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Can Synoptic Women Help Solve the Synoptic Problem?

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Abstract: As the discussion of the Synoptic Problem continues, we analyze a set of data that heretofore has not been taken into consideration: introduction, retention, and evolution of female characters in the synoptic gospels. Adopting the premise of Markan Priority (shared by the leading synoptic theories today), we assess the plausibility of the Two Source Theory, Farrer Hypothesis, and Matthean Posteriority based on the role played by female characters in each of the synoptic gospels.

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1. Introduction

The Synoptic Problem has been studied for approximately two centuries, and many questions still remain. Today, the majority of scholars accept Markan Priority, that is, the premise that the canonical gospel of Mark (or something very similar to it)[1] was used by the producers of the canonical gospels of Matthew and Luke[2] (for recent exceptions, see Burkett 2018; Rainbow 2024; Robinson 2025). Beyond that, there is much disagreement in terms of what else Matthew and Luke used in addition to Mark.[3] According to the still-prevalent Two Source Theory, they also used a (lost) sayings collection Q. The other possibility would be that one post-Markan evangelist (Luke or Matthew) used the other. In the early 21st century, the latter possibility has been primarily represented by proponents of the Farrer Hypothesis, according to which Luke used Mark and Matthew (e.g., Goodacre 2002; Watson 2013; Eve 2021). Other scholars, however, have read the same data in exactly the opposite way, proposing that it was Matthew that used Luke in addition to Mark (e.g., Garrow 2016; 2023; MacEwen 2015; Saulina 2023).[4] Still other scholars have recently proposed more complex solutions (e.g., Vinzent 2014; Klinghardt 2015). In this article, we aim to contribute to the ongoing conversation by highlighting the heretofore unexplored significance of female characters in the synoptic gospels.

The principal catalyst for this article is our contention that the evangelists' prolific construction of female characters has not yet been taken into proper consideration in the context of the synoptic problem discussion. Given the uneven distribution of specific women protagonists (and, occasionally, antagonists) across Mark, Matthew, and Luke, their collective presence in the synoptic stories comprises an important set of data. In addition to directing attention to said data in the narrow context of the synoptic problem, we also seek to contribute more broadly to the study of the construction of women and gender in the synoptic gospels, highlighting the role female characters play in each synoptist's narrative world.[5] In other words, our hope is to contribute to the ongoing process of "building specifically feminist approaches" in biblical and gospel studies (Parks 2021: 481).[6]

1. For other possibilities, see Ennulat 1994.
2. We use the names Matthew, Mark, and Luke as a manner of convenience in referring to the anonymous producers of the synoptic gospels.
3. The extensive overlap between Matthew and Luke (the so-called synoptic double tradition) necessitates the existence of an additional shared source(s) or mutual dependence.
4. This speaks in favour of the phenomenon of alternating primitivity, on which see, e.g., Weiss 1889: 486 n. 1; Streeter 1924: 183; Davies and Allison 1988–1997: 1.116; Tuckett 1996: 10; Kloppenborg 2003: 223-225; Scherer 2016: 199; Andrejevs 2023: 160-163.
5. Parks 2021: 479: in ancient texts, one is "virtually always faced with evidence for the ways in which men viewed women." Parks' statement was in reference to the Apocrypha, but it is applicable to the New Testament's female protagonists as well.
6. Parks (2021: 482) discusses three historical stages of development in the study of women and gender in the Apocrypha, which may also be applicable to the field of gospel studies. Our study features elements of the first stage, "highlight[ing] the erstwhile forgotten women characters in the corpus," with the adjustment from the synoptic gospel *corpus* (where female characters are arguably no longer forgotten at the time of this writing) to the more narrow context of the *synoptic problem*. It is in that highly specific theoretical context that these characters have heretofore remained forgotten. On their historical silencing, see Kateusz 2019: 184–6. For a recent text- and redaction-critical engagement with female characters in the gospels, see Schrader 2017.

