

# *The Synoptic Problem in Sixteenth-Century Protestantism*

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*This article examines early Protestant discussion of the historic puzzle in New Testament study known as the Synoptic Problem, which deals with the potential literary relationship between the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. The subject was addressed by John Calvin, pioneer Reformer, and by the early Lutheran Martin Chemnitz. Calvin made a puissant contribution by constructing the first three-column Gospel harmony. Chemnitz contributed nascent redaction-critical assessments of Matthew's use of Mark. Thus, far from simply being a concern to post-Enlightenment critics (as is often assumed), interest in the Gospel sources was present from the earliest days of the Reformation.*

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The amount of common material, and often verbatim agreement, in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) presents a puzzle that defies a simple explanation. The Synoptic Problem deals with the study of the potential literary relationship behind the Synoptic Gospels, specifically whether one Gospel writer made use of another's work, or if authors used a common source. Most modern New Testament scholars consider the Synoptic Problem to be the product of Enlightenment changes in approaches to Scripture, and thus the history of discussion of the Synoptic Problem normally begins in eighteenth-century Germany.<sup>1</sup> While it is clear that the work of eighteenth-century theologians paved the way for critical considerations of biblical scholars with regards to the sources of the Gospel writers,<sup>2</sup> the Synoptic Problem was of interest in

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Theodor Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. J. M. Trout, Edinburgh 1909, ii. 403–5; William Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem: a critical analysis*, New York, 1964, 1–34; and D. L. Dungan, *A history of the Synoptic Problem: the canon, the text, the composition, and the interpretation of the Gospels*, New Haven 1999, 302–10. All these authors consider investigation into the Synoptic Problem to have been formulated by eighteenth-century scholars.

<sup>2</sup> That is, the rise of 'source criticism' of the Gospels (critical investigation to discover where the Gospel writers got their information) was enabled by the dramatic shift in

the early days of the Reformation, long before higher criticism was developed. The purpose of this article is to consider contributions to the study of the Synoptic Problem made in the sixteenth century by John Calvin and Martin Chemnitz, both foundational leaders in the Reformation.

*John Calvin: using parallel columns to compare the Synoptic Gospels*

Of all the immense volumes that Calvin produced, he addressed the inter-related nature of the Synoptic Gospels in only one, his *Commentary on the harmony of the first three Gospels*.<sup>3</sup> While the attempt to produce a harmony of the Gospels was far from novel in Calvin's day, he was the first to offer parallel columns to compare the three Synoptic Gospels but without including the Gospel of John. Calvin commented that for an interpreter properly to consider a synoptic passage, a comparison with the other two Synoptic Gospels must be made, and that his parallel columns would allow the reader to see 'one unbroken chain, [even as] a single picture ... the resemblance or diversity that exists'.<sup>4</sup> Calvin's method stood in stark contrast to that of his fellow Protestant, Andreas Osiander, who had published a harmony only thirteen years previously.<sup>5</sup> Osiander's harmony was a laboured volume based on the assumption that each evangelist kept chronological order. Thus, Osiander separated events in Christ's life if any details, whether in chronology or information, varied in the slightest from one Gospel to the next. Thus, Christ experienced three temptations, cleansed the temple three times etc. Calvin rejected such an approach, and even mentioned Osiander's strange method in his commentary on the healing of the blind man (men) in Matthew xx.29–34, Mark x.46–52 and Luke xvii.35–43. Osiander handled the differing accounts by positing that there were four blind men healed on different occasions. Calvin remarked of Osiander's explanation that, though it was clever, 'nothing can be more frivolous than this supposition'.<sup>6</sup>

assumptions about the Bible by theologians in Germany such as J. F. W. Jerusalem, J. S. Semler and J. D. Michaelis. See William Baird, *History of New Testament research: from Deism to Tübingen*, Minneapolis 1992, i. 116–54.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Commentarii in harmoniam ex tribus evangelistis*, Paris 1551. Latin quotations are from the 1667 Amsterdam edition: *Commentarii in quatuor evangelistas*, Amsterdam 1667.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, *Commentary on a harmony of the evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, i, trans. William Pringle, Edinburgh 1845, repr. Grand Rapids 2003, 18; 'continua serie velut in una tabula ... quid simile habeant vel diversum': *Commentarii, argumentum*.

