

Chapter 7

CRITICIZING THE CRITERION OF MULTIPLE ATTESTATION: THE HISTORICAL JESUS AND THE QUESTION OF SOURCES

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Multiple Attestation and the Historian's Training

When historians say that they prefer traditions that are attested in a variety of different sources, they are stating the obvious. As a general principle, no one seriously prefers ill-attested late traditions to well-attested early ones. When historical Jesus scholars appeal to the criterion of multiple attestation, they are, on one level, behaving as one would expect sane historians to behave. They are drawing attention to the best evidence, looking for multiple, early, independent attestation of traditions about Jesus with a view to setting up the bedrock for a strong reconstruction. In principle, the criterion of multiple attestation is simply a statement of sound historical method. On the face of it, there ought not to be any controversy here. Indeed the discussion of historical Jesus criteria often takes place in introductory essays, the purpose of which is to train young historians about the task.¹ In these contexts, it is important to establish basic principles, and to find ways of explaining that historical Jesus research is all about exploring the early Christian material through a historian's eyes. The fact that many students first approach the material with religious or anti-religious prejudice makes the task of setting in

1. See, e.g., David A. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods and Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 2004), 179–88, which provides a survey of the criteria with a basic break down of what they reveal. See similarly Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (3d ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 218, and *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 89 (identical in each), "In any court trial, it is better to have a number of witnesses who can provide consistent testimony than to have only one, especially if we can show the witnesses did not confer with one another to get their story straight. A strong case will be supported by several witnesses who independently agree on a point at issue. So too with history. An event mentioned in several independent documents is more likely to be historical than an event mentioned in only one."

place proper historical method all the more important. In his only systematic discussion of the criteria for Jesus research, E. P. Sanders writes from this perspective, guiding students to an understanding of how a historian might approach the Synoptic Gospels.²

And for students of the New Testament, there is a particular advantage to spending a little time with the criterion of multiple attestation. Not only does it underline the importance of searching for multiple, independent sources, but it provides a grounding in key consensus views in New Testament scholarship that will serve students well in other areas too. Most fundamentally, it introduces them to the standard solution to the Synoptic Problem, the Two-Source Theory, according to which Mark and the hypothetical source Q are the early, independent works that form the basis for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.³ Then, in addition, the student is introduced to M and L to make up the four sources of Streeter's classic Four-Source Theory,⁴ which is still foundational for many historical Jesus scholars.⁵

Moreover, it is not simply the solution to the Synoptic Problem that students new to Jesus research discover. In some versions of the criterion

2. E. P. Sanders and M. Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International; London: SCM, 1989), 301–34. Sanders and Davies speak of “tests” rather than criteria and they draw attention to a useful test that is almost universally ignored in the standard discussions of criteria, a “view common to friend and foe” (330–33).

3. For an introduction to the Synoptic Problem, see my *The Synoptic Problem: A Way Through the Maze* (London: T&T Clark International, 2001).

4. B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (London: Macmillan, 1924).

5. Robert H. Stein, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels: Origin and Interpretation* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), illustrates the point, “How does our knowledge of the relationship between the Synoptic Gospels assist us in historical criticism? One way is by means of the ‘Criterion of Multiple Attestation.’ Essentially, this criterion works as follows: Assuming that the Markan, the Q, and the unique Matthean (M), Lukan (L), and Johannine material come from different sources, if a teaching or activity of Jesus is witnessed to in a number of these sources rather than just one (e.g. John, M, or L), the probability of its historicity or authenticity is enhanced. In other words, each source of the Gospels acts as a witness before the judgment seat of history, and the more independent witnesses (i.e. sources) that can give testimony, the stronger the case” (156). See similarly Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM, 1998), “... we have two ancient sources (Mark and Q) which are independent of each other, and in addition large complexes of Matthaean and Lukan special material, each of which represents an independent tradition (oral or written?)” (25). See also Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria* (trans. M. Eugene Boring; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 235–39.

of multiple attestation, perhaps most famously when adopted by the Jesus Seminar, the *Gospel of Thomas* is introduced as “a fifth, independent source for the sayings and parables of Jesus,” “a gold mine of comparative material and new information.”⁶ And in other versions, John too is a major independent source for historical Jesus research, giving the teacher the chance to underline the difference between John and the Synoptic Gospels.⁷

If the criterion of multiple attestation has some value as a tool of New Testament Introduction, as a useful means of training the young historical Jesus scholars in some of the basics of the game, its value is greatly limited once one progresses beyond the introductory level. Indeed, the oversimplification that is intrinsic to the introductory-level approach masks some serious problems with the criterion of multiple attestation. When it comes to the detailed conceptualization and application of the criterion, it becomes problematic, misleading and ultimately unusable. The difficulties with the criterion can be explored under several headings, the role played by Q, the relationship between Mark and Q, the independence of Gospel of Thomas, and the conflict with the criterion of embarrassment.