Mark's narrative features fourteen female characters: thirteen individuals and one collective character (the unidentified women followers in Mark 15:41b).[7] The full list can be printed as follows:

1. Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31);
2. Mary the mother of Jesus (Mark 3:20, 31–35; 6:3);
3. Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:21–24a, 35–43);
4. the woman with the hemorrhage (Mark 5:24b–34);
5. Herodias (Mark 6:14–29);
6. Herodias' daughter (Mark 6:14–29);
7. the Syrophoenician woman (Mark 7:24–30);
8. the poor widow (Mark 12:41–44);
9. the woman in Simon's house (Mark 14:3–9);
10. the high priest's maid (Mark 14:66–70a);
11. Mary Magdalene (Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1);
12. Mary the mother of James the Less (Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1);
13. Salome (Mark 15:40; 16:1);
14. the "other" women who had followed Jesus to Jerusalem (Mark 15:41b).

Presupposing Markan Priority (one of the few points of relative consensus in contemporary synoptic problem analysis), hereafter we shall refer to these characters as "the Core Group." The exorcism in Capernaum (Mark 1:21–28) and the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31) form the gospel's first two miracles performed by Jesus. Both can be grouped under the rubric of healings, since the line between physical illness and demonic possession was rather blurry in antiquity (see Luke 4:39, where Jesus *rebukes* the fever of Peter's mother-in-law, and also Luke 13:11, 16; cf. Nolland 1989–1993: 1.210–11, 366). By constructing this gender pair, Mark appears to signal the ensuing story's interest in the ministry of Jesus to men *and* women.

Nevertheless, in Mark's gospel, the male/female ratio of individuals healed by Jesus (or petitioning on behalf of a child) who receive their own episode (with the recipient's gender identified) stands at 11/5 and is heavily skewed toward male recipients.[8] Crowds that receive healing (e.g., Mark 1:32–34; 3:7–12; 6:54–56) and are fed (Mark 6:35–44; 8:1–10) lack gender differentiation, and it is not possible to be certain whether Mark intends for the audience to infer that they included

7. The sisters of Jesus potentially make a narrative appearance in Mark 3:32 (καὶ λέγουσιν αὐτῷ· ἰδοὺ ἡ μήτηρ σου καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοί σου [καὶ αἱ ἀδελφαί σου] ἔξω ζητοῦσίν σε) and are mentioned by the Nazareth crowds in Mark 6:3. However, the text of Mark 3:32 is uncertain, with the omission of καὶ αἱ ἀδελφαί σου enjoying wide attestation (accordingly, καὶ αἱ ἀδελφαί σου is placed in square brackets in Nestle-Aland's 28th edition). In favour of the short text (καὶ αἱ ἀδελφαί σου being secondary): e.g., Gundry 1993: 185; France 2002: 177; Radl 2003: 537 n. 234; Focant 2004: 146; Yarbro Collins 2007: 225. Certainty remains out of reach. The strongest argument in support of the short reading is that Matthew 13:56 preserves Mark 6:3's reference to Jesus' sisters. Thus, there seems to be no apparent reason for Matthew to have omitted the sisters at Mark 3:32.

8. Male: (1) 1:21–28; (2) 1:40–45; (3) 2:1–12; (4) 3:1–6; (5) 5:1–20; (6) 5:21–24a, 35–43 (father); (7) 7:31–37; (8) 8:22–26; (9) 9:14–27 (father); (10) 9:14–27 (child); (11) 10:46–52. Female: (1) 1:29–31; (2) 5:21–24a, 35–43 (child); (3) 5:24b–34; (4) 7:24–30 (mother); (5) 7:24–30 (child). When Jesus is approached by a petitioner on behalf of a son or daughter, we assigned a point to both the parent and the child. For example, the healing of Jairus' daughter in Mark 5:21–24a, 35–43 was counted as 1/1, with a point for Jairus and the child. It is worth remembering that in antiquity children were essentially viewed as future assets for their parents. Hence, a parent stood to benefit from the healing performed for their child. The logic of the healing of the centurion's slave (Matthew 8:5–13 // Luke 7:1–10) seems similar.

women. Mark leaves the motif of women as followers and disciples underdeveloped: in 15:40–41, one learns that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less, and Salome had "followed Jesus" (ἠκολούθουν αὐτῷ) in Galilee, and that many other women "came up with Jesus" (συναναβᾶσαι αὐτῷ) to Jerusalem (presumably also from Galilee). With this belated note (cf. Nolland 2005: 819), the presence of women among Jesus' followers is established, but the Markan story is almost finished; all that remains is the empty tomb narrative.

As we shall now see, Matthew and Luke (on Markan Priority) would pick up on these latent motifs in Mark's narrative, developing both the interaction of women with Jesus and women's role as followers and disciples. The manner in which each of the post-Markan synoptists approached this task has direct relevance for the Synoptic Problem.