<sup>5</sup> Andreas Osiander, *Harmonia evangelica*, Basle 1537.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Commentary*, ii, 428; 'Atqui ejus commento nihil est magis frivolum': *Commentarii*, 230.

Instead of separating similar synoptic accounts, as Osiander had done, or merging them into one, Calvin preferred to leave them side-by-side in his harmony. He did not explain why he chose not to include a column for the Gospel of John, although from his earlier comments, in the *dedicatory* before the commentary, he stated his desire to honour ‘Christ riding magnificently in his royal chariot drawn by four horses’.<sup>7</sup> Whatever his reason for omitting John from his harmony, it was not because he considered it to be a contradictory witness to the others. Although the eighteenth-century scholar J. J. Griesbach popularised the term ‘synopsis’ to denote his parallel comparison of the Synoptic Gospels,<sup>8</sup> Calvin produced a three-parallel-column harmony over two centuries earlier for the purpose of analysing the similarities and differences. However, while Calvin’s Latin harmony allowed for a side-by-side comparison of the Synoptics, it did not allow the reader to compare in minute detail the verbal coincidences in Greek that Griesbach’s synopsis afforded. For modern New Testament studies, a Gospel synopsis is a standard tool for investigating the Synoptics.

Though Calvin’s parallel comparison of the Synoptic Gospels may potentially have inspired Griesbach’s three-column synopsis, the two scholars held divergent opinions on the Synoptic Problem. In the *argumentum* to his *Commentary on the harmony of the Gospels*, Calvin, like most interpreters before him, was not terribly concerned with the sources of the Gospels beyond the traditional explanations. He noted that Matthew’s first-hand experience as an Apostle was well documented and sufficient to inform his Gospel. Similarly, Mark most likely received his information from Peter, another Apostle and eyewitness. However, Mark’s source of information was of little importance because Mark’s pen was guided by the Holy Spirit. Calvin then offered some revealing remarks:

<sup>7</sup> *Idem*, *Commentary*, i. 13; ‘Christum regiis suis quadrigis vectum magnifice’: *Commentarii*, *dedicatory*.

<sup>8</sup> J. J. Griesbach, *Libri historici Novi Testamenti Graecae: pars prior, sistens synopsis Evangeliorum Matthaei, Marci et Lucae*, Halle 1774, and *Synopsis evangeliorum Matthaei Marci et Lucae una cum iis Joannis pericopis quae omnino cum caeterorum Evangelistarum narrationibus conferendae sunt*, Halle 1776. Griesbach and the English clergyman Henry Owen are both credited with proposing the two-Gospel hypothesis, which posits that Matthew wrote first, Luke then made use of Matthew’s Gospel, and that Mark made use of both. See also F. W. Farrar, *The Gospel according to St. Luke*, London 1891, 8 at n. 1, where Farrar cited a use of the term ‘synopsis’ ‘as applied to a tabular view of the first three Gospels’ by Georg Sigelii almost two centuries before Griesbach. Farrar was referring to M. Georg Sigelii, *Synopsis historiae Iesu Christi, quemadmodum eam S. Matthaeus, Marcus, Lucas descripsere in forma tabulae proposita*, Nuremberg 1583. It is not clear whether Sigelii coined the term, nor if his *Synopsis* influenced Griesbach. Sigelii’s *Synopsis* is apparently no longer extant.