The Role Played by Q

Q is indispensable to the usual practice of multiple attestation. Every practitioner of the criterion values Q, placing it at the heart of the analysis of the Jesus material.⁸ The origins of the criterion, at this point just “double attestation,”⁹ are usually attributed to F. C. Burkitt, for

6. Robert Walter Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus: New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 15. The criterion of multiple attestation is a major criterion for the Jesus Seminar, though it is not unassailable. For example, “Strong multiple attestation in independent sources is not a sufficient reason in itself to attribute a saying to Jesus” (*Five Gospels*, 187). For an excellent critique of the Jesus Seminar’s use of historical Jesus criteria, see W. J. Lyons, “A Prophet Is Rejected in His Home Town (Mark 6:4 and Parallels): A Study in the Methodological (In)Consistency of the Jesus Seminar,” *JSHJ* 6 (2008): 59–84.

7. See, e.g., Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, 36.

8. On the role played by Q in the criterion of multiple attestation, with special reference to the work of Meier, see Eric Eve, “Meier, Miracle and Multiple Attestation,” *JSHJ* 3 (2005): 23–45, esp. 34–36.

9. The earliest use of the phrase “multiple attestation” that I can find is in B. H. Branscomb, *Jesus and the Law of Moses* (New York: Smith, 1930), 136; it attains popularity through its use by C. H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet

whom Q, alongside Mark, provided the double attestation that can launch historical Jesus study:

We need, therefore, a kind of starting point for the consideration of our Lord's doctrine, some external test that will give us a general assurance that the Saying we have before us is really from Him, and not the half-conscious product of one school of His followers. Where shall we find such a test?

It appeared to me that the starting point we require may be found in those Sayings which have a real double attestation. The main documents out of which the Synoptic Gospels are compiled are (1) the Gospel of Mark and (2) the lost common origin of the non-Markan portions of Matthew and Luke, i.e. the source called Q. Where Mark and Q appear to report the same Saying, we have the nearest approach that we can hope to get to the common tradition of the earliest Christian society about our Lord's words. What we glean in this way will indicate the general impression His teaching made upon his disciples.¹⁰

Over a century later, the prominence of Q in historical Jesus research, especially in the use of this criterion, is a mark of just how secure the consensus on its existence remains. In spite of an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the hypothesis, most historical Jesus scholars simply assume the existence of Q without any detailed justification or testing of the hypothesis. Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz's *Comprehensive Guide* illustrates the point. They hold that "Q is certainly the most important source for reconstructing the teaching of Jesus," they introduce it without any discussion of alternatives, and they are more inclined to discuss doubts about the existence of Jesus than doubts about the existence of Q.¹¹

The difficulty relates to the degree of confidence with which Jesus scholars appeal to Q as one of their early, independent witnesses, a confidence that is at odds with the well-known fact that there is no

& Co., 1936), 117; see also Dodd's *History and Gospel* (New York: Scribner's, 1937), 91-101, for discussion of the related phenomenon of "multiple forms" which is sometimes discussed along with multiple attestation. The phrase is sometimes associated especially with the contribution of Harvey K. McArthur, "Basic Issues, A Survey of Recent Gospel Research," *Interpretation* 18 (1964): 39-55, esp. 47-48, for example by Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 45. Both McArthur and Perrin refer to T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus Studies of Its Form and Content* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), which works with multiple attestation without using that term.

10. F. C. Burkitt, *The Gospel History and Its Transmission* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906), 147.

11. Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, 27-29, 122-23.

known ancient attestation to Q of any kind. One of the key witnesses in the enterprise is itself unwitnessed. It is a result of scholarly endeavour rather than a presupposition for it. There is some residual awareness that the hypothetical source should be treated with caution, but such reservations are sidelined when the serious work of using the criterion of multiple attestation begins. John Meier, for example, cautions that the Two-Source Theory is “not universally accepted” and that it is “not without its problems” but he adds that it is “the one most used by the international community of scholars” and that “the important upshot of this position is that Mark and Q provide two different sources for comparison and verification.”¹²

But the architecture of the Two-Source Theory here inspires false confidence in one of the two sources, and a move has been made here that gives Q too important a position. Even if the Two-Source Theory is the best solution to the Synoptic Problem, a position that several scholars dispute,¹³ the role played by Mark and Q in historical Jesus research should not be equivalent. A hypothetical text should always of necessity play a subsidiary role in this kind of historical work. Since Q is unattested, the result of an inference made about the independence of Matthew and Luke, it ought to be our duty continually to remind ourselves that we are not working with an extant text. We are building from hypothesis. This is not to say that the hypothetical nature of Q is unfamiliar to historical Jesus scholars, or that they are unaware of the fact that the entire enterprise is a matter of discussing competing hypotheses. As Kloppenborg has underlined, “Hypotheses are all that we have and all that we will ever have.”¹⁴ Studying the interrelationships of the Synoptic Gospels is all about the construction of hypotheses. It is about proposing, discussing and testing the best models to explain the data and solve the Synoptic

12. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Vol. 1, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 44.

13. See Austin Farrer, “On Dispensing with Q,” in *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot* (ed. D. E. Nineham; Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), 55–88; Michael Goulder, *Luke: A New Paradigm* (JSNTSup 20; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989); Sanders and Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*; Mark Goodacre, *The Case Against Q: Studies in Marcan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2002); Mark Goodacre and Nicholas Perrin, eds., *Questioning Q* (London: SPCK, 2004). The Farrer Theory affirms the priority of Mark but explains the double tradition by drawing a direct line from Matthew to Luke.

14. See especially John S. Kloppenborg Verbin, *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 50–54 (quotation on p. 54).

