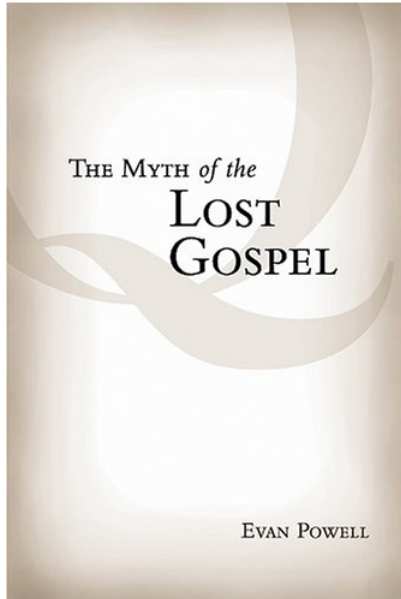


RBL 07/2009



Powell, Evan

The Myth of the Lost Gospel

Las Vegas: Symposium Press, 2006. Pp. 176. Paper.
\$16.00. ISBN 0977048608.

Sarah E. Rollens
University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Evan Powell's *The Myth of the Lost Gospel* examines a relatively unexplored solution to the Synoptic Problem (hereafter, SP) in hopes of further illuminating data for the historical Jesus. His proposal, coined Matthean Posteriority (MtP), maintains that Matthew was the latest of the Synoptic Gospels to be written, using both Mark and Luke as sources. Although this book bears a provocative title, like many solutions to the SP, it is less definitive than it purports to be.

Initially, Powell claims that the scholarly fixation on the Two-Document Hypothesis (2DH), which argues that Matthew and Luke were composed using Mark and a sayings collection known as Q, has deceived scholars into privileging the potential historicity of Q as a primitive sayings Gospel and a source for the historical Jesus. The 2DH and a number of other potential solutions have dominated scholarly dialogue concerning the SP. The only solution not taken seriously as yet is that of MtP. Powell aims to demonstrate that MtP better accounts for the synoptic data than do other solutions, most importantly, the 2DH.

In chapter 1, Powell introduces his theory of MtP, which requires Matthew to be a late composition. Among other things, Matthew's more sophisticated textual arrangement

and theology, as well as the attribution of original apostolic authorship to the Gospel, indicate that Matthew was composed later than Luke. The main thrust of Powell's argument in this chapter, however, is that, although Matthew is shorter in length than Luke, the former contains a greater density of traditions about Jesus, suggesting that Matthew both condenses and conflates Mark and Luke for his composition. To demonstrate this, Powell tallies the frequency of an admittedly arbitrary categorization of traditions, including such things as "the supernatural events," "the ethical teachings," and "Jesus as the Christ." Under the assumption of MtP, it appears that for each category of tradition Matthew consistently expands the material from Luke by 71 to 77 percent, often by incorporating Markan material. For Powell, these statistics are too significant to overlook, leading him to conclude that Matthew consistently builds on Mark and Luke.

In chapter 2, Powell examines Matthew's use of his sources. After observing Matthew's use of Mark, he infers that Matthew would have used Luke similarly. Matthew's redactional techniques evince two main strategies: eliminating unnecessary language and correcting factual and theological errors. Powell believes that, in addition to revising his sources, Matthew was motivated by a political need to align the Christianity of the author's day more closely with Rome. To him, Matthew's consistent redaction of Luke and Mark are more compelling than the 2DH's solution, which requires that Luke have different editorial policies for Mark and Q.

Chapter 3 explores more instances that seem to indicate that Matthew corrects or resolves issues in Mark and Luke. For example, Powell argues that Matthew intentionally alters Luke's representation of Joseph of Arimathea, who, although likely a Pharisee, is only designated in Matthew as a rich man so as not to align Jesus and his followers with the Jews. Powell also addresses how Matthew tries to rationalize Judas's betrayal and how he deals with the allegation of the stolen body in the passion narrative. These changes, Powell contends, are more ideologically and theologically satisfying for Matthew, given its composition near the end of the first century.

Having argued Matthew to evince redactional changes that might indicate that the author was correcting or revising Luke, in chapter 4 Powell asks bluntly whether Matthew knew Luke. The typical argument against Matthew's use of Luke is that they have conflicting genealogies, infancy narratives, and resurrection narratives. These are not particularly compelling for Powell and can be explained by Matthew's theology and preferential treatment of Mark. Matthew's preferential treatment of Mark explains why Matthew rarely agrees with Luke against Mark. When simple explanations of dependence fail, Powell reasons that Matthew had access to oral or other independent traditions. Matthew's awareness of Luke is also evident in his corrective changes to Luke and his apparent conflation of Mark and Luke. Thus, once Matthew's late position is granted,

Powell is able to offer reasonable explanations for how Matthew's created his Gospel from Mark's and Luke's.