There is no ground whatever for the statement of Jerome,<sup>9</sup> that [Mark's] Gospel is an abridgment of the Gospel by Matthew. He does not everywhere adhere to the order which Matthew observed, and from the very commencement handles the subjects in a different manner. Some things, too, are related by him which the other had omitted, and his narrative of the same event is sometimes more detailed. It is more probable, in my opinion – and the nature of the case warrants the conjecture – that he had not seen Matthew's book when he wrote his own; so far is he from having expressly intended to make an abridgment. I have the same observation to make respecting Luke ... so under this diversity in the manner of writing the Holy Spirit suggested to them an astonishing harmony, which would almost be sufficient of itself to secure credit to them, if there were not other and stronger evidences to support their authority.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, Calvin argued that the synoptic evangelists worked independently of one another, and that the Holy Spirit was the source of their agreements as well as their differences. This solution to the Synoptic Problem would later be termed the 'independence hypothesis'. Calvin did not offer a fuller explanation, but contented himself and his readers with the advice that, on the subject of the evangelists' sources, 'we need not give ourselves much trouble'.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the remainder of *Harmony*, Calvin failed to revisit the sources behind the synoptics. However, he was not the only early orthodox Protestant biblical scholar to offer a solution to the Synoptic Problem in the sixteenth century. If Calvinism's earliest proponent of a solution to the Synoptic Problem could be considered an advocate of the independence hypothesis, Lutheranism offered the first scholar to champion the Augustinian hypothesis.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Calvin apparently misattributed to Jerome Augustine's statement that Mark was Matthew's abbreviator: Dungan, *A history of the Synoptic Problem*, 182.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin, *Commentary*, i. 17; 'Quod tamen dicit Hieronymus, ratione prorsus caret, epitomen esse Evangelii a Matthaeo scripti. Nam neque servatum a Matthaeo ordinem ubique sequitur, et ab ipso statim initio dissimilis est quantum ad tractandi rationem, et quaedam refert ab altero illo ommissa, et in eiusdem rei narratione interdum prolixior est. Mihi certe magis probabile est, et ex re etiam ipsa conicere licet, nunquam librum Matthaei fuisse ab eo inspectum, quum ipse suum scriberet: tantum abest, ut in compendium ex professo redigere voluerit. Idem et de Luca iudicium facio ... ita Spiritus sanctus in diversa scribendi forma mirabilem illis consensum suggestit, qui solus fere ad fidem illis astruendam sufficeret, si non aliunde maior suppeteret auctoritas': *Commentarii, argumentum*.

<sup>11</sup> Idem, *Commentary*, i. 17; 'non est anxie nobis laborandum': *Commentarii, argumentum*.

<sup>12</sup> So named because it was first proposed by Augustine in the fourth century CE in his Gospel harmony, *De consensu evangelistarum* 1.2.4. The Augustinian hypothesis attributes Mark with having used Matthew's Gospel in composing his own. It also proposes that the order in which the Gospels were written is the traditional canonical order: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John.

*Martin Chemnitz (1522–86): nascent redaction criticism*

Martin Chemnitz studied at the feet of Martin Luther and Philipp Melancthon from 1545 to 1547, at Wittenberg, where he would later serve as faculty member from 1554 until his death. Chemnitz was intimately involved with the development of Lutheranism, as demonstrated by his extensive publications on church government, theology and devotional literature,<sup>13</sup> as well as his formative role in constructing the *Formula of Concord* in 1577 and the *Book of Concord* in 1580, seminal documents outlining Lutheran doctrine.<sup>14</sup> It is not an overstatement to describe Chemnitz not as simply an orthodox Lutheran of the sixteenth century, but as one who defined that orthodoxy at that time.<sup>15</sup> As early as 1673, it was said that ‘if the second Martin [Chemnitz] had not come along the first Martin [Luther] would not remain’.<sup>16</sup>

From Chemnitz’s extensive list of publications it is his *Harmony of the Gospels* that is of interest for the Synoptic Problem.<sup>17</sup> Chemnitz was only able to finish the first volume before his death; the remaining two were taken up by Polykarp Leyser and Johann Gerhard. Even so, Chemnitz’s own volume was not published until 1593, some seven years after his death, and ended with the description of the ministry of John the Baptist in Matt. iii, Mark i and Luke iii.

In the lengthy *prolegomena* to his *Harmony*, Chemnitz explained his views on the Gospels. He relied upon statements of two predecessors, one modern (Jean Gerson) and one ancient (John Chrysostom). Though the Gospels contain no contradictions, quoting Gerson, Chemnitz suggested that they do have a ‘very harmonious disharmony’ in which the Spirit ‘was pleased to stir up the minds of the faithful to a more humble and more watchful investigation of the truth’.<sup>18</sup> Like Chrysostom, Chemnitz

<sup>13</sup> For a complete bibliography of Chemnitz’s works see D. Georg Williams, ‘The works of Martin Chemnitz: a bibliography of titles, editions, and printings’, *Concordia Theological Quarterly* xlii (1978), 103–14.