Problem. Nevertheless, there is a material difference between these two major sources in the quest. One is a known entity from antiquity with textual witnesses and patristic citations. The other is a scholarly construct, the contours and content of which are a matter of debate.

John Meier shows some consciousness of the difficulties involved by suggesting a “mantra” to be chanted by New Testament scholars every day, “Q is a hypothetical document whose exact extension, wording, originating community, strata, and stages of redaction cannot be known.”¹⁵ In practice, though, Meier’s mantra only serves to encourage a scepticism about Q scholarship, especially as it relates to its reconstruction, history and stratification, while effectively inoculating the reader against questioning Q in the context of Meier’s own work on the historical Jesus. Once the Q hypothesis has been established as a major player, it is repeatedly used in the criterion of multiple attestation without any fresh examination of the alternatives to the hypothesis.¹⁶

John Dominic Crossan is similarly conscious of the major role played by Q in much historical Jesus research, and while reflecting on Meier’s mantra, he suggests:

There is another and even more basic mantra that those same exegetes should utter each morning on rising: “Hypotheses are to be tested.” And you test them by pushing, pushing, pushing, until you hear something crack. Then you examine the crack to see how to proceed.¹⁷

Crossan’s suggestion is on the money—hypotheses are there to be tested. In practice, however, Crossan’s idea of “pushing” the hypothesis is all about the application of Q and its stratification to his reconstruction of the historical Jesus. There is a difference between applying a hypothesis and testing it. The kind of “testing” that would be profitable in establishing the value of the criterion of multiple attestation is the kind of testing that asks about the strength of the hypothesis to explain the specific data at hand. In given instances, does Q explain the data better than the

15. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Vol. 2, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 178.

16. Cf. Stanley E. Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical Jesus Research: Previous Discussion and New Proposals* (JSNTSup 191; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 87–89, who notes the extent to which the criterion of multiple attestation depends on the Two-Source Theory.

17. John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSan-Francisco, 1998), 111. Crossan is criticizing Meier from the perspective of the kind of Q scholarship that Meier does not participate in, one that is interested in stratification, community and reconstructed wording.

alternative that Luke had access to Matthew's Gospel? The issue is an important one because some of the key examples of multiple attestation are derived from contexts where Luke's knowledge of Matthew appears to explain the data as plausibly, arguably more plausibly, than the alternative.

Mark and Q

The difficulty over the use of Q in the criterion of multiple attestation is brought into focus by a particular difficulty that is routinely missed in the scholarship. The search for material that is attested in both Mark and Q is a search that inevitably results in prejudicing a particular set of problematic data, the so-called Mark-Q overlaps. When Burkitt set out what he called "the doubly attested sayings," he was largely listing Mark-Q overlap material.¹⁸ Lecturing in 1906, the difficulties with conceptualization and categorization of this material were not yet apparent. In due course, however, scholars of the Synoptic Problem came to see serious difficulties with the category Mark-Q overlap. Although the difficulties are widely known to those who have familiarized themselves with the Synoptic Problem, they are still unknown to many historical Jesus scholars and it will be worth summarizing them here.¹⁹

The "Mark-Q overlap" material is a prejudicial name given to triple tradition material that features major agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark. As a category, it is problematic for the following reasons:

1. The key premise of the Two-Source Theory is that Matthew and Luke used Mark independently of one another. One of the reasons commonly given for their independence is that Matthew and Luke never agree with one another against Mark. However, they actually often agree with one another against Mark. The name given by Q theorists to passages featuring major agreements like this is "Mark-Q overlap." Further, it is often stated

18. His list is greatly inflated by pieces that no one now places in Q, such as the Parable of the Sower: "We may conjecture that the Parable of the Sower stood in Q, but the text of Matt. 13:2ff and Luke 8:5ff seems wholly derived from Mark" (*Gospel History*, 152). It is further inflated by L material (Luke 11:27-28; see *ibid.*, 152) and Lukan redactional material (Mark 6:4 // Luke 4:24; see *ibid.*, 155). Nevertheless, the bulk of his examples is made up of Mark-Q overlap material.

19. For fuller treatments, see my *Case Against Q*, especially 49-55, 163-65; E. P. Sanders, "The Overlaps of Mark and Q and the Synoptic Problem," *NTS* (1973): 453-65; and Sanders and Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, 78-83.

that Luke never features Matthew's major additions to Mark in triple tradition, but the so-called Mark–Q overlaps demonstrate that this is incorrect.

2. The existence of these major agreements goes unnoticed because of the way that Two-Source theorists describe the data, with a division between minor agreements (those that can be explained by appeal to independent redaction, coincidence and textual assimilation) and Mark–Q overlaps (those that are too substantial to be explained by appeal to independent redaction, coincidence and textual assimilation). The existence of these major agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark calls into question one of the key arguments in favour of the Q hypothesis.
3. The standard explanation for the existence of these major agreements is that Mark and Q occasionally overlapped. While there is no difficulty in principle with the idea of an overlap between two sources that feature similar subject matter, the alleged overlap is so substantial that it places a question mark over the independence of the two sources, Mark and Q. Q apparently finishes Mark's sentences (Mark: "He will baptize you with the holy spirit"; Q: "and fire!")²⁰ and presupposes its narrative structure (John the Baptist preaches about a "coming one" whom he baptizes; he is declared God's son and goes to the desert to be tested as his son, and so on).²¹

One is faced with a dilemma that is as unappealing to the Two-Source Theorist as it is to the historical Jesus scholar who wishes to assign a key role to Q. Either the Mark–Q overlap passages point to Luke's familiarity with Matthew as well as Mark, or there is a direct literary link between Mark and Q. Either Q does not exist, in which case its value as an early witness to Jesus tradition vanishes,²² or it is not the independent, autonomous entity that participates in the independent attestation of materials.

