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The Order of the Synoptics: Why Three Synoptic Gospels?

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prophets. Technical language is kept to a minimum and scholarly debates are clearly explained.

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The Order of the Synoptics
Bernard Orchard and Harold Riley
Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987
294 pp. U.S. \$38.95

Bernard Orchard is a Benedictine monk of the Earling Abbey, London, England, and co-chairman of the International Institute for Renewal of Gospel Studies. Harold Riley is an Anglican priest, now retired from administrative posts in the Church of England. The publisher Mercer University Press in the state of Georgia represents a conservative Protestant press in the United States. I mention this because it is the issue of the priority of the Gospel of Matthew which has brought this group together. Other than that, London and Macon are a long ways apart geographically, culturally and theologically.

While there was a debate about the priority of Matthew in the first two decades of this century, the priority of Mark has been more or less accepted in the synoptic gospel research. However, there has always been some debate about the synoptic problem—William Farmer is one person who had written on the issue—and here again is a book on that subject.

One can clearly find statements in the tradition of the early church which stress the Gospel of Matthew as the oldest of the four gospels, but those sources are not working with the literary issues in the synoptic gospels. In the early church the concern was to harmonize the gospels for the purpose of church unity and doctrine. The modern study of the synoptic problem stresses more literary and historical issues. In *The Order of the Synoptics* it is difficult to see how these historical and literary issues are handled.

The point which is being made is that Matthew wrote his gospel first. Then Luke wrote his next and made some changes, then Mark came along with his gospel as a bridge between Matthew and Luke. Matthew represented the conservative stand of Peter and the primitive Jewish church. Luke represented Paul and the gentile church. In this argument, Mark was the person who tried to keep the two parties together by editing his gospel as a compromise. This was to keep both Matthew and Luke in the canon with Mark in the middle.

This is an interesting thesis, but it uses a theory of Hegel from the nineteenth century to solve an issue in the first century. Hegel's theory

of historical development through thesis, antithesis and synthesis is finally mentioned right on the last page of the book. This theory has been used by F.C. Baur and in Marxism, but it is funny to see it used in this argument to defend a conservative thesis about the priority of Matthew.

The authors' thesis raises several questions. Matthew had one birth story, Luke another. How is it that Mark edited these two by not having any birth story? Matthew had the Sermon on the Mount, Luke has the Sermon on the Plain. How is it that Mark edited these two by not having any sermon at all?

We now have editions of the three synoptic gospels which are line by line set up in parallel with each other. These parallels of the synoptic gospels show us literally hundreds of slight differences and similarities in the sentences and words in the gospels. Most books on the synoptic problem study literally hundreds of little variations. It seems odd to see a study of this issue which does not use this type of work. Did the authors go through such a parallel study? It is just such a study which suggests that Mark was first and that Matthew and Luke were doing independent changes. If the authors wish to debate this issue, they should go through literally hundreds of verses, but they have totally avoided this issue. Thus for a reader who has done even some work on the parallels in the gospels, this book is frustrating to read; at least it is frustrating for me. So the book is even hard to review. It is good to read the church fathers, but it is also good to read the gospels.

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Let Each Gospel Speak for Itself

R. Rhys Williams

Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1987

Williams is a retired Episcopal priest with forty years of pastoral experience, a Professor Emeritus of Marist College, Poughkeepsie, New York, where he taught for seventeen years. He now lives in Nova Scotia.

The title of the book adequately describes its content and purpose. This is "not another explanation of the meaning of the gospels, but an introduction to a different method of studying the gospels." Williams is committed to the redaction-critical approach which focuses more on the differences than on the similarities between the various gospel accounts. The approach is one which "takes the creative function of the gospel writer seriously." The author acknowledges that "such an approach is not new." He contends, however, that "this approach has not had much impact on the average, serious student of the New Testament or on the parish clergy." This situation William wishes to remedy.