<sup>14</sup> Carter Lindberg, *The Reformation theologians: an introduction to theology in the early modern period*, Oxford 2002, 140–2.

<sup>15</sup> Chemnitz believed that the authority of the Scriptures came from the fact that the biblical writers were all especially equipped by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and approved by the Church: *Examen Concilii Tridentini*, Leipzig 1565–73, i. 85. See also H. F. F. Schmid, *The doctrinal theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Philadelphia 1876, 103–4.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Si Alter Martinus non venisset, prior Martinus non stetisset’: Theophilus Spizel, *Templum Honoris Reseratum*, Augsburg 1673, 399.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *Harmoniae Evangelicae* (1593). Latin quotations are from the 1628 Amsterdam edition; English quotations are from *The harmony of the four evangelists*, trans. Richard J. Dinda, Malone, Tx 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Chemnitz, *Harmony*, 13. Jean Gerson composed his Gospel harmony, the *Monotessaron*, in 1420. Quotations here are from the 1728 Antwerp *Opera omnia*, 91,

felt that the minor differences in the Gospels reflected the fact that the four evangelists did not conspire ('non mutua conspiratione') but were led by divine inspiration ('sed divine inspiratione').<sup>19</sup>

However, Chemnitz posited that it was appropriate to seek to reconcile the narratives in a Gospel harmony for reasons which can be assigned to three categories:<sup>20</sup>

**Apologetic:** 'To crush the false charges of the wicked' ('retundendas igitur impiorum calumnias'), and therefore, to deliver the 'devout' ('piis') from those who are 'overly-anxious' ('scrupulos').<sup>21</sup>

**Devotional:** To offer a 'pleasant help for the memory' ('iucundum memoriae subsidium') and 'very sweet encouragements' ('incitamenta suavissima') for 'devout meditations on the life and office of Jesus' ('pias meditationes vitae & officii Jesu').<sup>22</sup> Chemnitz could claim this result because of his previous personal experience with a Gospel harmony which he had privately constructed, one that allowed him to memorise the life of Christ and 'carry it about in [his] mind' ('mente circumferre').<sup>23</sup>

**Biographical/historical:** To better comprehend in completeness 'how Christ passed over the entire world' ('quomodum Christus totum terra') in his ministry by 'investigating and observing the order of history' ('historiae investigetur & observetur').<sup>24</sup>

While not neglecting harmonies already published – Chemnitz discussed the Harmonies of Tatian (c. 170 CE), Ammonius of Alexandria (c. 230 CE), Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 320 CE), Augustine (c. 400 CE), Victor of Capua (c. 450 CE), Peter Comestor (c. 1160), Ludolph the Carthusian (c. 1300), Jean Gerson (1420) and Andreas Osiander (1537) – Chemnitz sought to follow Augustine's method, which was to be preferred over that of Osiander. Osiander, of course, approached his harmony by assuming

where he wrote that 'The four Evangelists have spoken, not by mutual conspiracy, but by divine inspiration', providing a 'harmonious dissonance' ('quatuor Evangelistas, non mutua conspiratione, sed divina inspiratione fuisse locutos... concordissima dissonantia').

<sup>19</sup> Chemnitz, *Harmony*, 5; *Harmoniae* i.1.1. Chrysostom, in the first of his *Homilies on Matthew* (late third–early fourth century CE), stated that the evangelists wrote 'not at the same times, nor in the same places, neither after having met together, and conversed one with another ... [T]he discordance which seems to exist in little matters delivers them from all suspicion': quoted in Phillip Schaff (ed.), *A select library of ante-Nicene and post-Nicene Church Fathers*, x, New York 1888, 3.