The difficulties are best illustrated by drawing attention to a favourite example of something often thought to be established by the independent, double attestation of Mark and Q—the baptism of Jesus by John (Matt 3:13–17 // Mark 1:9–11 // Luke 3:21–22). Although the criterion of

20. Mark 1:8 // Matt 3:11 // Luke 3:16.

21. On Q's narrative structure and its presupposition of the Markan narrative, see my *Case Against Q*, Chapter 9.

22. This does not, of course, mean that the double tradition material in Matthew and Luke is thereby necessarily unhistorical but, rather, that the easy guarantee of pre-Matthean, pre-Lukan content is no longer present.

embarrassment is also often invoked here,²³ the double attestation of Mark and Q is regularly given as a sign that the story has some pedigree.²⁴

| <i>Matt 3:16–17</i> | <i>Mark 1:9b–11</i> | <i>Luke 3:21–22</i> |
|---|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <u>βαπτισθεὶς</u> δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς | καὶ ἐβαπτίσθη εἰς τὸν | Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῷ |
| εὐθύς ἀνέβη ἀπὸ | Ἰορδάνην ὑπὸ Ἰωάννου. ¹⁰ | βαπτισθῆναι ἅπαντα τὸν |
| τοῦ ὕδατος· καὶ ἰδοὺ | καὶ εὐθύς ἀναβαίνων ἐκ | λαοῦ καὶ Ἰησοῦ |
| | τοῦ ὕδατος εἶδεν | <u>βαπτισθέντος</u> καὶ |
| | | προσευχομένου |
| <u>ἠνεώχθησαν</u> οἱ οὐρανοί, | σχιζομένους τοὺς οὐρανοὺς | <u>ἀνεωχθῆναι</u> τὸν οὐρανὸν |
| καὶ εἶδεν | καὶ τὸ | ²² καὶ καταβῆναι τὸ |
| πνεῦμα θεοῦ καταβαῖνον | πνεῦμα | πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον σωματικῶ |
| ὡσεὶ περιστέρην ἐρχόμενον | ὡς περιστέρην καταβαῖνον | εἶδει ὡς περιστέρην |
| <u>ἐπ’</u> αὐτόν· ¹⁷ καὶ ἰδοὺ φωνή | εἰς αὐτόν· ¹¹ καὶ φωνή | <u>ἐπ’</u> αὐτόν, καὶ φωνὴν |
| ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν λέγουσα· | ἐγένετο ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν· | ἐξ οὐρανοῦ γενέσθαι· |
| Οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱός μου ὁ | Σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱός μου ὁ | Σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱός μου ὁ |
| ἀγαπητός, ἐν ᾧ | ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ | ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ |
| εὐδόκησα. | εὐδόκησα. | εὐδόκησα. |
| And when Jesus | ...and he | And it came to pass that |
| <u>had been baptised,</u> | was baptised in the Jordan | while all the people were |
| | by John. And immediately, | being baptised, Jesus also |
| he arose immediately | having arisen | <u>having been baptised</u> was |
| from the water; and | from the water, | praying, and |
| behold, the heavens | he saw the heavens | the heaven |
| were <u>opened</u> to him; and | torn apart and | was <u>opened</u> and |
| he saw the spirit of God | the spirit as a dove | the holy spirit |
| descending | descending | descended in bodily form |
| like a dove and coming | | as a dove |
| <u>upon</u> him; and behold a | into | <u>upon</u> |
| voice from the | him. And a | him, and there came |
| heavens saying, “This is | voice came from the | a voice from |
| my beloved son, in whom I | heavens, “You are | heaven, “You are |
| am well pleased.” | my beloved son, in whom I | my beloved son, in whom I |
| | am well pleased.” | am well pleased.” |

23. See further on this problem below.

24. See, e.g., Robert L. Webb, “Jesus’ Baptism: Its Historicity and Significance,” in *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus: A Collaborative Exploration of Context and Coherence* (ed. Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb; WUNT 247; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 95–150 (esp. 97–98). Webb sees the tradition as multiply attested because of the allusion to it in John 1:29–34 and the *Gospel of Hebrews 2*, both of which he sees as independent of the Synoptics. John Dominic Crossan also draws attention to multiple attestation in Mark, Q and the *Gospel of Hebrews* and he describes Jesus’ baptism by John as “one of the surest things we know about them both” (*The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Jewish Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991], 234).

