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The Three Gospels: New Testament History Introduced by the Synoptic Problem

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This Ph.D. dissertation completed at the University of Wales Lampeter under D. P. Davies joins the ranks of those scholars who reject the consensus framework on the composition and dating of the Synoptic Gospels. In addition to insisting on apostolic authorship, it presses for an early dating that would see the entire New Testament completed prior to 70 C.E. Since this research is a second career project, its author boasts of undergraduate qualifications in classics and mathematics as proving that he possesses a more logical and historical sensibility than the majority of New Testament scholars working on these topics today. Measured by academic work in theoretical physics, history of science, and classics today, these assertions are not credible. Another standard rhetorical ploy is to castigate even those who advocate alternate views with failure to devote sufficient attention to early twentieth-century scholars such as J. Chapman (1937), G. Edmundson (1913), E. Meyer (1923).

Readers will have to slog through a fair amount of idiosyncratic terminology employed to represent familiar hypotheses about Synoptic relationships and graphical representations that require constant rechecks to figure out. He also conveniently ignores criticisms of the methods or conclusions that he adopts from earlier Roman historians such as R. Syme (1937) on prosopography, which the author simplistically defines as "studying history through its minor characters" (xxii; contrast the article on "Prosopography" in *OCD*[3],

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1996), and Sherwin-White (1960–1961) as having demonstrated that Luke has detailed knowledge of Roman law and administration in the provinces. He cites C. K. Barrett on John (1975) but never Barrett's extensive ICC commentary on Acts (1994–1998) or in defending Pauline authorship for Ephesians to the ICC commentary by E. Best (1998). The author apparently considers references to early German scholars such as Harnack and Meyer to exempt him from considering the work of contemporary German exegetes and classicists.

Setting aside rhetoric and bibliographic deficiencies, Mosse has attempted to forge an alternative theory distinct from other scholars who share his convictions. A preliminary "Terms and Methods" chapter (xxi–xxxii) provides an initial run through for the major methodological items in the various chapters. So the reader knows before setting out that the only "sayings collection" to remain standing is the Aramaic sayings recorded by Matthew. No variant of the Q hypothesis will remain (xxvii). Second, Mosse exhibits an extraordinarily positivistic attitude toward human sources and history. Once he asserts that all sources have human testimony behind them, he presumes that that makes first-generation authorship and historical reliability equivalent (xvii). Modern studies of memory and witness testimony, not to mention the multiple versions we get of contemporary events when participants write their memoirs, should result in a more skeptical approach. Third, readers discover that Mosse engages in his own version of making historical epochs by fixing on particular dates before or after which X cannot have happened. He rightly criticizes a naïve use of the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 C.E. as a *terminus ante quem* for the composition of the Gospels because Jesus could never have predicted it. However, appeals to Churchill and Jung anticipating World War II are irrelevant (xxviii). A number of "historical Jesus" scholars as well as Markan scholars who think that Gospel reflects the turmoil at the beginning of the Jewish War agree on the general point. Eventually an even more problematic assumption that the execution of Christian scapegoats connected to the fire of 64 C.E. represented a definitive, empire-wide change in attitude toward the group is crucial in his early dating arguments (xxix). Such a simplistic presentation should engage with discussions of the fire and the later years of Nero's reign generally by ancient historians (e.g., E. Champlin, *Nero* [2003]).

When the reader learns that Mosse intends to date Matthew's finished Gospel to Palestine between 40 and 50 C.E. (xxxi), she or he may protest that Matthew's depiction of the Jewish community, especially the influence of the Pharisees, does not fit such an early date as well as the later 80 to 90 C.E. of the standard model (so W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel according to Matthew: Introduction and Commentary on Matthew I–VII* [ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988], 126–38). Rather than study their detailed argument, Mosse's critique of Allison refers only to Allison's article on Matthew in the one-volume *Oxford Bible Commentary* (ed. J. Barton and J. M Muddiman, 2001). Of

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course, Mosse requires that Matthew, the tax-collector, both assembled an initial collection of Aramaic sayings as Papias reports and then incorporated it into the basic narrative of Jesus' deeds and passion provided by Mark. So all the detailed study of source and tradition history found in major commentaries on Matthew that provide our picture of Matthew's Jewish context is irrelevant, in his view. On the first page of the preface, Mosse lumps social history in with theology, proudly declaring his innocence of both, "I offer none at all in theology. Hence the reader who expects to find here such matters as social interpretation of the gospels, or comments upon a myriad of topics which currently exercise the theological community, will be disappointed" (xv). Indeed.