<sup>20</sup> This summary of Chemnitz's motivations is adapted from H.J. De Jonge, 'Sixteenth-century Gospel harmonies: Chemnitz and Mercator', in *Theorie et pratique de l'exegese*, Geneva 1990, 155–66. <sup>21</sup> Chemnitz, *Harmony*, 3; *Harmoniae* i.1.2. <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Idem*, *Harmony*, 6; *Harmoniae* i.1.2.

<sup>24</sup> *Idem*, *Harmony*, 3–4; *Harmoniae* i.1.2.

that each evangelist kept chronological order, so that even almost identical *pericopae* were deemed to describe different events if they were arranged differently. As Chemnitz remarked, Osiander's plan seemed to be suitable because it preserved each evangelist's order. There was, however, one major weakness to this method, that Osiander was 'forced to make into different episodes that which (by the consensus of all antiquity and by the circumstances bearing obvious witness of this) are the same episodes in different evangelists and to separate them by a long interval of time'.<sup>25</sup> Although Osiander maintained that his arrangement could be explained by the fact that Christ repeated the same words at different times, Chemnitz judged that his comparison 'nearly perishes' ('ferme perit') by its implausibility.<sup>26</sup>

Chemnitz rejected this approach, and instead agreed with Augustine<sup>27</sup> that no single evangelist maintained strict chronological order, though there was a general sequence. The job of the harmonist was to take the clues purposely given by the evangelists and reconstruct one continuous narrative, and Chemnitz sought to perform this task in a disciplined way. In the fifth chapter of his *Prolegomena*, Chemnitz provided a list of eighteen rules that guided his decisions *vis-à-vis* determining the true chronological order. Providing the entire list of rules here would be beyond the scope of this article, but it suffices to note that Chemnitz believed that there was almost always a way to deduce the correct chronological order. He did this by looking at the verbal cues, provided in phrases such as 'in those days' and 'as He was going' etc., to determine which evangelist was most specific at any given point, and by allowing that when two evangelists agreed on a context apart from the third, the context of the two would be given preference.<sup>28</sup> Although he applied this latter principle only to

<sup>25</sup> Idem, *Harmony*, 14. 'Quod historias, quae consensu totius antiquitatis, & circumstantiis hoc manifeste testantibus apud diversos Evangelistas eodem sunt, ipse cogitur alias seu diversas facere, & longo temporis intervallo divellere': *Harmoniae* i.3.7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> *De consensu* ii.21.51. There, Augustine wrote that 'For of what consequence is it in what place any of [the evangelists] may give his account; or what difference does it make whether he inserts the matter in its proper order, or brings in at a particular point what was previously omitted, or mentions at an earlier stage what really happened at a later, provided only that he contradicts neither himself nor a second writer in the narrative of the same facts or of others? For as it is not in one's own power, however admirable and trustworthy may be the knowledge he has once obtained of the facts, to determine the order in which he will recall them to memory (for the way in which one thing comes into a person's mind before or after another is something which proceeds not as we will, but simply as it is given to us), it is reasonable enough to suppose that each of the evangelists believed it to have been his duty to relate what he had to relate in that order in which it had pleased God to suggest to his recollection the matters he was engaged in recording. At least this might hold good in the case of those incidents with regard to which the question of order, whether it were this or that, detracted nothing from evangelical authority and truth': *The works of Aurelius Augustine*, ed. Marcus Dods, viii, Edinburgh 1873, 254–5.

<sup>28</sup> Chemnitz, *Harmony*, 35.

chronology, Chemnitz recognised that ‘multiple attestation’ was a good criterion for determining the authenticity of the actual timing of the events recorded.<sup>29</sup> His concern was not to be sceptical of the accounts; but he expressed the more positive conviction that when two evangelists agreed on timing and sequence, then there was a good indication that the genuine order was intended. Chemnitz believed that by his strict method almost all of the differences between the Gospels could be reconciled, but he also admitted that there were times when his reckoning of events was only probable, and even rare occasions when his eighteen rules were unable to provide clarity.<sup>30</sup>

