

## Plausibility, Probability, and Synoptic Hypotheses A Response to F. Gerald Downing

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This response interacts with Gerald Downing's, *Plausibility, Probability, and Synoptic Hypotheses*, the first article to offer a sustained attempt to show that Matthew's use of Luke (with Markan Priority) is an implausible solution to the Synoptic Problem<sup>1</sup>.

Once Markan Priority is accepted, three main options present themselves: Matthew used Luke, Luke used Matthew, or, Matthew and Luke made independent use of Q. In the course of evaluating the second option scholars have shown that Luke's use of Matthew, as proposed under the Farrer Hypothesis (FH), requires Luke to treat Matthew in ways that are physically and mechanically improbable, and without contemporary precedent<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, when assessing the third option, others have shown that Matthew's and Luke's independent use of Q, as proposed under the Two Document Hypothesis (2DH), requires implausibly high levels of coincidence<sup>3</sup>. Comparable attempts to demonstrate the implausibility of Matthew's use of Luke have, however, been notable by their absence<sup>4</sup>. The need for greater

1. F.G. DOWNING, *Plausibility, Probability, and Synoptic Hypotheses*, in *ETL* 93 (2017) 313-337.

2. The study of ancient compositional practices has been important to this line of argument. For example, F.G. DOWNING, *Compositional Conventions and the Synoptic Problem*, in *JBL* 107 (1988) 69-85; R.A. DERREBACKER, JR., *Ancient Compositional Practices and the Synoptic Problem* (BETL, 186), Leuven, Peeters, 2005; and A. KIRK, *Q in Matthew: Ancient Media, Memory, and Early Scribal Transmissions of the Jesus Tradition* (LNTS, 564), London – New York, Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016.

3. See, for example, M. GOODACRE, *Too Good to Be Q*, in J.C. POIRIER – J. PETERSON (eds.), *Markan Priority without Q: Explorations in the Farrer Hypothesis* (LNTS, 455), London – New York, Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018, 82-100. Also F. WATSON, *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2013, pp. 117-155.

4. The Matthean Posteriority Hypothesis (MPH) receives some critical attention in P. FOSTER, *Is It Possible to Dispense with Q?*, in *NovT* 45 (2003) 313-337. Foster's principle concern is, however, to challenge the FH. Nonetheless, in the latter stages of the article Foster observes that, "[D]espite the strengths of Matthean posteriority in comparison to the Farrer theory, the solution it offers to the synoptic problem is not without difficulties" (p. 336). The difficulties he identifies are: Alternating Primitivity, Matthew's Omissions of additional Lukan material, and Matthew's apparent ignorance of Luke's additions to Mark in the triple tradition. In brief response, the irrelevance of Alternating Primitivity, in relation to the question of direct contact between Matthew and Luke, is demonstrated in A. GARROW, *Streeter's 'Other' Synoptic Solution: The Matthew Conflator Hypothesis*, in *NTS* 62 (2016)

critical evaluation of this option has become increasingly pressing as interest in the case for placing Matthew third (Matt3<sup>rd</sup>) has begun to grow<sup>5</sup>.

Against this background Gerald Downing's *Plausibility, Probability, and Synoptic Hypotheses* is very much to be welcomed. Over several decades Downing has earned respect amongst students of the Synoptic Problem for his pioneering presentations of the compositional practices and techniques of the Evangelists' contemporaries<sup>6</sup>. In consequence, his critique of the case for Matt3<sup>rd</sup> invites careful attention.

