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## Oral Tradition and the Problem of Synoptic Verbal Agreement

MAINSTREAM SCHOLARLY ANALYSIS OF the Synoptic Gospels proceeds from the axiom that Synoptic verbal agreement is a reliable indicator of Synoptic literary relationships. The truth of this axiom is almost never contested. So much is common knowledge.

What is perhaps less commonly known is that this axiom has never been discussed at any length in print. One searches the archives in vain for any detailed exposition or defense of the claim that Synoptic verbal agreement is a good indicator of Synoptic literary relationships, finding instead only the continual repetition of that claim: Synoptic identities in language “are so numerous and so close, and in many cases they contain constructions or words which are so very unusual or even peculiar, that the use of written Greek documents is *prima facie* suggested by them”<sup>1</sup>; Q “is held to be a written document, because the verbal resemblances between the majority of the parallels between Matthew and Luke are so close as to demand for their explanation the fixity of writing in the common source”<sup>2</sup>; and so forth.<sup>3</sup> It seems, in short, that the axiom “verbal agreement among parallel Synoptic texts is a reliable indicator of literary relationships among those texts” was not arrived at through extended debate and persuasive argument,

1. Hawkins, *Horae Synopticae*, 54.

2. Streeter, *Four Gospels*, 237.

3. So, more recently, Christopher Tuckett: “These agreements are often so close, amounting at times to almost verbatim agreement in the Greek texts of the gospels . . . that some form of literary relationship seems to be demanded” (Q, 4); John Kloppenborg: “Such agreement . . . is hardly explicable except on the supposition that one gospel is literarily dependent upon the other or that the two directly depend on a common source” (*Excavating Q*, 18); Henry Wansbrough: “Time and again such long stretches show almost *verbatim* agreement between Matthew and Mark or Mark and Luke that some literary relationship at the textual level must be postulated between them” (“Four Gospels,” 1002, his emphasis).

but was simply introduced as an axiom. It is difficult to say precisely when it achieved axiomatic status for the guild as a whole, but it appears to have held this status among its proponents from its inception.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, Synoptic critics have not normally thought it necessary to determine just how much verbal agreement of the sorts displayed among the Synoptic Gospels might have been produced by independent reference to oral traditions. The answer is already known, more or less: verbal agreement among parallel Synoptic texts is a reliable indicator of literary relationships among those texts. Even if some minor sorts of verbal similarity were produced by way of the Synoptic Evangelists' independent knowledge of Jesus traditions, these are not the main sorts of verbal similarity one encounters in the Synoptics, and so are not very important for explaining their compositional relationships.

4. As long ago as 1823, Herbert Marsh could refer to "those who agree on the general principle, that the verbal harmony of the Evangelists must be explained on the supposition, that the one copied from the other" ("Dissertation," 175) without feeling constrained to defend or even explain that principle. More recently, Robert Morgenthaler based his quantitative analysis of the Synoptic Problem on "the basic axiom . . . that the appearance of identical wording must depend on copying" (*Statistische Synopse*, 120), which axiom he did defend, sort of, with the parallel assertion that "the oral tradition has never had the power to fix orally transmitted sentences to the point of exact wording" (119), and the claim that "this axiom also corresponds to the demands of critical research" (120). Occasionally one finds New Testament scholars attempting to defend the axiom by noting that other New Testament scholars have also held it to be true, even though these other scholars referred to do not defend it either. Thus Joseph Tyson and Thomas Longstaff claim that, "[despite] allowances that must be made" for differences in ancient and modern approaches to oral transmission and literary authorship, "Burton was convinced that a higher rate of verbal agreement occurs in the case of documentary relationships than in oral traditions" (*Synoptic Abstract*, 1). But Burton does not even state this view explicitly, much less defend it at length (see, e.g., *Principles*, 23). Perhaps the most instructive recent example of this sort of thing may be found in Thomas Bergemann's *Q auf dem Prüfstand* (14–56). In an attempt to determine a set of criteria by which to positively identify Q passages in Mark and Luke, Bergemann surveys the criteria employed in eighteen prior treatments of Q, all of which employ the criterion of verbal agreement to some extent (though not, indeed, to his complete satisfaction). Ultimately he decides that "the only methodologically sound and defensible way" to define Q is "as a source defined by great agreement in wording. All texts that do not satisfy this criterion may not be ascribed to Q, but must be explained with help from oral tradition or other sources" (60). But at no point does Bergemann or any of the scholars he cites present any empirical evidence for the claim that verbal agreement is a reliable criterion for determining the source relations between the Matt/Luke double traditions.

## 2.1 The Standard Argument

Still, we are within our rights to ask why we ought to accept this axiom.<sup>5</sup> There must, after all, be some good reason to think it is true. Thus it is still occasionally necessary, in textbooks and introductory essays on the Synoptic Problem, to consider the rhetorical possibility that the phenomenon of Synoptic verbal agreement might in large part be explained by reference to the oral tradition of the early church. In these contexts we are normally presented with a brief argument delivered in summary fashion according to a standard plan. Sanders and Davies's introductory treatment illustrates this plan nicely.<sup>6</sup>

*Step 1: Display two or three parallel Synoptic texts containing comparatively high levels of verbal agreement.* Choosing Matt 16:24–28/Mark 8:34–9:1/Luke 9:23–27 as a first example, Sanders and Davies display these texts in parallel columns, both in Greek and in English. They then set out three additional parallels in English.<sup>7</sup>

*Step 2: Describe something of the extent and character of the verbal similarities displayed in the parallels.* Sanders and Davies prosecute this step with extreme thoroughness. They mark the verbal similarities in Matt 16:24–28/Mark 8:34–9:1/Luke 9:23–27 as follows.<sup>8</sup>

Matthew 16:24–28	Mark 8:34–9.1	Luke 9:23–27
24 Then Jesus <u>said to his disciples,</u>	34 And he called to him the multitude with <u>his disciples,</u> and <b>said to</b> them,	23 And he <b>said</b> to all,

5. This question has rarely been raised in print explicitly and in earnest; but see Rist, *Independence*, 10; Chilton, *Profiles of a Rabbi*, 6; Guthrie, *Introduction*, 1035.