### *Chemnitz’s solution to the Synoptic Problem*

Chemnitz assumed that a chronological sequence of Gospel events could be constructed because each evangelist worked with knowledge of the Gospels that preceded his. Matthew wrote first with a ‘very special reckoning of matters’ in which the order of events was sometimes specific. Chemnitz then explained the origin of the other Gospels:

We conclude this quite clearly because (according to the opinion of Epiphanius and Augustine) those among the evangelists who wrote after the others both saw and read the writings of the others (as Luke confesses concerning himself in the preface and as the history of the Church bears witness regarding John).<sup>31</sup>

Chemnitz considered that these two early Church Fathers, Augustine and Epiphanius,<sup>32</sup> had believed in a dependency hypothesis and used them to justify his own conclusions. Mark’s reason for writing was to reveal ‘the order of things done in the narrations of Matthew’.<sup>33</sup> Further, Luke wrote to ‘arrange his Gospel account in greater detail and put it together in some sort of formal arrangement’.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> The criterion of multiple attestation was developed in the twentieth century by New Testament scholars to help to determine whether material in the Gospels had historical validity. Although it is not used in isolation, the criterion assumes that the more sources which include common material the more credence should be attributed to that account. See, further, Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and his contemporaries: comparative studies*, Leiden 1995, 15–17.

<sup>30</sup> Chemnitz, *Harmony*, 37.  
<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 4. ‘Et manifestius hoc inde colligitur, cum, juxta Epiphanius et Augustini sententiam, inter evangelistas illi, qui post alios scripserunt, priorum scripta et viderint et legerint: sicut Lucas de se in praefatione profitetur, & de Johanne Ecclesiastica historia testatur’: *Harmoniae* x.1, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Although he did not specify the location, Chemnitz’s mention of Epiphanius was apparently based on his reading of *Panarion haereses* 51.6.10–13, where Epiphanius stated that Mark came after Matthew, and that Luke came after both.

<sup>33</sup> Chemnitz, *Harmony*, 4; ‘in narrationibus Matthaei ordinem’: *Harmoniae* i.1.3.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid; ‘altius historiam Evangelicam ordiatur, & ordine quodam illam contextat’: *Harmoniae* i.1.3.



Chemnitz began the harmony with Luke's preface and concluded that, in verses 1 and 4, Luke admitted to knowing the Gospels of Matthew and Mark:

Moreover, one can also take these words to refer to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, which were published before the writing of Luke, for ἐπεχείρησαν – 'to take in hand' – does not mean a vain attempt but means literally to set one's hand to a job ... For if this were to mean the false evangelists, he would simply say: 'Because many have written in an untrustworthy manner, it seemed good to me ...' But now he says: 'It seemed good to me also ...,' and lists himself with those who first dealt with this subject matter.<sup>35</sup>

Chemnitz used Luke's preface to show that when an evangelist incorporated the material of his predecessors it added to the trustworthiness of those Gospels. He stated that when he and his readers assumed that Luke was speaking of Matthew and Mark as the 'many' of Luke i.1, 'we canonize the writings of the prior evangelists'.<sup>36</sup> Luke's knowledge of Matthew and Mark validated both Gospels as apostolic and eyewitness testimony. This conclusion was predicated on a positive interpretation of Luke's language that did not disparage the 'many' who had undertaken to write prior Gospels.

To be able to construct a single continuous story from four separate accounts required combining the verbiage of all of them. But how could this be done in such a way that none of the individual evangelists' voices were lost? Chemnitz devised a scheme that used letters of the alphabet to denote the various permutations of arrangements of Gospel texts. They were:

(a) denotes the words of Matthew; (b) denotes the words of Mark; (c) denotes the words of Luke; (e) denotes the words of Matthew and Mark; (f) denotes the words of Matthew and Luke; (h) denotes the words of Mark and Luke; (l) denotes the words of Matthew, Mark and Luke.<sup>37</sup>

Letter (f) is akin to 'double tradition' in modern terminology, and (l) corresponds to 'triple tradition'.<sup>38</sup> The use of letters to denote the material of

<sup>35</sup> Idem, *Harmony*, 64. 'Possunt vero etiam haec verba intelligi de Matthaei & Marci libris Evangelicis, ante Lucae scriptionem editis ἐπεχείρησαν enim non significat vanum conatum: sed ad verbum significat, manum operi admovere... Si enim pseudoevangelistas intelligeret, simpliciter diceret: Quoniam multi infideliter scripserunt, visum est mihi. Iam veto dicit [visum est mihi] annumerans se illis, qui prius hoc argumentum tractarunt': *Harmoniae* i.1.3.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 'canonizantur priorum Evangelistarum scripta': *Harmoniae* i.1.3

<sup>37</sup> Idem, *Harmony*, 12.

