalistic Enlightenment philosophy, and his treatise came at the height of Enlightenment influence on learning.¹³⁴ Owen’s synoptic approach—typical of Enlightenment philosophical approaches—deprecated, dismissed, and capriciously rejected tradition, especially early church tradition. The following typify his arguments regarding the church fathers: “But as these Writers [church fathers] differ widely in their accounts . . . even the testimonies alleged are generally to be looked upon as no more than collateral proofs of what had been deduced before them from the internal structure

¹³⁰Ibid., 82 [emphasis added].

¹³¹Ibid., 82.

¹³²Ibid., 85.

¹³³This can be verified by showing Owen’s awareness of Michaelis’s *NT Introduction* (Owen, *Observations on the Four Gospels* 100).

¹³⁴Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 315.

of the Gospels”;¹³⁵ “the accounts they [all the ecclesiastical writers of antiquity] have left us on this head are evidently too vague, confused, and discordant, to lead us to any solid or certain determination”;¹³⁶ “the only inference we can draw with certainty is,—that, of all the Evangelists, St. Matthew, in their opinion wrote first; St. Mark, next; then St. Luke; and last of all St. John: though perhaps the Gospels themselves, carefully examined, may afford us reason to doubt the exactness of this order”;¹³⁷ “the ancient Fathers . . . ‘tis to be feared took it upon trust. The oldest of them collected reports of their own times, and set them down for certain truths; and those who followed, adopted those accounts, with implicit reverence. Thus, traditions of every sort, true or false, passed on from hand to hand without examination, until it was almost too late to examine them to any purpose”;¹³⁸ “their strangely various and contradictory Accounts.”¹³⁹ He argued that the early fathers’ accounts regarding the date of the Gospels “are evidently too vague, confused, and discordant, to lead us to any solid or certain determination. Discordant, however, as these accounts are, it may not be improper to collect them, and present them to the Reader’s view.”¹⁴⁰ Owen goes on to conclude, “There being, then, but little dependence to be laid on these *external* proofs, let us now see whether anything can be inferred from the *internal* construction of the Gospels themselves, either *for* or *against* the preceding articles.”¹⁴¹ For Owen, the early church fathers were unthinking or inept, and had little critical skill in evaluating historical evidence. Having set aside early church traditions that contradicted his hypothesis, Owen like Griesbach “arrived at their result on the basis of an internal analysis of the synoptic gospels.”¹⁴²

Owen then subjectively analyzed internal evidence as a buttressing support for his *a priori* assumption of literary dependence, using selective evidence from the church fathers to support his assumption. His assumption is evident at the outset of his discussion:

When the *first* Evangelist had penned his Gospel, it is natural to conclude that it was soon published and dispersed abroad. . . .

Hence then we may further conclude, that the *second* evangelist was perfectly acquainted with the writings of the *first*: and that the *third*, when he wrote, perused the Gospels of the other *two*. . . . This we offer at present only by way of supposition: hereafter it may appear to have been real fact.

¹³⁵Owen, “Preface” iv.

¹³⁶This term inserted, “all the ecclesiastical writers of antiquity,” is Owen’s own term used in the prior context (Owen, *Observations on the Four Gospels* 1).

¹³⁷*Ibid.*, 6-7.

¹³⁸*Ibid.*, 8.

¹³⁹*Ibid.*, 102 [emphasis original].

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴¹*Ibid.*, 8-9 [emphasis original].

¹⁴²Stoldt, *History and Criticism* 7.

But to clear our way to the proof of this fact, it will be necessary to determine, among other things, which of these sacred Historians is in reality to be accounted the *first*; which the *second*; and which the *third*: for much depends on this question.¹⁴³

Owen accepted external evidence selectively only when it agreed with his already chosen position of literary-dependence. After dismissing the fathers as valueless and accepting from them only what would support his assumption in rationalistic overtones,¹⁴⁴ Owen boldly asserted that he conducted his research “with the utmost impartiality. For the Author [Owen], having no hypothesis to serve, nor any other end in view but the investigation of truth, suffered himself to be carried along as the tide of evidence bore him.”¹⁴⁵ Owen, however, consistently based the order, circumstances, and dates on a subjective analysis of internal evidence with an acceptance of external evidence only when it confirmed his preconceptions. Thus, he wrote, “If he [Owen] displaced the common order of the Gospels [i.e. Matthew-Mark-Luke as he thought church tradition maintained], it was because he found that the order incompatible with their internal character, and contrary to the sentiment of primitive antiquity.”¹⁴⁶ Instead, based on internal evidence, Owen adopted the order Matthew-Luke-Mark. He concluded his preface by asserting, “The whole aim of his [Owen’s] research is the acquisition of Truth.”¹⁴⁷ One is left wondering how “truth” can be discovered through suppression of adverse evidence and subjective selection of favorable evidence in confirming what someone has already assumed.