6. See Sanders and Davies, *Studying*, 54–60.

7. Sanders and Davies choose Matt 12:1–8/Mark 2:23–28/Luke 6:1–5; Matt 18:1–5/Mark 9:33–37/Luke 9:46–48; and Matt 19:13–15/Mark 10:13–16/Luke 18:15–17.

8. Underscored text for agreement between Matt and Mark, bold text for agreement between Mark and Luke, underscored and bold text for agreements among all three, and italic text for agreements between Matt and Luke only.

Matthew 16:24–28

Mark 8:34–9.1

Luke 9:23–27

“If any one would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?

27 For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done.

28 Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.”

“**If any one** would follow **after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.** 35 **For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake** and the gospel’s will save it. 36 **For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?** 37 **For what can a man give in return for his life?**

38 **For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.**”

9:1 And he said to them, “**Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.**”

“**If any one would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.** 24 **For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it.** 25 **For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?**

26 **For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.**

27 **But I say to you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.**”

They then proceed to point out the various agreements among these texts. “In this example,” they observe, “we see that many of the words appear in all three gospels”; “Matthew and Mark have some words in common which are not in Luke”; “against Matthew, Mark and Luke” agree twice; and “Matthew and Luke agree against Mark” at least once, and perhaps twice

(depending on one's reading of the Greek text of Mark 8:34).<sup>9</sup> Following this explanation, Sanders and Davies provide similar analyses of the additional English parallels, and encourage beginning students to mark the agreements themselves in color.

*Step 3. Conclude that there must be a literary relationship among the Synoptic Gospels.* Having observed the verbal similarities found in these parallels, Sanders and Davies suggest "the student has seen some of the basic facts of the synoptic gospels, and we have illustrated one important conclusion, not about how to solve the synoptic problem, but about its character: as we pointed out at the beginning, the relationship among the gospels is literary. It is the result of either direct copying from one to the other, or of common dependence on the same source or sources."<sup>10</sup>

*Step 4: Declare that such verbal similarities could not have been produced by reference to the oral tradition of the early church.* Sanders and Davies carry out Step 4 with customary succinctness: "The agreements, we have seen, are in Greek. They cannot be explained by appeal to an oral tradition in Aramaic (presumably the language spoken by Jesus and his followers). Memorized but unwritten texts in Greek might possibly account for the phenomena, if we could imagine schools of professional or semi-professional memorizers. What evidence there is, however, is against this. . . . The simplest explanation, and the one almost universally accepted by scholars, is that the relationship was literary, based on copying written texts."<sup>11</sup>

Although the above represents an especially conscientious deployment of the standard argument from Synoptic verbal agreement to Synoptic literary relationships, its outline will be familiar to anyone conversant with scholarly introductions to the Synoptic Gospels. Normally, the steps are introduced in rapid succession, and much less attention is given to the details of the verbal agreements involved. Alternatively, briefer but equally significant verbal agreements may be cited. Steps 1 and 2 may be effectively combined into a single step. Steps 3 and 4 are not fixed; they may be placed

9. Sanders and Davies, *Studying*, 57. Sanders and Davies's estimate of possible minor agreements between Matt and Luke against Mark in these pericopae is rather conservative. The main text of NA26 has Matt and Luke agreeing against Mark at least four times here (forms of ἔρχομαι in Matt 16:24/Luke 9:23; the word ἀπολέση in Matt 16:25/Luke 9:24; the word ἄνθρωπος in Matt 16:26/Luke 9:25; and the particle δὲ in Matt 16:26/Luke 9:25), and Matt and Luke may agree against Mark several additional times in this passage depending on which variants one accepts.

10. *Ibid.*, 60.

11. *Ibid.* However, Sanders and Davies's conviction that a literary explanation of Synoptic similarities is the simplest explanation is not universally shared. For contrary views see, e.g., Davies, *Invitation*, 19, 89; Wright, *Jesus*, 136; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 223n215; Baum, "Oral Poetry," 32.

almost anywhere in the sequence. Often all four steps are compressed into a single sentence, viz.: “the Greek text of these three Gospels is in many places so nearly identical that some form of borrowing from one to another must have taken place at some stage of written rather than oral transmission.”<sup>12</sup> The standard argument is widely considered sufficient to establish the axiom that Synoptic verbal agreement is a reliable indicator of Synoptic literary relationships.

But when we examine the argument in detail, it is difficult to see how this could be true. To begin, the argument itself requires some clarification. It is evidently meant to be a simple argument from two or three premises, but what we are actually given in these contexts is a somewhat sketchy amalgam of two separate arguments. Standard Argument 1 is given in Steps 1–3. Step 1 sets the initial conditions: there are Synoptic texts that are verbally similar. Step 2 may represent either or both of two distinct premises:

- a. These particular Synoptic texts display such-and-such amounts of verbal similarity; and
- b. These particular Synoptic texts display such-and-such kinds of verbal similarity.<sup>13</sup>

Sometimes only one of these premises is floated, and sometimes one is considered more important than the other. Let us combine them into the single premise:

- 1A. *These particular Synoptic texts display such-and-such kinds and amounts of verbal similarity.*

Step 3 then presents the conclusion:

- 1B. *Therefore: The relationship among the Synoptic Gospels is literary in nature.*

Thus, Sanders and Davies display four Synoptic parallels and describe the verbal agreements they contain; on the evidence of these agreements alone the reader is supposed to conclude that “the relationship among the gospels is literary.”