The existence of a Q baptism story is inferred on the basis of several agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark, in particular the heaven(s) opening (ἀνοίγω) rather than being “torn apart” (σχίζω) and the Spirit descending “upon” Jesus (ἐπ’ αὐτόν) rather than “into” him (εἰς αὐτόν). Those who argue for the presence of the baptism story in Q regard these agreements as too striking to be put down to independent redaction of Mark by Matthew and Luke, but this is where the difficulty lies. The overlapping of Mark and Q that provides the historical Jesus scholar with double attestation of the story is explicable in several other ways that do not require the postulation of a Q baptism. For Q sceptics, who see a direct link between Matthew and Luke, it is a simple case of Luke preferring elements of Matthew’s redaction of Mark, as often in Luke 3–4 and elsewhere.²⁵ For Q adherents who think that the agreements here are relatively minor and straightforwardly attributed to independent redaction by Matthew and Luke, the Q version vanishes.²⁶ And for those who do place the pericope in Q, there is the troubling issue of the degree of overlap between Mark and Q. Given that the handful of double agreements here are absorbed into a pericope featuring many triple agreements, it is difficult to resist the notion that there must have been some kind of link between Mark and Q. And if there was some kind of link between Mark and Q, then one cannot speak about this as double, independent attestation.

When one reflects on Jesus’ baptism by John synoptically, it is easy to see that it is a problem pericope, and the alleged strength of the double attestation is actually not present. Something that is problematic in terms of synoptic interrelations, the status of which is disputed in the literature, is the basis for a key example of double independent attestation,²⁷ a

25. Goulder, *Luke*, 279–81.

26. Kloppenborg, for example, opposes the notion of a Q baptism, arguing for independent redaction of Mark by Matthew and Luke (*Excavating Q*, 93). See too F. Neiryck, “The Minor Agreements and Q,” in *The Gospel Behind the Gospels: Current Studies on Q* (ed. Ronald A. Piper; NovTSup 75; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 49–72 (esp. 66–67).

27. The difficulty, in part, is the conflict between the general and the particular. Robert Webb, for example, affirms his acceptance of the Two-Source Theory while “aware of the problems with this hypothesis and of the other hypotheses” but then goes on to affirm the attestation of John’s baptism of Jesus in Q without question; see Webb, “John the Baptist and his Relationship to Jesus,” in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans; NTTs 19; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 179–229 (214–15). The baptism pericope is one of the problems with the Q hypothesis, but this is forgotten in the affirmation that Q witnesses to the baptism.

situation that illustrates how precarious the criterion can be. And this is simply an illustration of one Mark–Q overlap passage. Others in the category cause similar difficulties. It is a useful warning that a simple appeal to independent attestation in Mark and Q can mask complexities that should not be ignored.

Q, *Thomas and the First Beatitude*

If there are problems with the appeal to material that is attested in both Mark and Q, it is worth asking about the material attested in both the *Gospel of Thomas* and Q since this forms so major a part of John Dominic Crossan’s use of the criterion. At first sight, the idea of privileging material attested in both *Thomas* and Q might seem to be promising. As Crossan makes clear, both are independent of the Synoptic Gospels, except in so far as Q was later absorbed into Matthew and Luke, and they are independent of one another.²⁸ This ought to be pure gold—inde- pendent, early witnesses to the Jesus tradition. Moreover, their status as “Sayings Gospels” provides the prospect of double, independent witness to early traditions of Jesus’ words.

One of Crossan’s favorite examples of *Thomas*’s independence from the Synoptics,²⁹ also one of his most secure pieces of historical Jesus tradition,³⁰ illustrates the difficulty with the approach. The first beatitude, “Blessed are the poor,” is attested in both Q (Matt 5:3 // Luke 6:20) and *Thomas* (*Gos. Thom.* 54)³¹ and Crossan is clear that the Thomasine ver- sion cannot have been derived from Matthew and Luke. This is a synopsis of the texts in question:

| Matt 5:3 | Luke 6:20 | Thomas 54 |
|--|---|---|
| μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν | μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοί ὅτι ὑμετέρα ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ | ΠΕΧΕΤΟ ΧΕ ΖΠΜΑΚΑΡΙΟC ΠΕ ΝΗΚΕ ΧΕ ΤΩΤΠΙ ΤΕ ΤΗΠΤΕΡΟ ΝΗΠΗΓΕ |

28. See, e.g., Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*, 237–38.

29. John Dominic Crossan, *Four Other Gospels: Shadows on the Contours of Canon* (Minneapolis: Seabury, 1985), 37. See too *Birth of Christianity*, 118.

30. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 270–74. The words “Blessed are the destitute” find a place in Crossan’s Overture as part of the “score to be played and a program to be enacted” (*ibid.*, xiii–xiv).

31. Crossan adds Jas 2:5 so that the saying is “1/3,” first stratum, triply attested (*Historical Jesus*, 270, 437). The status of James in this context is difficult since the saying is not there attributed to Jesus.