Like Griesbach, Owen fell under strong influence of the philosophy of Romanticism. As Dungan observes about both Owen and Griesbach, “we can see that they share the same new Romantic conception of a developmental history of early Christianity, in terms of which to *justify* the differences among the Gospels.”¹⁴⁸ Owen described his approach in Romanticism’s developmental terms, for example, “comparing the several Gospels together, and raising observations from that *comparative View*”¹⁴⁹ and “[c]ould we truly discover at what time, for whose use, and on what occasion, the Gospels were respectively written, we should doubtless be able, not only to understand them more perfectly, but also to read them with more profit, than we have the happiness at present to pretend to.”¹⁵⁰ Owen asserted regarding his Romantic idea of development of one Gospel from another, “That St.

¹⁴³Owen, *Observations on the Four Gospels* 9-10 [emphasis original].

¹⁴⁴Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 485 n. 50, cites this as “a choice expression of contemporary rationalist optimism” during the Enlightenment.

¹⁴⁵Owen, “Preface,” iv.

¹⁴⁶Owen, “Preface,” v-vi; cp. Owen, *Observations on the Four Gospels* 6-7.

¹⁴⁷Owen, “Preface” vii.

¹⁴⁸Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem* 317 [emphasis original].

¹⁴⁹Owen, “Preface” vi [emphasis original].

¹⁵⁰Owen, “Preface” iii.

Mark makes quick and frequent transitions from one Evangelist to the other; and blends their *accounts*, I mean their *words*, in such a manner is utterly inexplicable upon any other footing, than by supposing he had both these [Matthew and Luke] before him."¹⁵¹

Owen's synoptic approach also evidences the radical results of historical criticism. Several assertions demonstrate this fact. Long before the development of redactional hermeneutics in the twentieth century, Owen's work anticipated the concept of esoteric messages conveyed by the evangelist through the historical situation of the readers (i.e., manifesting a concept of *Sitz im Leben* before its time):

In penning their Gospels, the sacred Historians had a constant regard, as well to the circumstances of the persons, for whose use they wrote; as to the several particulars of Christ's life, which they were then writing. It was this that regulated the conduct of their narration—that frequently determined them in their choice of materials—and, when they had chosen, induced them either to contract or enlarge, as they judged expedient. In short, it was this that *modified* their Histories and gave them their different *colourings*."¹⁵²

He continues,

[I]f the Gospels were thus modeled, as I apprehend they were, to the state, temper, and disposition of the times, in which they were written; then are we furnished with certain Criteria, by which we may judge of their respective dates. For those times, whose transactions accord with the turn of the discourses related in *the Gospel-Histories*, are, in all probability, the *very times* when the Gospels were written."¹⁵³

Ignoring any external evidence that contradicted his synoptic hypothesis, Owen established the date of the Gospel based on an assumption of literary-dependence and modification of one Gospel by another. This subjective analysis of internal evidence, in turn, helped establish the circumstances of the readership and constituted a vehicle for esoteric messages to the particular Gospel's readership. External evidence is used in a selective fashion merely to corroborate his assumptions centered in internal evidence. Thus, Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience. It was "penned at a time, when the Church was labouring under heavy persecution."¹⁵⁴ Through the vehicle of references to persecution, Matthew tells his Jewish-Christian readership "to expect" and "to bear" persecution and that "the Church must be supposed to labour under such a state when the Evangelist advanced and urged them." He continues, "This example . . . and these promises, St. Matthew laid before them, for their imitation and encouragement. For now—toward the close of

¹⁵¹Owen, *Observations on the Four Gospels* 74 [emphasis original].

¹⁵²Ibid., 15-16 [emphasis original].

¹⁵³Ibid., 16 [emphasis original].