At the heart of Downing's response lies the observation that notice must be taken of a contemporary cultural commonplace, namely:

... a widespread insistence precisely on common witness. One may instance Quintilian on the theme at length, Trajan on anonymous accusations, canonical Deuteronomy (Deut 19,15), John 18,17, Josephus expecting Jewish conformity to be acknowledged, even the trial of Jesus in Mark (Mark 14,55-60; Matt 26,59-61). It is in this context that we may also affirm the relevance of a similar wide conviction among the historians of the period: agreed witness is universally to be preferred. On this I previously cited, among others, Tacitus, "Where the authorities are unanimous, I shall follow them"; and Arrian, "Whenever Ptolemy son of Lagus and Aristobulus son of Aristobulus

207-226, pp. 208-209. The problem of Omissions would only be severe if it could be shown that Matthew *must* include some element of Luke that does not appear in Matthew. Foster's last complaint is ironic inasmuch as the so-called Minor Agreements are all occasions where (under the MPH) Matthew appears to demonstrate knowledge of Luke's additions to Mark. Further instances of critical engagement with the MPH include: J. VERHEYDEN, *A Road to Nowhere? A Critical Look at the "Matthean Posteriority" Hypothesis and What It Means for Q*, a paper presented at SBL Atlanta in 2010 but not yet published; and M. GOODACRE, *Why Not Matthew's Use of Luke?* a paper presented at SBL Denver in 2018 but not yet published.

5. A survey of fourteen authors who have advocated Matthew's use of Luke is provided by R.K. MAC EWEN, *Matthean Posteriority: An Exploration of Matthew's Use of Mark and Luke as a Solution to the Synoptic Problem* (LNTS, 501), London – New York, Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018, pp. 6-26. The current wave of interest in this view began with R.V. HUGGINS, *Matthean Posteriority: A Preliminary Proposal*, in *NovT* 34 (1992) 1-22. A similar proposal is offered by E. POWELL, *The Myth of the Lost Gospel*, Las Vegas, NV, Symposium, 2006. Matthew's use of Luke receives a thorough, and positive, examination in MAC EWEN, *Matthean Posteriority*. A closely related hypothesis, in which Matthew used Luke alongside other sources also known to Luke, has been proposed by M. HENGEL, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels*, trans. J. Bowden, Harrisburg, PA, Trinity, 2000; E. AURELIUS, *Gottesvolk und Außenseiter: Eine geheime Beziehung Lukas– Matthäus*, in *NTS* 47 (2001) 428-441; and GARROW, *Streeter's 'Other' Synoptic Solution* (n. 4), and A. GARROW, *An Extant Instance of "Q"*, in *NTS* 62 (2016) 398-438.

6. See, for example, F.G. DOWNING, *Redaction Criticism: Josephus' Antiquities and the Synoptic Gospels (I-II)*, in *JSNT* 8 (1980) 46-65 and 9 (1980) 29-48. Also ID., *Doing Things with Words in the First Christian Century* (JSNTS, 200), Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2000. Downing's approach laid a foundation for further important contributions to the debate including, DERRENBACKER, *Ancient Compositional Practices* (n. 2), and KIRK, *Q in Matthew* (n. 2).

have both given the same accounts ... it is my practice to record what they say as completely true"<sup>7</sup>.

The cultural commonplace referred to is, in effect, an expression of common sense: two corroborating, independent witnesses are more reliable than one. This observation may be used to set up the expectation that, if Matthew wrote third, he is likely to have given credence to episodes separately attested in both Mark and Luke. This expectation is very largely satisfied inasmuch as Matthew seldom omits such incidents<sup>8</sup>.

On the surface at least, therefore, it seems that Matt<sup>3rd</sup> conforms to what might be expected in the light of the ancient practice in question. Nevertheless, Downing, sees things differently. I will attempt to explain his position.

Foundational to Downing's logic is his view that a commonplace of the culture was not that two independent witnesses are more reliable than one but that, if two witnesses agree *verbatim*, then a third author relying on those witnesses must also retain the same phrases *verbatim*. Thus, Downing states:

In the light of current conventional preference for common witness, [Matthew failing to adopt doubly attested text found in both Mark and Luke] would have been absurd<sup>9</sup>.

Downing then notes that, alongside certain instances where Matthew *does* copy Mark-Luke *verbatim* parallels exactly, there are at least forty-one occasions where Luke and Mark agree exactly for thirty characters or more<sup>10</sup>, but where this common witness is *not* exactly reproduced by Matthew<sup>11</sup>.