2. Women in Matthew's Gospel: Insights from Markan Priority

Although the male/female ratio of individuals healed by Jesus (or petitioning on behalf of a child or a slave) who receive their own episode (with the recipient's gender identified) becomes more skewed toward male recipients at 13/5,[9] the increase in the participation of women in the story is substantial when compared to the Markan account.

Let us begin by surveying what Matthew does with the Core Group. He preserves all but two of Mark's fourteen characters, the exceptions being the poor widow (Mark 12:41–44) and Salome (Mark 15:40; 16:1). These exceptions are explicable. In Mark's gospel, the poor widow contributes everything she has (Mark 12:44) to the Temple treasury. The scene unfolds in the Court of the Women, where "stood a range of thirteen 'trumpet chests' designed to receive monetary offerings," including freewill offerings (such as the widow's) and the temple tax (France 2002: 489). As commendable as the Markan widow's freewill offering was given her poverty, the two copper coins did not match the amount of the Temple tax, which was a half-shekel (double drachma). In a uniquely Matthean scholastic episode (17:24–27), however, Jesus is presented by Matthew as compliant with the Temple tax, when Jesus obtains a shekel for Peter and himself.[10] Thus, Matthew's apparent agenda to stress Jesus' and his followers' historical compliance with the Temple tax might account for the disappearance of the Markan widow from the story. Put otherwise: if Jesus and his first followers were constructed by Matthew as compliant with the tax, and if God could miraculously provide the necessary amount,[11] praising a Jewish person, even one exempt from the tax (e.g., Luz 2001: 414; cf. *m. Šek.* 1.1ff.), for contributing less than Jesus and his first followers did, may not have appeared as a point worth making.[12]

9. Male: (1) 8:1–4; (2) 8:5–13 (master); (3) 8:5–13 (slave); (4) 8:22–34; (5) 9:1–8; (6) 9:18–19, 23–26 (father); (7) 9:27–31; (8) 9:32–34; (9) 12:9–14; (10) 12:22–24; (11) 17:14–18 (father); (12) 17:14–18 (child); (13) 20:29–34. Female: (1) 8:14–15; (2) 9:18–19, 23–26 (child); (3) 9:20–22; (4) 15:21–28 (mother); (5) 15:21–28 (child). One could count Matthean duplicated characters (8:22–34; 9:27–31; 20:29–34) separately to produce a more disproportionate ratio (15/5), but we have opted against this, counting only duplicated stories (9:32–34; 12:22–24) rather than duplicated characters within a single story (8:22–34; 9:27–31; 20:29–34).

10. Konradt 2015: 281 (on Matthew 17:24–27): "eine deeskalierende Strategie im Blick auf die sozial schwierige Lage der Gemeinde."

11. Finding treasures in a fish's body was a trope (see examples in Konradt 2015: 281).

12. See the discussion and further literature (along with pertinent ancient sources) in, e.g., Davies and Allison 1988–1997: 2.743 (note the discussion concerning whether the Galileans may have been considered lax in making payment); Luz 2001: 414–15; Konradt 2015: 280; Wilson 2022: 2.99. These scholars also comment on the differences between the Pharisaic, Sadducean, and Essenic views and/or practices.

As for Salome, while the character by this name disappears from Matthew's story, her role is filled by another woman whose presence at the cross makes for a dramatic statement. Matthew preserves Mark's fellowship of three women at the cross (Mark 15:40 // Matthew 27:56). In Mark 15:40, the third woman is Salome, but Matthew replaces her with the mother of the sons of Zebedee, a character whom he introduced into the narrative earlier (Matthew 20:20; see more below). According to several scholars (e.g., Davies and Allison 1988–1997: 3.638; Konradt 2015: 449), Salome is either replaced with or potentially *identified as* the mother of the Zebedee. In either case, there remains a third woman present at the cross in Matthew, accompanying Mary Magdalene and the other Mary.[13] As a result, this is not a true omission. As to its dramatic effect, the presence of this particular woman (cf. Matthew 20:20–23) at the cross has been said to serve "as a foil for her sons' cowardly absence" (Davies and Allison 1988–1997: 3.638). We are willing to take one step further than Davies and Allison. In addition to serving as a foil, the mother of the Zebedee potentially embodies female courage at a time when male courage appears to have momentarily failed.