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 17.

this dangerous period—it is most likely that he wrote his Gospel, and delivered it to them, as the anchor of their hope, and to keep them steadfast in this violent tempest.”¹⁵⁵

To Owen, since Matthew’s gospel was written “for the sake of the *Jews*, and consequently adapted to their peculiar circumstances, must necessarily be defective in several particulars, which nearly concerned the *Gentiles*.”¹⁵⁶ Notice the word “defective” that he applies to the inspired Gospel text. This word is hardly appropriate for someone maintaining a high view of the Scriptures.

Because of these Matthean deficiencies in writing to Jewish interests only, Luke was written to “satisfy the enquiries, and supply the wants of these *Heathen Converts*.”¹⁵⁷ Luke, utilizing Matthew, “adjust[s] the points of His [Matthew’s] History, as his Brother-Evangelist had done before, to the circumstances of the persons to whom he wrote; and so modify his general instructions as to make them applicable to those particular times.”¹⁵⁸

The Gospel of Mark resulted because Matthew’s and Luke’s “Histories became, in the detail, more complex and various than we have reason to think they would otherwise have been.”¹⁵⁹ To Owen, Matthew and Luke were too complicated than they should have been for a general readership. This is another aberrant assumption for someone with a high view of Scripture, believing in plenary verbal inspiration as well as the sufficiency of the Spirit-inspired text. Finally, in Owen’s thinking, Mark wrote his Gospel “exhibited in a more simple form . . . without any particular consideration to *Jew* or *Gentile*, delivered in a manner suitable to the condition of the world at large.”¹⁶⁰ Owen describes Mark as “divested of almost all peculiarities, and accommodated to general use” and that “he had but little more to do, it seems, than to abridge the Gospels which lay before him. . . . That St. Mark followed this plan, no one can doubt, who compares his Gospel with those of the two former Evangelists. He copies largely from both: and takes either one or the other almost perpetually for his guide.”¹⁶¹ For Owen, each Gospel writer wrote utilizing the other “improving upon one another.” That a Spirit-inspired text would need to be improved is not a position of orthodoxy but an aberration from the view of the early church maintained from the very beginnings of Christianity.

Although Owen stated that he left to others the outworking of the superstructure of his hypothesis, indications in his writings show the inevitable results of a hypothesis that makes one gospel the “source” of the others. Specifically,

¹⁵⁵Ibid., 17, 20, 21

¹⁵⁶Ibid., 24 [emphasis original].

¹⁵⁷Ibid. [emphasis original].

¹⁵⁸Ibid., 27.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 50.

¹⁶⁰Ibid. [emphasis original].

¹⁶¹Ibid., 51.

he dehistoricized the Gospels and exhibited the same type of radical creativity that modern historical criticism exhibits. For instance, Owen asserted a Gospel writer, in utilizing another Gospel as a source, put words on Jesus lips that He did not speak. In recounting the rooster crowing in Matthew 26:30-50, which Owen assumed was Mark's source in Mark 14:26-46, Owen asserted,

As the *Jews*, in the enumeration of the times of the night, took notice only of *one* cock-crowing, which comprehended the third watch; so St. Matthew, to give them a clear information that Peter would deny his Master *thrice* before *Three* in the morning, needed only to say, that he would do it "before the cock crew." But the Romans, reckoning by a *double* crowing of the cock—the first of which was about *Midnight*, the second at *Three*—stood in need of a more particular designation. And therefore, St. Mark, to denote the same hour to *them*, was obliged to say—"before the cock 'crow *twice*.'"¹⁶²

Thus, from Owen's perspective, Mark added to Jesus' words something that He did not say. Jesus did not say "twice" but Mark added it to Jesus's lips to clarify the passage for his Roman audience.

Owen allowed for the possibility the Gospel writer could creatively modify the historical situation of Jesus' teachings and circumstances in adopting it for use in his Gospel. For example, he asserted that "the Parable of the Seed, [Mark] iv. 26-29 seems to be taken from Matt. xiii.24 & c. but varied a little in the circumstances."¹⁶³ An examination of these two passages reveals that such a variation would mean more than a "little" variation, for Matthew 13:24-30 and Mark 4:26-29 are entirely different in content and wording. Matthew 13:24-30 deals with an enemy sowing wheat and tares in a man's field with both elements growing together until separation at the harvest, but Mark 4:26-29 deals with the gradual growth from seeds to mature crops in a man's garden that leads to harvest. The orthodox approach would recognize these as two distinct parables spoken by Jesus rather than one creatively revised by Mark.