12. Johnson, *Writings*, 144.

13. “These particular Synoptic texts” here means just the Synoptic texts chosen to serve as the immediate subject of the argument; “such-and-such kinds” or “amounts” of verbal similarity means the actual kinds or amounts of verbal agreement that do exist in those texts, by whatever definition of “verbal agreement” and whatever system of measurement you prefer.

But this is much too quick. Standard Argument 1 implies that eminent scholars such as Arthur Wright and Brooke Westcott, and more recently, John Rist and Bo Reicke, simply made elementary and obvious mistakes when they advocated theories of Synoptic literary independence; for any moderately intelligent and attentive undergraduate can see that there is a literary relationship between the Synoptics just by looking at a set of Synoptic parallels in English translation.<sup>14</sup> On this view, detailed knowledge of the languages, cultures, and histories of the nations and peoples from which the early Christians were drawn, or of their particular social and religious practices, or of their literary practices, aptitudes, or technologies, or of the testimony of the Fathers concerning the composition of the Gospels, is completely unnecessary for the solution of this problem. This, however, is massively implausible.

Moreover, Standard Argument 1 asserts that, given a literary relationship among the texts provided, the most important relationship among the Gospels is literary. But this conclusion certainly does not follow on its own. That there is a literary relationship among particular Synoptic texts would entail that there is some literary relationship among the Synoptic Gospels, but to demonstrate that the only or the most important relationship among the Synoptics is literary in nature would require a great deal more work.<sup>15</sup>

One might go about this in a number of ways. One could try to show, for instance, that the kinds or amounts of verbal agreement displayed in the texts in question were somehow representative of those found in most other Synoptic pericopae. It is not in fact clear that Sanders and Davies could accomplish this, given their chosen parallels (the average percentage of exact verbal agreement found between two parallels of Matt 16:24–28/Mark 8:34–9:1/Luke 9:23–27, for example, is around 53 percent,<sup>16</sup> while most of the parallel pericopae contained in Matthew, Mark, or Luke display

14. Cf. Morgenthaler's comment that the existence of a literary relationship among the Synoptics "is of course a well-known fact even without statistical work," (*Statistische Synopse*, 281). But see Wright, *Synopsis*; Westcott, *Introduction*; Rist, *Independence*; Reicke, *Roots of the Synoptic Gospels*. The literary independence of two or more of the Synoptics has also been proposed and defended by Kenneth Bailey (see esp. ICOT 1995); Birger Gerhardsson (see esp. *Memory and Manuscript*); Armin Baum (see esp. *Der mündliche Faktor*); and to some extent by Bruce Chilton (see esp. *Profiles of a Rabbi*).

15. It is perhaps worth pointing out in this context that scholarly considerations of Synoptic "literary independence" are all concerned with literary independence, as it were, "in the original manuscripts." Nobody denies that there is a literary relationship among at least some of the extant texts of the Synoptic Gospels.

16. The highest level of agreement among the three parallels is in Luke 9:23–7, which shares 79 of its 106 words with Mark 8:37–9:1; this amounts to around 75 percent of Luke's pericope.

less than 50 percent verbatim agreement), but other parallels might be more amenable to this treatment.<sup>17</sup> One might try to show that some particular kind of verbal agreement is found in all or most parallel Synoptic pericopae; but, without resorting to extremely broad categories like “exact” or “inexact,” there seems to be no such kind, so this avenue seems closed. More promisingly, one might try to show that if there is a literary relationship among some Synoptic pericopae, a similar relationship most likely holds for all or most Synoptic parallels; and something like this claim is probably assumed by most Synoptic critics. But at all events neither Sanders and Davies’s nor any other deployment of Standard Argument 1 includes any demonstrations of these kinds. Rather than independently confirming the claim that Synoptic verbal agreement is a good indicator of Synoptic literary relationships, Standard Argument 1 just assumes the truth of that claim.

Standard Argument 2 assumes both the premise 1A and the conclusion 1B of Standard Argument 1, but argues via the additional premise, delivered in Step 4:

- 2A. *The kinds and amounts of verbal similarity found in these Synoptic texts cannot be produced by exclusive reference to oral traditions.*

Here the point is that 1B cannot be overthrown by calling on any sort of “oral hypothesis.” Thus, Sanders and Davies display four Synoptic parallels and describe the verbal agreements they contain. On the evidence of these agreements alone the reader is supposed to conclude that “the relationship among the gospels is literary.”

They then attempt to support this conclusion with the assertion that oral-traditional activity will not account for these agreements. However, Standard Argument 2 may plausibly be understood as taking the form

- 1A. *These particular Synoptic texts display such-and-such kinds and amounts of verbal similarity.*
- 2A. *The kinds and amounts of verbal similarity found in these Synoptic texts cannot be produced by exclusive reference to oral traditions.*

17. By Tyson and Longstaff’s figures, and using their (briefer than average) pericope divisions, I calculate that 40 percent of the 123 pericopae Mark shares with Matthew or Luke, 38 percent of Matthew’s 182 shared pericopae, and 30 percent of Luke’s 172 parallels display more than 50 percent agreement (see Tyson and Longstaff, *Synoptic Abstract*). Robert McIver and Marie Carroll similarly note that “passages of high common vocabulary are relatively rare in the parallels between the Synoptic Gospels. Of the 348 passages of over sixty words in the UBS Greek New Testament that have a separate subheading, only thirty-six have more than 50 percent common words” (“Experiments,” 687).

1B. *Therefore: the relationship among the Synoptic Gospels is literary in nature.*

Stated this way, Standard Argument 2 improves slightly on Standard Argument 1 by giving at least a nod to the fact that the truth of 1B cannot be known simply by looking at English translations of parallel Synoptic pericopae.