<sup>38</sup> These are terms used by New Testament scholars to refer to material common to Matthew and Luke but not Mark (double tradition), and common to all three Synoptic Gospels (triple tradition). Many New Testament scholars think that the presence of a large amount of double tradition is evidence for the hypothetical Q document. See

the evangelists had already been done by Jean Gerson, though his system used (M) for Matthew, (R) for Mark, (L) for Luke and (J) for John, but failed further to distinguish the material.<sup>39</sup> Chemnitz's ingenious method allowed him to unify the accounts, yet keep them distinctive.

*Chemnitz's nascent redaction criticism*<sup>40</sup>

By constructing a harmony that combined all of the synoptic accounts and, at the same time, preserved the wording of each evangelist, the additions and omissions of the subsequent evangelists were brought into sharp contrast. Though Chemnitz's general tendency to reconcile discrepancies was to use traditional harmonisational methods, on at least two occasions he offered what might be described as a nascent form of redaction criticism. The first occurred in his handling of the introduction to Mark's Gospel (Mk i.1), which Chemnitz placed after Matt. i–ii and Luke i–ii. Chemnitz posited that Mark chose to begin his Gospel by calling Jesus Christ 'the son of God' to prevent misuse of Matthew's Gospel:

You see, because Matthew had shown in great detail that Christ was the Son of David, Mark calls him 'the Son of God' at the very beginning to show that ... people are not preaching the Gospel properly if they are not preaching Christ simultaneously as the Son of David and the Son of God.<sup>41</sup>

The notion that one evangelist might provide what another lacked was not original to Chemnitz,<sup>42</sup> but his explanation of Mark's motive was new. Mark, having read Matthew, knew that preachers might misinterpret Matthew and thus sought to correct potential problems. To achieve this purpose, Mark began his narrative by proclaiming Jesus as 'the Son of God' from the outset.

Edwin K. Broadhead, 'The extent of the sayings tradition (Q)', in Andreas Lindemann (ed.), *The sayings source Q and the historical Jesus*, Leuven 2001, 719–28.

<sup>39</sup> See Gerson, *Monotessaron, proemium*, 93–100.

<sup>40</sup> Redaction criticism refers to the practice, developed in the twentieth century by New Testament scholars, of positing editorial changes made by a Gospel writer to source material, and reasons for those changes: Gail P. C. Streete, 'Redaction criticism', in Stephen R. Haynes and Steven L. McKenzie (eds), *To each its own meaning: an introduction to biblical criticisms and their application*, Louisville, KY 1993, 105–24.

<sup>41</sup> Chemnitz, *Harmony*, 264; 'Quia enim Matthaeus multis ostenderit, Christum esse filium Davidus: Marcum statim in principio vocat Dei filium, ut ostendat ... Et Evangelium non recte annunciati, si Christus non simul & Davidus & Dei filius praedicetur': *Harmoniae* i.16.151.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Chemnitz's citation of Clement's description of John's Gospel from Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* vi.14.7.

The second place where Chemnitz appeared to use a redaction-critical approach was in his comments on the preaching of John the Baptist. Chemnitz's harmony had the following account:

(a) When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his Baptism, he said to them (c) and to the crowds which were coming out to receive his baptism: (f) 'O generation of vipers, who has warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore produce fruits worthy of repentance. And (a) do not be of this mind (c) that you begin (f) to say within yourselves: "We have Abraham as our father."' <sup>43</sup>