In summary, though Owen professed a high view of Scripture, his treatise exhibits startling contradictions of such a profession. Like Griesbach, Owen's work exhibited the same kind of negative influence regarding presuppositions. Owen's work reveals a Griesbach-like philosophy that affected his theology, leading to a qualitative departure from an orthodox view of inspiration and a qualitatively different approach to Gospels origins. His approach led naturally to dehistoricizing the text as well as to historical-critical concepts of creativity and fabrication. Though Owen may not have been as radical as Griesbach, he nonetheless exhibited the same negative influences that led Griesbach to the same literary-dependence conclusions.

CONCLUSIONS

¹⁶²Ibid., pp. 56-57 [emphasis original].

¹⁶³Ibid., 72-73.

Several conclusions stem from this discussion. First, the roots of literary-dependence were the same as roots of modern errancy views.¹⁶⁴ One cannot overstate that the same radical skepticism regarding historical reliability and harmonization of the Gospels that produced modern errancy hypotheses regarding Scripture also produced modern literary dependence hypotheses. Second, an examination of the historical evidence surrounding Griesbach's and Owen's hypotheses reveals that the primary impetuses for the development of their synoptic approach were errant and unorthodox views of inspiration derived from philosophical concepts—e.g., the Rationalism, Deism and Romanticism (to name a few)—rather than from an objective, “scientific” investigation of the Gospels. Aberrant philosophical ideologies led not only to a departure from the orthodox view of inspiration (i.e., plenary, verbal), but to an approach qualitatively different from the first 1,700 years of church tradition—i.e., from literary independence to literary-dependence.

Some evangelicals counter, however, that by sanitizing the roots of dependence hypotheses, one can practice literary-dependence methodology in isolation from antecedents that gave the methodology impetus. Such an assertion deserves two responses. (1) Logically, the tried and true saying that “a text without a context is a pretext” applies here. Such historical-critical ideologies are no more valid than the concepts upon which they are based. Etienne Gilson, in his *Unity of Philosophical Experience*, has demonstrated, no hypothesis or theory is better than the concepts upon which it is based, arguing, “However correct my combinations of concepts may be, my conclusions cannot be more valid than my concepts. . . . [I]f it is necessary for a true reasoning that it be logical, it is not enough for it to be logical in order to be true.”¹⁶⁵ If a method is based in a false ideology, no matter how logical it may be, such a method will lead to wrong conclusions. Thus, if historical-critical ideologies, including source-critical dependence hypotheses, derive from aberrant thinking, their conclusions cannot be true—even though they may appear to some to be “logical.” More crassly, if the roots of the tree are rotten, so will be the fruit.

(2) Due to their aberrant roots, both philosophically and historically, literary-dependence hypotheses will automatically produce significant denigration of the historical accuracy of the Gospel accounts.¹⁶⁶ Church history stands as a

¹⁶⁴For more information concerning the names involved in both, cf. Farnell, “Philosophical and Theological Bent of Historical Criticism,” in *The Jesus Crisis* 86; Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* 9-15, 19-42; Geisler, *Biblical Errancy* 7-237, and Norman L. Geisler, “Philosophical Presuppositions of Biblical Errancy,” *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 307-34.

¹⁶⁵Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965) 14.

¹⁶⁶*The Jesus Crisis* (1998) has catalogued a number of examples of the denigration of the historical accuracy of the Gospels by evangelical practitioners of historical criticism, in which the Gospel of Mark is assumed to be the source of Matthew and Luke (cf. Robert L. Thomas, “The ‘Jesus Crisis’: What is It?,” in *The Jesus Crisis* 13-34).

monumental testimony to orthodox positions that have stood the test of time and diligent scrutiny, but more recent theories have often been proven to be heterodox in origin. Have evangelicals forgotten that church history also stands as a monumental witness that once someone comes under the influence historical-critical ideology, disastrous consequences ensue (cf. Acts 20:28-31)? As the Apostle Paul admonished, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the traditions of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ" (Col 2:8 cf. 2 Cor 10:3-5).