Now, I have stated 2A rather baldly here because this is roughly the way it is actually stated by the majority of commentators. However, statements of 2A are usually made with an implicit qualification. New Testament scholars have recognized for some time that 2A is not precisely true as stated. As long ago as 1961, Birger Gerhardsson's work on the transmission of Oral Torah suggested that there is at least one sort of oral-traditional system that could handily produce the kinds and amounts of verbal similarities found among the Synoptics: the oral-traditional system referred to in the Talmud.<sup>18</sup> But the majority of New Testament scholars do not think that the early Christians engaged in rabbinic-style rote memorization, and so it is not normally considered necessary to mention it as a separate hypothesis.<sup>19</sup> So,

18. As, e.g., at b. Erubin 54b; see esp. *Memory and Manuscript* and "Gospel Tradition." Some critics have disputed the claim that the sort of oral-traditional system sketched in the Talmud could even theoretically account for Synoptic-type verbal agreement, on the ground that a system of rote memorization could not produce the variation in wording that may be observed among the Synoptic materials (see, e.g., Smith, "Comparison," 9; Teeple, "Oral Tradition," 60; OWG, 30–31; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 198; Hagner, *New Testament*, 133; Botha, *Orality and Literacy*, 139), but this objection fails on at least two counts. First, it assumes that the oral-traditional system employed by the third-century rabbis was always "firm" and never "flexible." But, as Gerhardsson observes, there were relevantly flexible aspects of the transmission of oral Torah (see *Memory and Manuscript*, xviii–xix; Gerhardsson, "Secret"; cf. Alexander, "Orality," 181–82). We do not know what effects these flexible aspects of the process might have had on independently recited parallel דברים or מעשים, since we do not have certain access to any such parallels (cf. Neusner, "Synoptic Problem"), but *prima facie* there is no reason why they might not have led to Synoptic-type variations in wording. But, second, even if the rabbis had only transmitted oral Torah by way of verbatim memorization, this would not diminish the heuristic value of their oral-traditional system for Synoptic critics. Synoptic critics are not primarily interested in how oral Torah was transmitted in the third century; they are concerned with how oral Jesus traditions were transmitted in the first century. There is no telling what sorts of verbal agreements or disparities the Synoptic Evangelists might have produced if they had been practitioners of (or simply had knowledge of traditions transmitted by) a rabbinic-style memory-intensive oral-traditional system (cf. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 250, 257–58). This would depend on a number of factors, including *inter alia* the Evangelists' (or their sources') facility with the system, the amount of time given them to master it, and the depth of their commitment to recording in writing only and exactly what they had memorized.

19. John Kloppenborg's judgment is typical: "The oral hypothesis must in fact be

for instance, when Werner Kümmel claims that the Q materials “can hardly be accounted for by simple oral tradition” because “the common vocabulary in all the sections which come under consideration is over 50 percent”<sup>20</sup> a certain amount of emphasis is to be laid on the word *simple*—this level of common vocabulary cannot be accounted for by *simple* oral tradition. It could perhaps be accounted for by reference to a rabbinic-style approach, but hardly anyone thinks that such an approach was employed by the early church, so this possibility is understood to be off the table.<sup>21</sup> Sanders and Davies, however, make the point explicitly.<sup>22</sup>

But even when we take this qualification into account, Standard Argument 2 does not inspire much confidence. In the first place, it is not at all obvious that a rabbinic-style oral-traditional system is the only sort of oral-traditional system that could possibly account for the verbal agreement we observe among the Synoptics. Certainly there is not a one-to-one correspondence between particular methods of composing and transmitting oral-traditional materials and the particular literary genres they may be used to produce or inform. Even if the early church did not employ “professional or semi-professional memorizers,” there might for all we know be any number of other oral-traditional methods that would be capable of producing Synoptic-type verbal agreement. On almost everybody’s view oral traditions about Jesus were transmitted in the early church; for 2A to seem plausible something ought to be said about the actual ways this is supposed to have been done.

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rejected . . . not because certain oral techniques could not in principle be faithful, but because there is no evidence that such techniques were in use in primitive Christianity (or in contemporary Judaism for that matter!)” (*Formation of Q*, 44).

20. Kümmel, “In Support of Q,” 231.

21. Though not, of course, by everybody: a number of scholars continue to view a rabbinic-style approach to the transmission of Jesus traditions in the early church as a live possibility (see esp. Riesenfeld, *Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings*; Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*; Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*; Ellis, *Making*; Byrskog, *Story as History*, 123); and many others are willing to concede that the first Christians, or at least the first Jewish Christians, took a somewhat careful and deliberate approach to the oral transmission of Jesus traditions (see, e.g., Rowland, *Christian Origins*, 131; Theissen, *Gospels in Context*, 3n3; Talmon, “Oral Tradition”; Stanton, *Gospels and Jesus*, 171–72; Meyer, “Consequences”; Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 264–87; note also Jacob Neusner’s foreword to the Eerdmans reprint of Gerhardsson’s *Memory and Manuscript* [xxv–xlvi]).

22. So Sanders and Davies, *Studying*, 142: “[If] we cannot imagine Jesus drilling his disciples in the repetition of his sayings, we cannot come up with a believable environment in which extensive teaching material was precisely transmitted. . . . And Gerhardsson, we think, has thus far failed to find that environment or ‘setting.’”