7. DOWNING, *Plausibility* (n. 1), p. 322.

8. Only four incidents referred to in both Mark and Luke have no parallel in Matthew: The Healing of the Demoniac in the Synagogue (Mark 1,23-28//Luke 4,33-37); Withdrawal and Preaching (Mark 1,35-38//Luke 4,42-44); A Stranger Works Miracles (Mark 9,38-40//Luke 9,49-50); and The Widow's Mite (Mark 12,44-44//Luke 21,1-4). The total extent of these apparently unaccounted for episodes is sixteen verses.

9. DOWNING, *Plausibility* (n. 1), p. 335.

10. Downing recognises that his nomination of strings of letters of thirty or more is arbitrary, but he argues that such strings are sufficiently substantial to deserve attention. Such strings typically represent between three and sixteen words.

11. Matthew consistently reproduces the *verbatim* witness of Mark and Luke when they fall within a category that Downing calls 'Conventional Verbatim Shared Texts'. These are instances where *verbatim*, or all but *verbatim*, coincidence is "what we would expect", for example, definitive words of Jesus, God, the Baptist and quotations of Scripture (p. 320). Downing also notes another type of *verbatim* agreement between Mark and Luke. These occur within material that is more discursive and where exact reproduction is not essential. Downing calls these 'Unconventional Verbatim Shared Texts'. By implication, exact agreement between Mark and Luke in these passages is *not* what we would expect. Downing identifies forty-two instances of these Unconventional Verbatim Shared Texts (listed on p. 337). It is Matthew's failure exactly to reproduce all but one of these instances that is central to Downing's case against Matt<sup>3rd</sup>.

Putting these two observations together, it follows that Matthew cannot have known both Mark and Luke because, if he had, the chances of his so frequently failing to adopt the exact common witness provided by Mark and Luke would have been, “simply nil, zero, zilch”<sup>12</sup>.

The flaw in the first step in this logic is, I hope, self-evident. There is nothing to suggest that the authorities Downing cites saw particular virtue in dual verbatim testimony. Indeed, common sense suggests the opposite. The more extensively two witnesses agree verbatim the greater the suspicion that, far from offering independent corroboration, the second witness is merely parroting the first.

A second substantial problem is that Downing’s case relies on the notion that Matthew would and should have been alert to every occasion when Mark and Luke agree for a sequence of thirty or more letters. Thus, he states:

With that keen attention, mainly to Mark, but constantly aware of Luke, [Matt3<sup>rd</sup>] *could hardly have failed to notice this common matter*. Indeed, as argued, we would expect him to look for it, and value it. But he does not<sup>13</sup>.

The credibility of this statement is, however, inadvertently undermined by a challenge that Downing himself sets the reader. On pp. 330-331 he invites us to find some particular extended strings of letters that are identical in both texts. The purpose of this exercise is to demonstrate how difficult it would have been for Matthew to pick out these passages so as to “assiduously avoid” them (something that does not actually happen – see Examples 1-10 below). What this exercise simultaneously demonstrates, however, is how difficult it would have been for Matthew to pick out these passages so as to assiduously *include* them – as Downing suggests he ought<sup>14</sup>.

If Matthew were especially concerned with identifying, perhaps by specifically training his memory, every occasion when Mark and Luke agree exactly for more than thirty characters, then it is remotely possible that he might have succeeded in spotting all such incidents. It is difficult to see, however, how such an eccentric and prodigiously time-consuming activity might have benefitted his project. The only discernible benefit would have been the satisfaction of knowing that he had got these strings of thirty or more letters ‘exactly right’ – a result apparently not valued by other authors of the period<sup>15</sup>. And the cost of this ‘benefit’ would have been not

12. DOWNING, *Plausibility* (n. 1), p. 335.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 334 – emphasis added.

14. In this exercise Downing uses continuous majuscule text to more closely mimic the challenge that would have confronted Matthew if he were working from manuscripts of Mark and Luke. Even then, however, the true difficulty of the task is only hinted at because, of course, Matthew could not have set his sources side by side as neatly as they are laid out in Downing’s test.