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of the heavens | Blessed are the poor for yours is the kingdom of God | Blessed are the poor for yours is the kingdom of the heavens |
|---|--|--|

Crossan suggests that if *Thomas* had been working from the Matthean and Lukan versions,

One would have at least to argue that Thomas (a) took the third person “the poor” from Matthew, then (b) the second person “yours” from Luke, and (c) returned to Matthew for the final “Kingdom of Heaven.” It might be simpler to suggest that Thomas was mentally unstable.³²

In fact, no such procedure would have been required, and the mental stability of the author of *Thomas* need not be in doubt, at least not in relation to this parallel. *Thomas*’s version is very close to Luke’s. Crossan’s point (a) only holds when one is contrasting translations like the RSV of Luke (“Blessed are you poor”) with Lambdin’s translation of *Thomas* (“Blessed are the poor”).³³ It is straightforward to see *Thomas* recounting the Lukan version, adding Matthew’s distinctive “kingdom of heaven” instead of Luke’s “kingdom of God,” a term that never appears in Coptic *Thomas*.³⁴

Indeed, the case for *Thomas*’s independence from the Synoptics is further weakened when one looks at neglected evidence for Luke’s familiarity with Matthew here. Although it is repeatedly stated, as if self-evident, that Matthew “spiritualized” the Q version with the gloss πῶ πνεύματι (“in spirit”), there are strong grounds for considering the alternative, that Luke characteristically redacted Matthew to bring it in line with an agenda often found in Luke. Luke’s Jesus similarly begins his earlier sermon with good news to “the poor” (Luke 4:18); he regularly has examples of eschatological reversal involving rich and poor, from the Magnificat (Luke 1:52–53) to the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31); and he has contextualized his Sermon on the Plain as an address to the voluntarily poor, the disciples (6:20) who have recently left everything to follow Jesus (Luke 5:11 [R], 28 [R]).³⁵

32. Crossan, *Four Other Gospels*, 37.

33. Thomas O. Lambdin, “The Coptic Gospel According to Thomas,” in *Nag Hammadi Codex II*, 2–7 (ed. Bentley Layton; 2 vols.; NHS 20–21, The Coptic Gnostic Library; Leiden: Brill, 1989), 1:52–93.

34. The situation in Greek *Thomas* is different, where “kingdom of God” appears certainly in Logion 27 and probably in Logion 2. See further my *The Case Against Q*, 148–49.

35. See further my *Case Against Q*, Chapter 7, for the argument for Luke’s redaction of Matthew in the first beatitude.

The problem is that the case for the independent attestation of this saying of Jesus is not as secure as it is assumed to be by Crossan.³⁶ Similar points could be made in relation to other examples of double attestation in Q and Thomas. It is a double difficulty. Not only are there question marks over the role that can be played by Q in historical Jesus research, but if Thomas is familiar with the Synoptic Gospels, as a significant number of scholars think,³⁷ its value in the criterion of multiple attestation is compromised.

What About John, M and L?

Similar comments could be made with respect to others of the allegedly independent sources used by practitioners of the criterion. Given the lack of consensus over the question of John's familiarity with the Synoptics, it remains precarious to appeal to the Fourth Gospel as an independent source when using the criterion.³⁸ When the Fourth Gospel's John the Baptist witnesses to the theophany at Jesus' baptism, for example, is this a sign of independent attestation of Jesus' baptism, or does it simply show John's familiarity with the Synoptics or Synoptic-like traditions?³⁹

The situation with M and L is little different.⁴⁰ In spite of the fact that many practitioners of the criterion look for attestation in M and L, our uncertainty about these sources makes this a precarious business. It is worth remembering, for example, that these "sources" are defined as

36. So similarly Funk et al., *The Five Gospels*, 292.

37. For *Thomas's* familiarity with the Synoptics, see Klyne Snodgrass, "The Gospel of Thomas: A Secondary Gospel," *Second Century* 7 (1989–90): 19–38, and Christopher M. Tuckett, "Thomas and the Synoptics," *NovT* 30 (1988): 132–57. See also my *Thomas and the Gospels: The Case for Thomas's Familiarity with the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012). For the case for *Thomas's* autonomy, see Stephen J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* (Foundations and Facets; Sonoma, Calif.: Polebridge, 1993).

38. This does not, of course, mean that John is without value in studying the historical Jesus. There have been recent interesting discussions about the role that John can play in Jesus research, for example in Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just and Tom Thatcher, eds., *John, Jesus, and History* (2 vols.; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007–2009). The difficulty relates to the necessary assumption of independence in the appeal to John in the criterion of multiple attestation.

39. My inclination, given the similarity in wording, is to see Johannine familiarity with the Synoptic tradition. John 1:32, *Τεθέαμαι τὸ πνεῦμα καταβαῖνον ὡς περιστέρην ἐξ οὐρανοῦ, καὶ ἔμεινεν ἐπ' αὐτόν* is close to Matt 3:16 // Mark 1:10 // Luke 3:22, and it shares the Matthean / Lukan (or Q) re-wording *ἐπ' αὐτόν*.

40. See further Eve, "Meier, Miracle and Multiple Attestation," 36–38.

much by what they exclude as what they include. In Streeter's Four-Source Theory, the source M was essentially co-extensive with Special Matthew, L with Special Luke. In an era before redaction-criticism, it made sense to assign practically all the special Matthean material to a source and practically all the special Lukan material to another source. These days, scholars are a little less confident about the inevitability of assigning the special Matthean material to one discrete source and, likewise, the special Lukan material. It is a lack of confidence that should be reflected in historical Jesus scholarship too. After all, a lot of what qualifies as M material bears the stamp of Matthew's style and, at the same time, it often appears embedded in triple tradition material (e.g. Matt 14:28–31, Peter's walking on the water; 16:17–19, commendation of Peter) where it is difficult to tell how far the content is due to the hand of the redactor and how far it is influenced by a discrete, non-Markan source.⁴¹

There is a related problem in looking at L. Sometimes Luke's versions of triple tradition material are sufficiently different from the versions in Mark and Matthew to be assigned to L (Luke 4:16–30, cf. Mark 6:1–6, Rejection at Nazareth; Luke 5:1–11, cf. Mark 1:16–20, Call of the first disciples; Luke 7:36–50, cf. Mark 14:3–9, Anointing in Simon's House), but it is not clear whether Luke is here reliant on a source different from Mark, in which case this would be an additional witness to the traditions in question,⁴² or whether Luke is simply reworking the Markan tradition in characteristic, Lukan fashion.

