

Book Review  
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Dungan, David Laird. *A History of the Synoptic Problem*. Anchor Bible Reference Library. NY: Doubleday, 1999. ISBN 0-385-47192-0. \$39.95

Dungan produces here a study which is simultaneously more than a history of the Synoptic Problem and less than that. It ultimately contains very little analysis or exposition of the various efforts to understand the literary relationships among the first three gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke. This study of these relationships is traditionally understood to be the Synoptic Problem: how is one to explain the various similarities and differences among these three very similar accounts of Jesus' ministry? At the same time, this book attempts to place the various approaches to understanding the gospels in the context of intellectual and religious impulses from the patristic period to the present. This latter project, however, is too large and complex for this book, and leaves the reader intrigued (or disturbed) but ultimately disappointed. Indeed, the often polemical and *ad hominem* style of the writing, when combined with the lack of adequate depth to the discussions, leaves this reader feeling that the study generates much heat but little light to shine upon the issue of the Synoptic Problem.

At the heart of Dungan's approach is his view that the Synoptic Problem involves far more than simply theories about the literary relations among the gospels. He posits four components or aspects to the problem: the question of which gospels to consider (canon), the question of which text to follow (text criticism), the matter of literary relations among the gospels (source criticism), and finally how one should interpret the gospels (hermeneutics). There is much to be said for this broader scope in approaching the Synoptic Problem. In particular the issue of which gospels should be considered

becomes a key feature in the development of the scholarly discussion.

The book is constructed on a broadly chronological approach. In Part One, Dungan considers the earliest approaches to the Synoptic Gospels. Part Two turns to the rise of modernist approaches to the study of the Bible, and the Synoptic Problem in particular. This covers the time period from the Enlightenment to the mid-20th century. Finally, Part Three turns to a consideration of recent trends in biblical scholarship on the problem, especially with regard to critiques of the dominant Two Source Hypothesis. Surprisingly, Part Three is the thinnest of all the sections; the primary emphasis of the volume is found in Part Two, especially with the effort to understand the political and economic underpinnings of the historical-critical method.

Part One, dealing with the early church's handling of the gospels, is a particularly rich part of the book, for Dungan shows that early church fathers were well aware of the differences and similarities between the gospels, and dealt with these differences in various ways. His discussion of Origen's handling of both textual difficulties and questions of differences in the accounts is helpful, as is the subsequent discussion of Augustine's quite different approach to the differences in the gospels. As Dungan shows, Origen's approach to the problem was to "solve" the problem of differences—differences of which he was acutely aware—by encouraging a combination of literal and spiritual interpretation of the gospels. For Origen, only this appeal to a mystical interpretation allowed the gospels to remain "truthful." This method of interpretation was consonant with his view of gospel authorship, which saw the Holy Spirit as engaging each evangelist directly, although with different visions as befit the time and place of authorship. Augustine, on the other hand, emphasized a literal interpretation of the gospels, and each gospel is literally correct in terms of details. While the events are

all to be taken at a literal level, there was no attention paid by the evangelists to chronological order.

The contradictions can be resolved, and in fact a harmony of the gospels can be accomplished.

Augustine is also the first to develop an initial idea of some form of literary relationship, since each subsequent evangelist had known the former. He initially proposed that Matthew was first, Mark was second, and Luke the third gospel, although he revised this idea later to propose that Mark had used Luke as well (so Matthew-Luke-Mark).

The second part of the volume, and by far the most extensive and most problematic, deals with the rise of biblical historical criticism and the development of the synoptic theories that arose out of this product of enlightenment and modernist thinking. Dungan presents at the outset of this section of his book a thoughtful, if selective, overview of some of the forces which guided intellectual thought from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In particular, he helpfully shows that this intellectual inquiry was not purely “objective,” uninfluenced by social, political, and economic issues. At the same time, though, Dungan tends toward simplistic and unsupportable statements of intention and influence which undermines his basic theses.

The centerpiece of Part Two is devoted to a study of Baruch Spinoza’s treatises on biblical interpretation. Spinoza was an early advocate of the historical critical method and was certainly not sympathetic with the theological or political hierarchies of his day. What Dungan does, however, is paint Spinoza as a larger-than-life character who, with malicious intent, established a method of historical interpretation which was intended to undermine the church’s reliance on the gospels. Spinoza, then, becomes the villain, the despoiled fountainhead as it were, in the corruption of the church’s study of the Bible. Because Spinoza was opposed to the church, his method is, therefore, deemed

intentionally corrupting. While this reading of intention is problematic enough, Spinoza and his writings are also seen as remarkably influential for all of the biblical scholars to follow.