In addition, in moving from its premises to the conclusion 1B, Standard Argument 2 has the same problem as Standard Argument 1: if true, 1A and 2A would only show that there is some kind of literary relationship among the Synoptic Gospels, not that the only or the most important relationship is literary. However, this problem is made more starkly apparent in Standard Argument 2 by the explicit mention of oral traditions. Presumably the oral traditions referred to are the oral traditions of the early church. Since the nature of these oral traditions is unspecified (apart from the implied exclusion of rabbinic-style approaches), we are compelled to ask what they were like, and whether any of them could produce any Synoptic-type verbal agreements. If so, we will want to know what these agreements are, and how they are to be distinguished from agreements produced by editorial activity. Once they are identified, we will want to know why the sorts of Synoptic relationships implied by them are less important, or due less attention, than Synoptic literary relationships. But none of these questions is addressed by Standard Argument 2. So while Standard Argument 2 purports to provide some evidence in support of the axiom that Synoptic verbal agreement is a good indicator of Synoptic literary relationships, what we get is just the assumption that 2A, and so the axiom, is true.

Notice, however, that nothing of what I have said about Standard Arguments 1 or 2 counts against the truth of 1B (“the relationship among the Synoptic Gospels is literary in nature”) or of the axiom under discussion. These may well both be true. All that has been shown is that the standard argument for Synoptic literary relationships from Synoptic verbal agreement assumes the axiom it is meant to support, and so cannot confirm the truth of the axiom.

But perhaps this is just a misunderstanding of the standard argument. After all, it is obviously not meant to be especially comprehensive or rigorous; it is suitable for use in introductions to the Synoptic Problem precisely because it is simple enough to be understood by the educated nonspecialist. Perhaps instead we should take these forms of the standard argument merely as rough outlines of a more detailed argument from Synoptic verbal agreement to Synoptic literary relationships, sufficient to serve as an authoritative explanation for the uninitiated, but serving only as a convenient shorthand for the specialist New Testament scholar. On this view, the standard argument seems fragmentary and question-begging only if one fails to recognize that it is deliberately abbreviated, and that it assumes a number of additional, unstated premises. Fully expanded, the standard argument would look something like this—only with all the relevant evidence set out explicitly:

- S1. Some specified Synoptic parallels display such-and-such kinds and amounts of verbal similarity. [Restatement of 1A.]
- S2. Kinds or amounts of verbal similarity found in these Synoptic parallels could not have been produced by exclusive reference to oral traditions, except for oral traditions produced by means of a formal program of rote memorization. [Expanded from 2A.]
- S3. The oral Jesus tradition did not operate by means of a formal program of rote memorization. [Typically unstated.]
- S4. Therefore: these Synoptic parallels cannot have been composed by exclusive reference to oral traditions. [From S1, S2, S3: typically unstated.]
- S5. The only other means of producing the kinds or amounts of verbal similarity found in these parallels is by editorial activity. [Typically unstated.]
- S6. Therefore: these particular Synoptic parallels must have been produced by some process of editorial activity. [From S1, S4, S5: typically unstated.]
- S7. Kinds or amounts of verbal similarity displayed in these parallels are representative of the kinds and amounts of verbal similarity displayed in Synoptic parallels in general. [Typically unstated.]
- S8. Therefore: verbal agreement among parallel Synoptic texts is a reliable indicator of literary relationships among those texts. [From S6, S7.]
- S9. The salient relationship among the Synoptic Gospels is that relationship which is most accessible and significant to professional New Testament scholars. [Typically unstated.]
- S10. The relationship among the Synoptic Gospels which is most accessible and significant to professional New Testament scholars is literary in nature. [Typically unstated.]
- S11. Therefore: The salient relationship among the Synoptic Gospels is literary in nature. [Restatement of 1B: from S8, S9, S10.]

If this argument works, it strongly supports the axiom that Synoptic verbal agreement is a reliable indicator of Synoptic literary relationships, since the axiom follows from premises S1–S7. So if we really want to know

why we should accept the axiom, we will have to evaluate this more complete argument, and the evidence to which its premises allude.

But of course some parts of the more complete argument are more significant for our purposes than others. It would seem that something like premises S9 and S10 must be assumed in order to get from S8 to S11 (though it is difficult to tell how Sanders and Davies might wish to make this move). But S11 is just a value judgment contingent on a particular set of scholarly interests. Here we are only concerned with the plausibility of S8; everything from S9 on could be demonstrably false and the remaining argument would still support the claim that Synoptic verbal agreement is a reliable indicator of Synoptic literary relationships. Premise S7 is rather more important: somehow it must be shown that the particular kinds or amounts of verbal agreement displayed in the particular texts under discussion are like the sorts of verbal agreement found in the rest of the Synoptics, or else our axiom S8 does not follow from S6.<sup>23</sup> S5 is not in dispute, what with the dearth of audio-recording equipment in the first century AD.<sup>24</sup> Neither is S1; the data it describes is one of the principal facts to be explained. The truth of S4, however, is obviously central to our project. If the verbal agreement displayed among Sanders and Davies's four Synoptic parallels could be plausibly explained as a feature of independently recorded, orally transmitted Jesus traditions, the veracity of our axiom would be thrown into considerable doubt.

So the evidence we are most concerned to evaluate is the evidence to support the claim S4, that any given set of Synoptic parallels cannot have been composed solely by reference to oral traditions. This evidence is implied by S2, which asserts that the verbal similarity in Sanders and Davies's parallels could only have been produced by reference to oral traditions if those traditions were produced by "schools of professional or semi-professional memorizers," and by S3, which asserts that the early church did not do that sort of thing. But we are immediately interested in the evidence to support S2, because S3 is only an issue if S2 is true. Unfortunately, there is no agreement among New Testament scholars concerning what evidence, or even what *kind* of evidence, might be sufficient to confirm or refute statements of S2 to the desired degree of certainty.<sup>25</sup>

23. Though if S7 were false, S6 might still give some weak support to the axiom.

24. This provided that "editorial activity" is construed so as to allow a role for the memorization of written texts in the editorial process; see, e.g., Gregory, "Literary Dependence," 95–103; Derrenbacher, "External and Psychological Conditions."