15. According to Downing, writing in other contexts, ancient authors were not generally concerned with getting wording ‘exactly right’. See, DOWNING, *Redaction Criticism (I)* (n. 6), where he summarises Pelletier’s observation: “Josephus’ prime intention is to paraphrase,

only the effort of the initial search but also the loss of editorial freedom. Matthew would have been forced to use pre-set non-critical phrases no matter their impact on the theology, style or economy of his own creation.

There is, more to the point, plenty of evidence that, if Matthew was particularly concerned about anything, it was to find material with which to supplement, rather than duplicate, the record provided by Mark. Seen in this light, the elements of Luke that would have been of least interest to Matthew would have been those where Luke was exactly similar to Mark. Conversely, Luke's text would have been of greatest interest where it included valuable, supplementary material<sup>16</sup>.

Given that Matthew is more likely to have trained himself to notice where Luke has something to add to Mark, rather than where they agree exactly, how might we expect him to treat passages where Mark and Luke are largely similar? Two considerations should probably be taken into account. First, it is very difficult for human beings, especially those working with first century technology, to read two texts simultaneously. Second, Matthew generally uses a range of editorial options when working from Mark. Combining the two, we might expect Matthew (when encountering the passages currently in view) to focus primarily on Mark and to use a range of editorial options as he did so. As the following ten examples (from Downing's list with the exception of Example 6) demonstrate, this seems to be precisely what happened.

### Example 1

Mark 1,4//Luke 3,3: κηρύσσω βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν  
Matthew: omits entirely.

In this instance Downing generously notes that Matthew might possibly have chosen to omit these words so as to allow the privilege of forgiveness of sins to Jesus alone. However, he goes on to protest: “[A]re we going to have to find a lot of such *ad hoc* explanations for over forty more Mark/Luke common texts ‘happening’ to displease this redactor?”<sup>17</sup>.

### Example 2

Mark 1,7//Luke 3,16: ἔρχεται ὁ ἰσχυρότερος μου [ὀπίσω μου] οὗ οὐκ εἰμι ἱκανὸς κύψας λῦσαι τὸν ἱμάντα τῶν ὑποδημάτων αὐτοῦ  
Matt 3,11: ὁ δὲ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος ἰσχυρότερος μου ἐστίν οὗ οὐκ εἰμι ἱκανὸς τὰ ὑποδήματα βαστάσαι

‘to change whatever he can’ if only by inversion” (p. 48). He concludes his summary by saying: “[Pelletier] urges (I find, convincingly) that mostly they are changes for change’s sake” (p. 49). DOWNING, *Plausibility* (n. 1), p. 313, similarly states: “close copying rather than paraphrasing was [unusual] in their culture”.

16. HUGGINS, *Matthean Posteriority* (n. 5), concludes that, “Matthew viewed Mark as his primary but Luke as his supplementary source” (p. 22).

17. DOWNING, *Plausibility* (n. 1), p. 322.

**Example 3**

Mark 1,13//Luke 4,1: ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ [τεσσεράκοντα ἡμέρας reverse order in Luke] πειραζόμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ ...

Matt 4,1-2: εἰς τὴν ἔρημον ὑπὸ τοῦ πνεύματος πειρασθῆναι ὑπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου καὶ νηστεύσας ἡμέρας τεσσεράκοντα

**Examples 4 and 5**

Mark 1,23-28//Luke 4,33-37 ‘The Healing of the Demoniac in the Synagogue’ includes two duplicate strings, one 114 characters long and the other 35.

Matthew omits the entire episode.

**Example 6** (not included by Downing)

Mark 1,22//Luke 4,32: καὶ ἐξεπλήσσοντο ἐπὶ τῇ διδαχῇ αὐτοῦ

Matt 7,28: ἐξεπλήσσοντο [οἱ ὄχλοι] ἐπὶ τῇ διδαχῇ αὐτοῦ

Here Matthew behaves as Downing believes he ought.