It is not that the Special Matthean and Special Lukan material is all inevitably secondary and unusable in historical Jesus research. The issue relates specifically to the criterion of multiple, independent attestation. Careful reflection on Matthew and Luke encourages a healthy scepticism over investing M and L with the status of discrete, independent sources.

The Contradiction with the Criterion of Embarrassment

The difficulty with the criterion of multiple attestation does not just relate to the status of the allegedly independent sources. Problems with the criterion become acute when it is used in concert with one of the

41. Cf. my *Synoptic Problem*, 42–45.

42. It is worth reflecting on the fact that two of these pericopae also have variant versions in John, the Anointing (John 12:1–8) and the Call of the disciples (John 21:1–11). But the difficulty of unravelling the relationships between the Gospels and their traditions here further illustrates the difficulty of naively appealing to multiple independent attestation.

other major criteria in historical Jesus research, the criterion of embarrassment.⁴³ It is a strange state of affairs that scholars will simultaneously claim both that a given tradition was “embarrassing” to the early church and that they repeated it on “multiple” occasions.⁴⁴ It is a counter-intuitive combination. The early church is alleged to have repeated, on multiple occasions, traditions that it found “embarrassing.”⁴⁵

The difficulty can be illustrated by returning one last time to a favourite example, the baptism of Jesus by John, which also happens to be a textbook example of the criterion of embarrassment. It is frequently said that this is one of the more historically secure traditions in the Gospels because of the evident “embarrassment” that retelling it would have involved for the evangelists. The embarrassment comes from the possible implication that Jesus required a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of his sins as well as the obvious difficulty that John might appear superior to Jesus, matters that the evangelists tried hard to avoid, subvert and spin.⁴⁶ It certainly appears to be the case that Matthew, with his redactional addition of a conversation between John and Jesus (Matt 3:14–15), and Luke, with his re-setting of the narrative after John’s arrest (Luke 3:19–20), are attempting to mitigate potential concerns that the story might throw up, but that is not the same thing as being “embarrassed” by the tradition. The very prominence given to the story by the evangelists suggests that they did not find it all that embarrassing. Multiple attestation of a tradition should be taken as *prima facie* evidence against embarrassment, and the idea that these criteria can work effectively in concert needs rethinking.

The theory is, of course, that certain traditions about Jesus were so pervasive, so widespread, that the evangelists felt constrained to include them. They may have taken liberties with the tradition, but they would not have omitted anything really important. But this kind of viewpoint is ultimately derived from an old-fashioned, conservative view of the evangelists as archivists rather than authors. It is stuck in the world of form-criticism with only a light overlay of redaction-criticism and little consideration of the creativity that the Gospel writers frequently show.

43. See further Rafael Rodríguez’s essay in the present volume.

44. Cf. DeSilva, *Introduction*, 188. Of ten bullet points offering “Just the Facts,” four of them are established by both “embarrassment” and “multiple attestation”: Nazareth; Jesus as a disciple of John; Jesus as a teacher and healer/exorcist; and crucifixion as a Messianic pretender.

45. I am grateful to W. J. Lyons (“A Prophet is Rejected,” 79) for drawing attention to a blog post I wrote in November 2005 (but had forgotten about) in which I made this point in passing.

46. See Meier, *Marginal*, 1:168–69.

Moreover, it is a view that is contradicted by the data. Since Luke lacks large portions of the triple tradition, we know that he apparently felt little reticence in omitting material that was not congenial. Indeed, one of the standard arguments for Markan Priority draws attention to the material from Mark that is absent from Matthew and Luke, material like the Deaf Mute (Mark 7:31–37) or the Blind Man of Bethsaida (Mark 8:22–26),⁴⁷ which is easily explained on the grounds that Matthew and Luke were embarrassed or uncomfortable about the content, with its gritty, earthy Jesus who uses physical aides in his healing (“Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears. Then he spat and touched the man’s tongue...,” Mark 7:33) and who is not always instantly successful (“I see people, but they look like trees walking around,” Mark 8:24).

Examples like this in fact argue against the use of multiple attestation as a criterion in Jesus research. Matthew’s and Luke’s reluctance to relate Markan material that limits Jesus’ power illustrates the possibility that the same kind of thing sometimes happened in the earliest decades. Unpalatable traditions about Jesus may have had a shorter life-span than traditions that cohered with the tradents’ best expectations. Rather than multiple attestation, it will sometimes be single attestation that points to historicity, those rare nuggets of primitive material that Mark is able to recount before later Christians write their accounts without reference to them.