25. So Andrew Gregory: "Continuing uncertainty about the extent to which the independent use of common oral tradition might lead to two documents including verbatim parallel traditions quite independently of each other makes it difficult to offer

## 2.2 Crossan's Critique

"It is hard for me to imagine," mused John Dominic Crossan some years ago, "more confusion and misinformation than accompanies current pre-suppositions about memory, orality, and literacy in connection with the Jesus traditions and the gospel texts."<sup>26</sup> This sentiment must surely be shared by anyone who surveys the enormous array of often incompatible opinions espoused on these topics by New Testament scholars.<sup>27</sup> Consider, by way of example, the findings of a relatively recent symposium of distinguished scholars on the subject of "oral tradition before, in and outside the Gospels":

We have been unable to deduce or derive any marks which distinguish clearly between an oral and a written transmission process. Each can show a similar degree of fixity and variability. We can, however, say of the Gospel material that the process of transmission has been marked by a combination of fixity and variability. . . . Whereas analysis of the Gospel traditions in terms of literary interdependence invites the analogy of a chain of tradition with many intermediate links, the variability, particularly of the oral traditioning process, may mean that only one link need necessarily be postulated between the original word/act and the present form of the tradition. . . . We cannot make any universal generalization that the Aramaic and/or Hebrew is always earlier and Greek always later, or that oral form always precedes written.<sup>28</sup>

These statements show that, as far as the participants in this symposium could make out, there is no evidence sufficient to confirm statements of S2. The sorts of "fixity" and "variability" contained in the Synoptic Gospels might be produced by either oral-traditional or literary means. Yet on the very next page of the volume in which these findings are presented, under the heading "Pointers to Further Investigation," we find the

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any firm criteria as to when literary dependence becomes a more likely explanation for such parallels than the use of oral tradition" (*Reception*, 60n21).

26. Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*, 52.

27. Cf. David du Toit's lament that there is "a complete lack of consensus on one of the most fundamental questions of the whole enterprise, namely on the question of the process of transmission of the Jesus traditions" ("Jesus, Mark and Q," 123). Extreme diversity of opinion among New Testament scholars on this subject is by no means a recent development: the same phenomenon was observed thirty years ago by John Bradshaw ("Oral Transmission," 30); fifty years ago by Birger Gerhardsson (*Memory and Manuscript*, 13–15); and one hundred sixty years ago by Brooke Westcott (*Introduction*, 165n1).

28. Wansbrough, *Jesus*, 12–13.

following question: “Given that so much of our material reflects substantial literary interdependence, can the presence of only a few fixed points of verbal agreement between some of these traditions count as evidence of oral transmission?”<sup>29</sup> This question shows that the participants in this symposium think that there *is* evidence sufficient to confirm statements of S<sub>2</sub>; for they affirm that “so much of our material reflects substantial literary interdependence.”<sup>30</sup> The presence of such a glaring contradiction regarding a matter of such basic importance, in what is supposed to be a unified statement on the matter by a panel of eminent scholars, suggests that something has gone very wrong indeed. But Crossan thinks that he can offer some assistance on this point.

Crossan’s 1999 monograph, *The Birth of Christianity*, is a wide-ranging and often fascinating attempt to describe the development of Jewish Christianity in the first two decades after the death of Jesus, a period that is in many ways opaque to historians of early Christianity. Crossan attempts to dispel some of the fog surrounding this period by the application of what he describes as “a new method,” “an interdisciplinary combination of anthropological, historical, archaeological, and literary disciplines,” to what he calls “new materials,” which however are “obtained from the earlier strata or larger sources of Christian texts we already have available to us.”<sup>31</sup> But of course the very existence of some of these new materials is a controversial proposition, so a major part of Crossan’s project is given to trying to establish the nature of the old materials in which they (or traces of them) are supposedly ensconced. And since the plausibility of his account of the composition and redaction of these older materials depends upon the utility of the traditional methods of Synoptic source- and redaction-criticism, he is obliged to show that Synoptic verbal agreement could not have been produced by non-rabbinic-style oral-traditional activity.

As the above-cited complaint indicates, however, Crossan is not at all satisfied with previous attempts to address this issue. On Crossan’s view, New Testament scholars are collectively in a state of total bewilderment about the relationship between the Synoptic Gospels and early Christian oral tradition. They do not possess an adequate understanding of the nature of orality or of human memory; their discussions of these subjects are characterized by reliance on “implicit presuppositions that are neither

29. *Ibid.*, 14.

30. Alternatively, it could be that this is just a sort of confession of faith in the axiom “Synoptic verbal agreement is a reliable indicator of Synoptic literary relationships,” an implicit admission that the axiom does not require empirical support. But I think it unlikely that this is what was intended.

31. Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*, x.

theoretically justified nor methodologically verified.”<sup>32</sup> These are major deficiencies which must be remedied, and the way to remedy them is clear: current conceptions of the oral Jesus tradition must be tested against the available empirical data. This, says Crossan,

is the only way to discipline claims about the intersection of memory, orality, and literacy based on assumed common sense, personal intuition, or hypothesis unaccompanied by either theoretical foundation or experimental confirmation. What, in other words, do we learn about the intersection of memory, orality, and literacy from oral fieldworkers operating inductively, or from social psychologists operating experimentally? It is time to confront the mystique of the oral Jesus tradition with some hard and inductive data from checked experience and controlled experiment.<sup>33</sup>

And this is not mere exhortation. Crossan himself devotes better than forty pages to this effort, at that time easily the most space ever given by a New Testament scholar to a consideration of external, non-patristic empirical evidence for any conception of the relationship between early Christian oral tradition and the Synoptic Gospels, barring only Gerhardsson’s *Memory and Manuscript*.<sup>34</sup>

Crossan’s treatment is by no means comprehensive. He did not attempt to evaluate all the evidence on offer up to the end of the twentieth century, and additional evidence has been presented since that time. Moreover, his continued reliance on the generalized notion of orality popularized by Walter Ong (and among New Testament scholars by Werner Kelber) renders his analyses of dubious value for understanding the problems under consideration here.<sup>35</sup> However, by marshalling together examples of three of the four main kinds of empirical evidence relevant to statements of S2, Crossan’s work suggests a convenient way to organize a more satisfactory treatment. Over the next four chapters I will engage Crossan as a key conversation partner, using his discussion in *The Birth of Christianity* as a port of entry to a detailed evaluation of the most important empirical evidence that has been produced to date for or against claims that some class of Synoptic verbal agreement cannot have been produced by non-rabbinic-style oral-traditional activity. The resulting analysis will undoubtedly fall short of being truly comprehensive, given especially the very high incidence of appeals

32. *Ibid.*, 48.