The first two chapters take up objections to the Synoptic Problem as it is generally formulated (1–89). Much space is devoted to Mosse's variations on the sort of tables commonly found in such discussions and transformation into graphs of the same observations (48–83, 84–89). He differs from a number of the minority critical of the standard solution in accepting the priority of Mark as a source for both Matthew and Luke. However, Mosse engages in a full-fledged attack on the Q hypothesis that continues into the third chapter (92–101). In his view, "Q is the most successful fallacy in the history of scholarship" (100). In the process, Mosse enlists some bits of information that are important to any modern discussion. Text critics have pointed out that early textual variations can make the readings in particular Gospels quite different from each other. Relying upon the eclectic text of any given synopsis masks such evidence (17–18). Second, any account must reflect the media involved and the process of composition evident in ancient authors. Consulting and combining scrolls in some of the detailed ways often assumed is not plausible (42–43). Third, Q does not fit the "Gospel" category on the assumption that "Gospel" must deal with the passion of Jesus (92). Further, more recent studies that allege to untangle redactional layers in Q are even more problematic (99).

Chapter 4, on the origins of Matthew's Gospel, incorporates Mosse's discussion of the Gospel of Thomas. He agrees that its Synoptic parallels cannot have been derived directly from those Gospels, given the lack of narrative introductions and interpretations connected with many of its sayings (104–6, 129–32). He accepts Papias's testimony that Matthew composed an orderly collection of Jesus' sayings, which contrasts with the lack of order in the Gospel of Thomas (117–18). Since neither Papias nor any of the church fathers know Matthew in anything but the Greek version, Mosse concludes that, while Matthew's Aramaic sayings collection antedates Mark, Matthew composed his Gospel after Mark. Aware that Mark derived his information from Peter, Matthew decided to incorporate his own collection of teaching derived from the chief of the apostles (120–25).

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Chapters 5 and 6 (133–53) include a fair amount of invective against both standard source criticism and conventional dating of the Gospels. Mosse advances a peculiar argument that, since Acts provides no knowledge of the "Q" community, Luke would not have had a source from an unattested group (148). Of course, Mosse has argued that Q never existed. But it is unclear how Mosse is correlating Mark and Matthew with churches represented in Acts. Mosse explains the Matthew and Luke overlap on the assumption that in revising Mark, Luke employs what he remembers from Matthew's Gospel. His reply to the sort of observations that see in the Matthean sermons a more elaborate reworking of shorter, disparate units of material found in Luke is not entirely clear. Text-critical variants of the Lord's Prayer (150) hardly answer all the questions posed by the Sermon on the Mount, let alone the other Matthean discourses.

The polemic in chapter 7 alleging that historians give reliable dates (155–62) ignores both the problems of dating in ancient historical sources where the authors themselves supply chronological notices and the fact that, minus a few exceptions in Luke, the Evangelists do nothing of the sort. Mosse then launches into the more speculative sections of his book, creating an early chronological sequence for the New Testament writings. Chapter 8 (163–181) insists not only that Mark derived his material from Peter in Rome but that he had done so by 45 C.E. In other words, Peter would be associated with the founding of the church there. That appears inconsistent with what little we learn from both Paul and Acts. To fix the conflicts over the chronology of Jesus' ministry between Mark and John, whose author Mosse thinks is the son of Zebedee, Mosse must pull off two hypothetical reconstructions. He must assume that John the son of Zebedee heard Mark and knew that Mark had gotten Jesus' itinerary wrong, starting too late in Jesus' life. So John sets out to fix that. Then he credits John with the correct date for the final supper, a Passover meal celebrated early, concludes that as a cousin of Barnabas, the Levite, Mark was embarrassed at such a lapse and redated it (168–78). Chapter 9 expands on the point that predicting the fall of Jerusalem does not require dating a text after those events (183–96).