Powell examines in chapter 5 Matthew's and Luke's source use on both the 2DH and MtP. Powell finds that on the 2DH, Luke's redactional policies for Mark and for Q are inexplicable. Luke appears to paraphrase Mark while embellishing it with his own more vivid details, but for Q, Luke appears to have copied verbatim large segments of text. Proponents of the 2DH would have to explain why Luke has two disparate attitudes toward his sources. On MtP, however, Matthew frequently copies Mark verbatim and so also might have done with Luke, thus explaining why there is often verbatim agreement in the double tradition (material common to Matthew and Luke but not Mark).

The sixth chapter treats the subject of Q in more detail. Powell rehearses the traditional arguments entailed in the 2DH, and despite the popularity of the hypothesis, he argues that the shortcomings of the theory are too many to be persuasive. These shortcomings include the failure to explain why Matthew often appears to conflate pericopae from Mark and Luke, why Matthew and Luke sometimes have minor agreements against Mark, and why Luke appears to have had differing redactional policies toward Mark and Q on the 2DH. Powell maintains that his theory of MtP can explain these Synoptic data better than the 2DH, especially if one assumes that Matthew was motivated to produce a definitive corrective to Luke's Gospel. The appendix supplements the argument in this chapter by engaging in a brief discussion of statistical variation of verbal agreement in the double tradition.

In the final chapter, Powell revisits the topic of the historical Jesus and explains how his findings impact the quest for the historical Jesus. If his theory of MtP is correct and Q did not exist, then no primitive sayings collection can be thought to go back to Jesus. Furthermore, his theory maintains that Matthew altered Luke for political reasons. What this suggests to him was that the original Jesus movement was an overt political movement that was toned down in the later Synoptic tradition in order to make it more favorable to Rome. Indeed, Powell maintains that, once the illusion of a primitive sayings source is jettisoned, the historical Jesus is shown to advocate an "anti-establishment message" (161). Because of this, Powell goes so far as to suggest that the Gospel of John might be the most historically accurate canonical Gospel.

Powell is correct that MtP has been largely ignored prior to his book. This, however, is for good reason, because the evidence for dating Matthew late is not especially compelling. There is no reason to think that a sophisticated or theologically mature composition could not have occurred at an early date. That Matthew is an even more sophisticated composition than Luke is not universally accepted. On the contrary, scholars such as

Mark Goodacre argue Luke to be the more elegant literary work. Nor should one assume that a later text necessarily would have needed apostolic attribution in order to be taken seriously. Powell's arguments thus frequently rest on qualitative judgments and assumptions about the development of texts that are unfounded.

This analysis demonstrates a common misperception about why scholars posit Q to account for Synoptic data on the 2DH. Q is not, as Powell suggests, the "product of scholarly imaginations working overtime" (11) or a theory that was imposed upon the data with no justification. Rather Q is a *correlation* of the 2DH, which is argued by many to account *best* for the *most* Synoptic data. The 2DH is, moreover, a working hypothesis and admittedly subject to revision.

Most important, however, is that the logic of MtP is problematic. It depends on the premise of Matthew being later than Luke. Once that is granted, the Synoptic dependence that Powell proposes becomes logically possible, and he is able to offer reasonable explanations for how Matthew must have changed Luke. However, the evidence upon which the initial premise is based is questionable, and thus the solution does not follow as neatly as Powell would like.

This study, moreover, is grounded in yet another fixation on uncovering the historical Jesus. Although this is certainly engaging for a less-specialized audience, to whom this book appears to be directed, one should not assume that Synoptic studies always go hand in hand with the quest for the historical Jesus.

At the same time, this study is worth consideration, lest the 2DH or other Synoptic solutions achieve an unquestioned, hegemonic status in the study of early Christianity. Powell's theory is valuable in its ability to account for some particularly vexing Synoptic problems such as the minor agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark and the alternating primitivity in the double tradition. If nothing else, Powell's book reminds us that the SP is just that, a problem with a number of nagging difficulties that still elude the explanatory power of any one solution.