A similar treatise, although much shorter, is devoted to John Locke as the archetype of individualism and the bourgeois approach to Scripture. Locke's liberal economic agenda, which emphasized free markets and an anti-royal political establishment, also influenced the way he approached religion and the scriptures. Dungan portrays Locke as having influenced subsequent segments of the church toward a literal reading of Scripture, a hermeneutical approach which is also problematic for Dungan. A third chapter of historic "villains" is devoted to John Toland, who is noteworthy because he rejected the canonical gospels alone, and promoted instead other gospels as more historically valid.

While these are interesting essays, and the issues are not unimportant for the developing approach to scripture in the rise of modernism, their role in this book is problematic. Dungan seizes on a few individuals who become villains in the subsequent development of biblical interpretation. Certainly Dungan uses their political or social agendas to taint their approaches toward biblical interpretation. Equally problematic is the way he frequently infers intention when none is given—Dungan's commentary on Spinoza's treatise seems to know why he says something, even when such statements are not given. Moreover, he then deduces a causality when other biblical scholars of the time utilize similar approaches. Might it not be more reasonable to assume that certain ideas were "in the air," so to speak, and not always the result of a direct lineage, e.g., from Spinoza to German critical scholars?

Part Two concludes with a helpful view of Johann Griesbach's development of the gospel

synopsis and the presuppositions upon which it rested. This chapter is also very curious, however. It contains an imagined conversation between Griesbach and Henry Owen, which is a bit odd. More curious, however, is Dungan's implication that a political conspiracy on the part of Reich Chancellor Otto von Bismarck helped promote the Two-Source Hypothesis in leading German Universities. While undoubtedly political and social issues are part of the matrix which influence biblical scholars — surely our postmodern sensibility ought to acknowledge that scholars are never able to be wholly objective and always carry with them the baggage of their own various ideologies — it is hard to imagine the Chancellor of Germany intentionally seeking to establish a particular biblical approach to the Synoptic Problem by selectively appointing professors friendly to this position. Moreover, while this might explain the dominance of the Two Source Hypothesis in Germany, it certainly does not explain its almost simultaneous rise to popularity in England and the United States.

Part Three of this volume was extremely disappointing. It should probably not come as a surprise that the author is himself a leading proponent of the revival of the Griesbach hypothesis in the last few decades. This becomes obvious in the overwhelming attention paid to the Griesbach hypothesis and its major proponent, William Farmer. Very little is said, however, of the substantial work by scholars on Q in the last twenty years. With only a minor paragraph, Dungan categorizes the Farrer Theory, a major alternative to the Two Source Hypothesis and the Griesbach Hypothesis, the Farrer Theory, as a version of Butler's solution; this is a complete error and a grave oversight in a book purporting to be a history of the Synoptic Problem.

But even in Part Three, the issue of the Synoptic Problem is not the main focus. For instance,

Dungan seems more interested in attacking the critical methodologies of current biblical scholars. Thus he attacks two handbooks of exegesis currently popular in theological education, one by Gordon Fee, *New Testament Exegesis*, and the other by John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis*. Remarkably, Dungan claims that these handbooks are dominated by the ideas of Spinoza and Locke! Criticizing Fee for not defining what is the “full system of truth contained in Christian theology,” which Fee cautions should guide the biblical exegete, Dungan charges “He cannot do this ... Fee assumes this abstract admonition will be given concrete content by each interpreter as he or she sees fit. In short, his hermeneutics is a classic example of Luther’s pious subjectivism reinforced by Locke’s middle-class democratic politics.” (359) And then Dungan charges about all these handbooks:

The dominant feature in all of these handbooks and discussions is the classic Spinozist ploy of changing the subject, so that the interpreter seeks not to engage the theological referent of the biblical text on its own terms but instead takes on the materialistic, skeptical investigation of progressively atomized aspects of the *physical history* of the biblical text, as advanced in Spinoza’s hermeneutical method. (359)

What makes these statements remarkable is not only that they are directed towards authors who are very careful to integrate faith issues with critical questions, but also that Dungan attempts to attach the opprobrium of Locke and Spinoza, his designated villains, upon them.

In short, then, Dungan’s book promises much but fails to deliver adequately. A major problem is the scope of the book, which is simply too large. The discussion of the intellectual development of the historical critical method itself deserves an entire book length treatment. And the actual topic which the title of this book suggests it will contain—a discussion of the Synoptic Problem—is given way too little attention. But the book’s flaws are more extensive than this. The entire book is tendentious in its attack on the historical critical method. Dungan approaches this task by means of *ad hominem*

attacks, by establishing key “villains,” which substitute for closely argued critiques. In the end, perhaps a retreat from a critical study of the Bible is what Dungan is proposing. And perhaps this is the best defense of his view of gospel relationships. Still, Dungan does properly suggest that a historical study of the Synoptic Problem must consider more than just theories of literary relationships. And his chapter on the early approach to the Synoptic Problem is very helpful.