Chapter 10 defends the position that Luke was part of Paul's entourage, though Mosse concedes that alleged "medical terminology" said to prove that he was a physician has been invalidated (205). To defend a very early date for Acts (pre-64), Mosse relies on his hypothesis of a major, empire-wide shift in the perception of Christians datable to 64 C.E. and a version of the end of Paul's life that treats Acts 28 as a first imprisonment from which Paul was released (210). Chapters 11 and 12 engage in an elaborate reconstruction of the end of Paul's life in support of the conclusion that Acts was written before either Peter or Paul had been martyred (205–56). Some items in this reconstruction, such as the possibility that 2 Timothy is an authentic letter from Paul's Roman imprisonment and that Paul may have been imprisoned in Rome twice, have a number of contemporary advocates. Mosse departs from the usual reconstructions by insisting that Paul did not go

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West after the first imprisonment but returned to the East. A renewed flare-up of hostilities in Ephesus led to his arrest there and eventual martyrdom in Rome (222). The most fanciful element in this section of the book attributes a second, mystical life-altering experience to Paul while he was imprisoned in Caesarea. Comparable to his original conversion, this vision persuades him that he needs to give up Spain (never God's plan, 234–35, 250) and consolidate affairs in the East (1 Timothy and Titus). Though Paul prophesied incorrectly that he would never see the elders at Ephesus again (Acts 20:23), he rightly noted the emergence of false teachers there (219–22). Mosse concludes that Jerome had correctly dated the martyrdom of Peter and Paul in Rome to Nero's last year (228).

At the point at which Luke concludes Acts, the Evangelist may have imagined that Paul would stand before the emperor. Perhaps he envisaged a show trial in which Paul would triumph (251–52). Instead, Paul was released from that imprisonment without a trial. Such a conclusion, Mosse believes, could only be written prior to the shift in attitudes toward Christians. Once Acts has been provided with what Mosse calls a "robust" date, the rest of the writings fall into place in the two decades between 43 and 63 C.E. (257–75). The Mosse version of a Synoptic relationships chart (274) includes several that have not been clearly argued in the text at all. An Ur-Thomas in Aramaic, Palestine, late 30s; Mark, the Evangelist's presence in Caesarea between 57 and 59 C.E. (to fit Col 4:10, 14) and return to Rome by the time Luke writes Acts there in 62 C.E.; additional eye-witness testimony from Mary and possibly James, Philip, and Peter employed by Luke in composing his Gospel in Rome in 60/61 C.E. are the more striking claims presented in Mosse's chart. He also assumes that the Gospel of the Nazoreans, composed in Aramaic in Palestine circa 60 C.E. was derived from Matthew's Gospel, written in the same region in Greek in the late 40s or early 50s. Additional appendices provide Mosse's dates for an entire New Testament chronology with his ordering of the Pauline epistles. He asserts that Peter established the episcopacy in Antioch and then in Rome circa 55 C.E., a view derived from Edmundson that is not supported by contemporary historians of the Roman communities. Minimally one would expect some indication of Peter's presence there in either Rom 16 or, if Mosse's view that Luke wrote Acts in Rome were adopted, evidence of Peter's Roman presence in Acts.

Whenever our historical sources are fragmentary or without a clearly defined date or social context, scholars create scenarios to fill the gaps based on other kinds of evidence, comparable cultural analogies, and some educated guesses about what may have been the case. The test of a proposal is not in the scaffolding but in the fine details whose significance is revealed once the framework provides a way of viewing the whole. Despite his claim to be a better historian than scholars who operate with the standard model, Mosse depends as much on hypotheses as they do. What the value of a slightly updated

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reversion to a conservative, early twentieth-century view of the Gospels or early church history is remains unclear.

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