As is clear in Chemnitz's harmonised text, Matthew's account has the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to John, while Luke includes crowds coming to be baptised. Likewise, Matthew and Luke give slightly different wording to John's instructions, so that Chemnitz quoted 'do not be of this mind' from Matthew (Matt. iii.9) and added 'that you begin' from Luke (Luke iii.8). He then quoted from both, 'to say within yourselves'. But why did the evangelists attribute slightly different words to John the Baptist? Chemnitz explained:

Those variations that Luke has the verb 'ἄρξῆσθε – begin' and Matthew, 'δόξητε – suppose' are not insignificant. When a word of repentance is set before a human mind, and when fruits are demanded thereof, it begins to look for various escape routes of pretexts, grabbing first at this, and next at that. Luke therefore says: 'Do not even begin to say'; that is, do not grab at this escape route that you wish to oppose this to the word of repentance. <sup>44</sup>

According to Chemnitz, Luke (iii.8) used ἄρξῆσθε instead of Matthew's (iii.9) δόξητε to remove the potential escape route that an interpreter might take by using Matthew's words to justify the lack of repentance. One can easily see how the combination of letters in Chemnitz's scheme – (a) – (c) – (f) – (a) – (c) – (f) – might cause Chemnitz to see a pattern provided by Luke, a pattern which could lead to the conclusion that Luke was careful to adapt Matthew's wording in order to correct a potential misuse of Matthew's record. Indeed, Chemnitz's devotional goals are evident in his observation that the human mind looks for ways to escape repentance, a point he saw in Luke's departure from Matthew's account.

Unfortunately, Chemnitz's volume ends after the account of the Baptist's preaching, and the opinions of Leyser and Gerhard, who composed the later volumes of *Harmony*, concerning the Synoptic Problem are unknown. Chemnitz's *Harmony*, like many of his writings, continued

<sup>43</sup> Chemnitz, *Harmony*, 263.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 286. 'Et variationes illae, quod Lucas habet verbum ἄρξῆσθε Mattheus δόξητε non sunt otiosae. Sed quia mens humana, quando ipsi proponitur concio poenitentiae, & exiguntur fructus, varia pretextuum effugia incipit quaerere, arripiens nunc hoc, nunc illud. Lucas igitur dicit, ne coeperitis dicere, hoc est non arripiatis hoc effugium, ut illud velitis opponere concioni poenitentiae': *Harmoniae* i.16.167.

to have an impact hundreds of years after his death. A half century after its publication, Francis Roberts cited Chemnitz's opinion on Gospel origins in *Clavis bibliorum*.<sup>45</sup> When George Townsend composed his chronological New Testament in 1825, he stated that Chemnitz's 'rules are so valuable' that he adopted them to aid in arranging his harmony.<sup>46</sup> In 1828, in his Gospel harmony, John S. Thompson declared the Chemnitz-Leyser-Gerhard *Harmony* to be 'the most extensive, and probably the most valuable work on the Gospels, that has ever been published'.<sup>47</sup>

While Calvin's brief remarks on the independence of the Gospels writers did not offer a new framework for biblical interpretation, his three-column harmony of the Gospels could be considered the first iteration of the Gospel synopsis, a tool used by biblical critics since the eighteenth century to compare the Gospels in minute detail. His willingness to exempt the Gospel of John from the comparison, as well as the ease with which a parallel column harmony lends itself to critical considerations, could very likely have served as an impetus for later critics. These methodological breaks from the past reveal the sea change underway with regard to Scripture in the early days of the Reformation. Further, Chemnitz's willingness to emphasise in print the differences between the Synoptic Gospels and explain those differences based on authorial redaction reveal a willingness to reconsider the traditional scholastic notion of divine inspiration. While far from being Enlightenment thinkers, early Reformers such as Calvin and Chemnitz demonstrated to the Protestant world the possibilities of new methods and assumptions regarding the Bible.

<sup>45</sup> Francis Roberts, *Clavis bibliorum*, London 1648, 469.

<sup>46</sup> George Townsend, *The New Testament, arranged in chronological and historical order*, Philadelphia 1825, ii. 9.

<sup>47</sup> John S. Thompson, *A Monotessaron, or, The Gospel of Jesus Christ, according to the four Evangelists*, Baltimore 1828, p. iv.