**Example 7** (Downing 6)

Mark 1,44b//Luke 5,14a: τῷ ἱερεῖ καὶ προσένεγκε περὶ τοῦ καθαρισμοῦ σου

Matt 8,4a: τῷ ἱερεῖ καὶ προσένεγκον

**Example 8** (Downing 7)

Mark 4,41//Luke 8,25: πρὸς ἀλλήλους τίς ἄρα οὗτός ἐστιν ὅτι καὶ

Matt 8,27: ποταπός ἐστιν οὗτος ὅτι καὶ

**Example 9** (Downing 8)

Mark 5,7-8//Luke 8,28-29: τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοὶ Ἰησοῦ υἱὲ τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου;

Matt 8,29: τί ἡμῖν καὶ σοὶ υἱὲ τοῦ θεοῦ;

**Example 10** (Downing 9)

Mark 5,13//Luke 8,33: εἰσῆλθον εἰς τοὺς χοίρους καὶ ὥρμησεν ἡ ἀγέλη κατὰ τοῦ κρηνοῦ εἰς τὴν ...

Matt 8,32: ἀπῆλθον εἰς τοὺς χοίρους καὶ ἰδοὺ ὥρμησεν πᾶσα ἡ ἀγέλη κατὰ τοῦ κρηνοῦ εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν

Downing claims, in the examples he cites, that Matthew “assiduously avoids”<sup>18</sup>, “refused to include”<sup>19</sup>, “eliminated”<sup>20</sup>, and “miss[ed]”<sup>21</sup>, these elements of exact Mark-Luke agreement. If this were actually the case, then it would be difficult to see how this could have been achieved without

18. *Ibid.*, p. 336 (abstract). See also p. 321.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 320 and 334.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 323.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 334.

Matthew having access to both Mark and Luke (admittedly with a need for prodigious amounts of effort for no discernible reward). In reality, however, nothing so dramatic has occurred. Matthew appears simply to have used the same range of editorial options that he uses elsewhere in his treatment of Mark: complete omission, partial omission, emendation, paraphrase, expansion and complete inclusion. This means, of course, that the data in question is compatible with any number of synoptic hypotheses<sup>22</sup>.

Given that the data under discussion do nothing to disprove, or prove, the case for Matt<sup>3rd</sup>, it might appear that we are back where we started. Such a result would, however, be telling in itself. We began by noting that, in contrast to the well-rehearsed difficulties faced by the FH and 2DH, there has been little in the way of published critique of Matt<sup>3rd</sup>. Downing does his best to make good this omission – but to regard his efforts as successful it would be necessary to believe that ancient authors really were in the habit of seeking out and then exactly reproducing every phrase and sentence where their sources agreed verbatim. Given that this is implausible, we are still left without a reason to reject solutions to the Synoptic Problem in which Mark came first, and Matthew used Luke.

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ABSTRACT. — This note responds to Gerald Downing's, *Plausibility, Probability, and Synoptic Hypotheses*, the first article to offer a sustained attempt to show that Matthew's use of Luke (with Markan Priority) is an implausible solution to the Synoptic Problem. Downing argues that, if Matthew wrote third, he would have been bound to reproduce all, or most, of the occasions when Mark and Luke agree verbatim for sequences of more than thirty characters. In my response I note that this suggestion not only defies common sense but also obliges Matthew to perform physically demanding actions for no discernible benefit. I conclude that we remain short of a reason to reject solutions to the Synoptic Problem in which Mark came first, and Matthew used Luke.

22. In reality, even if ancient authors had (however oddly) especially valued testimony that agreed verbatim, and if Matthew had adopted this approach, then all that would have resulted would be the creation of numerous Mark//Luke//Matthew verbatim parallels. Such data would reveal almost nothing, since triple verbatim agreements are explicable within almost any synoptic hypothesis.