Reflection on the point illustrates, once again, the advantage of taking the Synoptic Problem seriously in historical Jesus research.⁴⁸ Far too often, historical Jesus scholars do not regard the Synoptic Problem as a live issue, continued critical reflection about which might help in informing the broader historical task. At its best, source criticism, and reflection on the issues involved, can interact strongly with historical Jesus research. It need not be a boring backdrop that one gets out of the way before the really interesting parts of the historical task begin.

47. See my *Case Against Q*, 32–34, and *The Synoptic Problem*, 59–61.

48. The interaction between the Synoptic Problem and historical Jesus research is rarely discussed in the specialist literature. See, however, the recent nuanced treatment offered by Willam E. Arnal, “The Synoptic Problem and the Historical Jesus,” in *New Studies in the Synoptic Problem: Oxford Conference, April 2008: Essays in Honour of Christopher M. Tuckett* (ed. Paul Foster et al.; BETL 239; Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 371–432. See also John S. Kloppenborg, “The Sayings Gospel Q and the Quest of the Historical Jesus,” *HTR* 89 (1996): 307–44, for another honorable exception.

What About Paul?

In spite of the somewhat negative tone of much of this essay, all is not lost. If the attempt to find multiple independent attestation in the Gospels is something of a minefield, it is worth bearing in mind that there might still be one last hope for the criterion in the witness of Paul. No one seriously thinks that Paul is dependent on the Gospels and the cases in favour of the evangelists' familiarity with Paul are at best suggestive.⁴⁹ Here, then, there is the possibility of some genuinely independent tradition about Jesus.⁵⁰

It is well-known that Paul witnesses to many key pieces of biographical data concerning Jesus and that 1 Corinthians is particularly rich in hints for the historian.⁵¹ In Paul's letters, within a generation of the crucifixion, we have a witness to such traditions about Jesus as his descent from David (Rom. 1:3), his brothers (1 Cor 9:5) including James (1 Cor 15:7; Gal 1:18–19; 2:9, 11), the Twelve (1 Cor 15:5) among whom Cephas is prominent (1 Cor 15:4; Gal 1:18–19, etc.), and teaching about divorce (1 Cor 7:10–11), mission (9:14), the eschaton (1 Thess 4:15–18) and the institution of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:23–26).

The paucity of verbatim agreement between Paul and the Gospels on these points is itself a likely indicator of their independence. Moreover, several of these traditions are interesting because they contain information that Paul simply gives away in passing,⁵² information that Paul and his audience already share but which the historian might not otherwise

49. The strongest case that can be made probably relates to Luke's knowledge of 1 Corinthians; see especially Michael Goulder, "Did Luke Know Any of the Pauline Letters?," *Perspectives on Religious Studies* 13 (1986): 97–112.

50. See Sanders and Davies, *Studying*, 323–30. Sanders and Davies are sceptical about multiple attestation because of their scepticism over Q but add, "For the present purposes we shall use only the strongest group of passages under this head: those which are found in one or more gospel accounts and in Paul's letters" (323). On the Pauline witness, note in particular the often neglected contribution by Austin Farrer in *A Study in St Mark* (Westminster: Dacre, 1951), 203–5.

51. See Dale C. Allison, "The Pauline Parallels and the Synoptic Gospels: The Pattern of the Parallels," *NTS* 28 (1982): 1–32 for a helpful discussion of the key passages.

52. This might be called the criterion of "accidental information," universally ignored in discussions of the criteria by historical Jesus scholars, but see Michael Goulder, "Jesus: The Man of Universal Destiny," in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (ed. John Hick; London: SCM, 1977), 48–63: "Paul is trying to tell the Corinthians that Jesus rose from the dead, and he says, 'He appeared to Cephas': he tells us by accident that there was a man known as Cephas, and this is therefore dependable. Detection, both criminal and historical, is largely based on this criterion" (50).

have known. So when Paul says “Have I not got the right to take a believer as wife...as do the brothers of the Lord?” (1 Cor 9:5), Paul provides information *en passant* that Jesus had brothers (cf. Mark 6:3), and, what’s more, that Jesus’ brothers were married. His point is not to convey this information; he is not narrating this information, or making it available afresh to readers who previously knew nothing of it. Rather, it is shared information that Paul can take for granted, but which gets conveyed, to the historian, while he is relating other information as part of an argument.

This is not to argue for the replacement of one criterion (multiple attestation) by another (accidental information), but to suggest, rather, that crude, ham-fisted application of criteria was never likely to yield reliable results in the quest of the historical Jesus. At their best, the criteria should only have been about introducing new students to the historical task, providing inspiration about the way that historical Jesus research should proceed. They should never have been about the attempt to serve up rigid data with a degree of certainty. Where the criterion of multiple attestation has value, it is in illustrating the historian’s necessary preference for two sources rather than one, and for explaining the importance of independent witnesses to early traditions. Beyond the generality, though, it has the potential to be highly misleading, to encourage an unrealistic and old-fashioned expectation that the Gospels are made up of a variety of independent, self-contained sources that were collected together by docile redactors, or to hope that late, non-canonical sources embed early, independent sayings and traditions. The best historical research certainly involves the use of the imagination but it also involves the constraints of a reluctant scepticism, the recognition that however much we may wish for multiple independent sources and traditions, we have to settle for the materials we have and to do our best with them.