33. *Ibid.*, 58.

34. See *ibid.*, 47–89, 534–38; but now see Baum, *Der mündliche Faktor*.

35. See Ong, *Presence of the Word; Interfaces of the Word; Orality and Literacy*.

to anecdotal evidence in discussions of early Christian oral tradition, but it should be sufficient to establish the extent to which the evidence currently on offer is adequate to confirm statements of S2.

Recall, however, that most of the evidence that has been presented in support of such statements is not empirical, but theoretical. Modern discussion of early Christian oral tradition has been conducted largely by reference to speculative accounts of the characteristics of a universal “orality” in which the early Christians are supposed to have participated. Since I have devoted part of chapter 1 to demonstrating the inadequacy of this concept of orality for addressing questions related to the composition or transmission of any oral-traditional material whatever, I will not spend much time here criticizing its application to the problem of Synoptic verbal agreement. But because of the central role it plays in current debate on the subject, and in Crossan’s treatment specifically, it will be expedient to spell out exactly why it fails in this capacity, and how the present investigation will proceed without it.

Crossan’s portrayal of early Christian oral tradition is effectively his construal of how some of the materials contained in the canonical gospels and in certain of the extracanonical gospels would have been transmitted in orality.<sup>36</sup> Crossan has made some refinements to the earlier views of the orality theorists, eschewing an Ong-ish (or early Kelber-esque) conception of orality and literacy as radically different and mutually exclusive phenomena in favor of an emphasis on interface and interaction between them.<sup>37</sup> “[The] great-divide-understanding of orality versus literacy will not work,” Crossan declares, “because, while there have been oral cultures without literacy, there have been no literate cultures without orality. The divide, great or gradual, is not oral versus literate but *oral alone* versus *oral and literate* together.”<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, for Crossan as well as for Ong and Kelber, orality is a discrete phenomenon characterized by the manifestation of certain specific,

36. The extracanonical gospels Crossan is particularly interested in are the Gospel of Thomas, the Egerton Gospel, and the so-called Secret Gospel of Mark, all of which he thinks independent of the canonical gospels; the Gospel of Peter, which he deems dependent on the canonical gospels, but also dependent on an additional source independent of the canonical gospels which he calls the “Cross Gospel”; and the “Q Gospel,” which he considers “a Trojan horse, an extracanonical gospel hidden within two intracanonical gospels” (*Birth of Christianity*, 111). All of these, he thinks, are “crucially important for understanding the Jesus tradition” (115). See *ibid.*, 114–20; cf. Crossan, *Four Other Gospels*.

37. Werner Kelber has made similar refinements to his own views of early Christian orality; see, e.g., “Modalities”; *OWG*, xxi–xxii.

38. Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*, 88, his emphasis.

identifiable psychological characteristics distinct from those displayed in literacy, though orality may in various ways be mitigated or modified through its interactions with literacy. Crossan does not provide a detailed exposition of his particular conception of orality, but the distinction he makes between orality and literacy is easily observable where he applies his theory to the specific problem of Synoptic verbal agreement. “Orality,” he claims, “is structural rather than syntactical. Apart from short items that are retained magically, ritually, or metrically verbatim, it remembers gist, outline, and interaction of elements rather than detail, particular, and precision of sequence,” which are produced only by literacy.<sup>39</sup> Orality retains only “matrix,” not “format”; it produces only “oral multiform,” not “scribal uniform.”<sup>40</sup> For Crossan, the oral Jesus tradition is a concrete instantiation of orality; and orality does not produce verbatim agreements in wording of the sort found in the Synoptic Gospels.

Something like this position has historically been very popular among New Testament scholars, and its recent expression in terms of the “psychodynamics of orality” has afforded it an air of scientific respectability sufficient to elevate it in some quarters to the status of a confirmed hypothesis. But, to recapitulate the point raised in chapter 1, this position has been rejected by scholars of oral traditions as inadequate to explain the available data.<sup>41</sup> To put it bluntly: there is no such thing as “orality.” There is no monolithic psychological or sociological phenomenon that is uniformly displayed among or uniquely experienced by the members of “oral cultures,” or the

39. *Ibid.*, 54–55.

40. Crossan defines *matrix* as “an unphrased structure in memory. . . . *Format*, on the other hand, is the exact and individual formulation.” *Format* gives rise to *scribal uniform*, “the only correct quotation”; *matrix* to *oral multiform*: “multiple, equally valid ways of saying and resaying”; see *ibid.*, 85–87. Crossan’s use of the term *multiform* is apparently derived from Albert Lord, who used it in preference to the word *variant* to describe different versions of South Slavic epic songs; see, e.g., *Singer of Tales*, 24, 100; Lord and Lord, *Singer Resumes*, 23.

41. See, e.g., Ruth Finnegan’s analysis: “This recognition of the *positive* features of oral forms admittedly sometimes led to some overplaying of their significance and distinctiveness. It seemed for a time as if one single process had been revealed that covered *all* unwritten composition and performance. . . . Generalized dichotomies of this kind may still be remarkably persistent but are fortunately now approached with more caution. Certainly most serious scholars with any experience outside the parochialities of modern Western culture would question the attempt to take as universal the powerful Enlightenment vision that invokes the rationality of language and literacy as the characteristic of Western civilization and imagines fundamental divisions among humankind tied to the presence or absence of (alphabetic) writing. Instead they would point to the existence of not a single ‘orality’ but multiple forms of oral expression to be found in the urban contexts of today no less than ‘far away and long ago’” (“How of Literature,” 167–68).

partially or totally illiterate members of “chirographic cultures.”<sup>42</sup> Anthropologists and folklorists have documented a great diversity of approaches to the oral composition and transmission of an equally great diversity of types of traditional and other information in cultures around the world, and there is no phenomenon answering to any of the sometimes complex and typically vague descriptions provided by orality theorists that is shared by all these approaches or by the people who employ them. Likewise, there are no universal oral forms or characteristics of oral literature which, when recorded in written documents, can be reliably distinguished from literary forms or characteristics. Different groups, and different individuals, may handle similar kinds of information quite differently according to their own particular beliefs, motivations, intentions, abilities, and so on.<sup>43</sup> Of course, different oral-traditional systems or examples of oral literature need not be totally dissimilar. The methods used to compose Serbo-Croatian Muslim epic poetry in the early part of the last century might well have been similar in important ways to the methods used to compose the Homeric epics in the eighth century BC, for instance. But such similarity cannot be simply assumed on the ground that all the comparanda in question are examples of orality. Each oral-traditional system and each case of actual or hypothetically oral-traditional literature must be considered on its own terms, as a unique specimen which may be more or less like other unique specimens.

And so with the oral Jesus tradition and its relation to Synoptic verbal agreement. We know very little about the precise means by which oral traditions about Jesus were transmitted in earliest Christianity, but we do know that they were particular kinds of oral-traditional activity, conducted by particular people with particular histories and particular ideas about what they were trying to accomplish. Such people might have been capable of producing by those means a few of the sorts of verbal agreements we observe in the Synoptic Gospels, or quite a lot, or none at all; but we will not discover which by reference to a general theory of orality. No such theory can account for the great variety of approaches to the composition and transmission of oral traditions that have been documented to date, much less predict or retrodict the particular characteristics of oral-traditional systems which are unknown to us, or particular features of the texts they might be used to compose.

42. See, e.g., Halverson, “Goody”; Finnegan, “What Is Orality”; Rosenberg, *Folklore and Literature*, 25–26; Street, *Literacy*.

43. Cf., e.g., Foley, *Theory of Oral Composition*, 109; Haring, “True Comparative Literature,” 37; Bynum, “*Antiquitates vulgares*”; NaAllah, “Interpretation of African Orature,” 125; Thomas, *Literacy and Orality*, 107.

It may appear that this bodes ill for attempts to confirm statements to the effect that some particular kind or amount of verbal similarity found in any given set of Synoptic parallels could not have been produced by exclusive reference to oral traditions except for oral traditions produced by means of a program of rote memorization, because such statements are universal negative judgments: no verbal similarity of this sort can be produced by any oral tradition of that sort. There are probably thousands of ways the first Christians might theoretically have chosen to transmit Jesus-traditions; we cannot know how many of these possibilities were actually available to them, and we do not know which method was in fact employed; so it will never be possible to say with any certainty that early Christian oral tradition could not have produced some particular sort of Synoptic-type verbal agreement.

But this sets the bar too high. There are not very many things one can say with certainty about earliest Christianity. Historians must normally be content to advance their portraits of the first Christian communities in terms of rough probabilities. To be sure, some New Testament scholars have got used to assessing the production of Synoptic verbal agreement in terms of iron-clad certainty on the ground that orality does not produce verbatim agreement, and this is undoubtedly a mistake; but it is still possible that we should be able to come to some reasonable conclusion on the subject as a matter of greater or lesser probability. It might be, for example, that out of all of the cases of oral transmission of materials relevantly similar to materials contained in the Synoptic Gospels that have been observed to date by anthropologists and folklorists, none have produced anything like Synoptic-type verbal agreements. Or it might be that, of the kinds of oral-traditional systems that do sometimes produce Synoptic-type similarities, none were very plausibly available to the first Christians (as is widely thought to be the case regarding the oral-traditional system described by the rabbis). Given such knowledge, we might have good reason to think some, most, or all statements of S<sub>2</sub> probably true, even though we could not claim to know this with absolute certainty.

### 2.3 Conclusion

It is clear, however, that any valid confirmation or refutation of a statement of S<sub>2</sub> must be based to some extent on an evaluation of the relevant empirical evidence. This requirement has generally been recognized by New Testament scholars, if only implicitly. Even those critics who have relied extensively on the concept of a universal orality have seen that this concept

should be able to account for the actual data, and have sometimes attempted to illustrate claims about Synoptic verbal agreement by reference to particular instances of oral-traditional activity. Such illustrations might still possess considerable analogical force even if the theoretical framework in which they were originally employed can no longer be defended. In what follows, therefore, I will treat illustrations of this kind as analogical evidence for or against statements of S<sub>2</sub>, and judge them strong or weak as such (with an eye to Foley's principles of dependence), even if they were originally intended to illustrate the typical functioning of oral traditions in general.

There are four kinds of empirical evidence that New Testament scholars have used to support or rebut statements of S<sub>2</sub>. Two of these are types of anecdotal evidence: anecdotal evidence from common experience, and anecdotal evidence from uncommon experience. In addition, evidence for or against statements of S<sub>2</sub> has been adduced from transcripts of actual oral literature, and from scientific studies of human memory. Each of the next four chapters is devoted to an evaluation of one of these kinds of evidence.

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