Let us now turn to the Matthean additions, which include five new female characters; three individuals and two collective characters:

1. the women present at the feeding of the 5.000 (Matthew 14:21);
2. the women present at the feeding of the 4.000 (Matthew 15:38);
3. the mother of the sons of Zebedee (Matthew 20:20–23; 27:56);
4. the second maid in the high priest's courtyard (Matthew 26:71);
5. the wife of Pontius Pilate (Matthew 27:19).

The already mentioned mother of the sons of Zebedee is a uniquely Matthean character whose entry into the narrative (Matthew 20:20) is sometimes interpreted as an attempt to alleviate the negative portrayal of James and John (e.g., Wilson 2022: 2.167). This is not an obvious inference, however, since the whole family of Zebedee approaches Jesus as a group (Matthew 20:20–23; cf. Konradt 2015: 314)[14] and Jesus' closing statement is still addressed to the sons (Matthew 20:23; cf. Luz 2001: 541–42). The ambiguity of Matthew's "they," along with the mother kneeling before Jesus (v. 20) and at first remaining respectfully silent (Luz 2001: 543; Konradt 2015: 314),[15] more

13. The disappearance of this third woman from Matthew's empty tomb story could be due to a confluence of two factors: Matthew's interest in (a) dual witness (e.g., Matthew 8:28; 9:27; 20:30; 26:69–72) and (b) clarifying the Markan narrative. With regard to (b): in Mark 15:47 only two women observe where Jesus was laid (the two Marys). On Easter morning, however, Salome rejoins them (Mark 16:1). Matthew's omission of the third woman on Easter morning (Matthew 28:1) thus achieves greater consistency with the Markan note about only the Marys observing where Jesus was laid (Mark 15:47 // Matthew 27:61).

14. Cf. Davies and Allison 1988–1997: 3.87.

15. Kneeling: also at the first appearance before Jesus in Matthew's gospel (the leper in Matthew 8:2) and – more importantly for our purposes – at the women's encounter with the risen Jesus (Matthew 28:9). Cf. Nolland 2005: 818–19: "with the use of προσκυνεῖν for the leper we begin to be nudged in the direction of religious worship."

plausibly suggests that Matthew envisions her as a disciple (e.g., Luz 2001: 543; Nolland 2005: 819; Konradt 2015: 449). This inference receives further support from the fact that this woman later replaces Mark's Salome at the cross (Matthew 27:56, on which see above).[16]

Matthew's interest in increasing the number of women who follow Jesus arguably comes into sharpest relief in his redaction of the two Markan feeding miracles. In both accounts, women and children are explicitly included as recipients of the feeding miracles (Matthew 14:21; diff. Mark 6:44 // Matthew 15:38; diff. Mark 8:9).[17] The presence of women was technically not required here, since one could just as well imagine them staying at home with the children while the males followed Jesus. In Matthew, however, the crowds who follow (Matthew 14:13: ἠκολούθησαν) or come to (Matthew 15:30: προσῆλθον) Jesus on the occasion of each of the two feeding miracles are clarified to have included entire households. To be sure, it is not entirely clear whether Matthew intends for these women to be understood as hearing Jesus' instruction, since the Markan emphasis on Jesus teaching the crowds is absent (Mark 6:34 // diff. Matthew 14:14). Still, the line between following Jesus and receiving instruction seems to be at best a blurry one in Matthew. For example, after Matthew the tax collector "followed Jesus" (Matthew 9:9: ἠκολούθησεν αὐτῷ), the next scene describes tax collectors and sinners sitting down with Jesus (Matthew 9:10: συνανέκειντο τῷ Ἰησου), which seems to imply a symposium setting in which instruction might naturally be imparted.

Let us now turn to the Passion Narrative, where dual witness[18] plausibly explains Matthew's duplication of the maids questioning Peter about his involvement with Jesus (Mark 14:66–70a // Matthew 26:69–72). Matching Peter's threefold denial, in Matthew there are *two* separate *individuals* (both women) who accuse him, in addition to a *group* of "bystanders" (Matthew 26:73: οἱ ἑστῶτες). Arguably the most significant Matthean addition of a female character then occurs a few scenes later in the form of a non-Jewish woman, the wife of Pontius Pilate (a uniquely Matthean character). This elite individual joins her husband in stressing Jesus' innocence and describes him as a righteous person (Matthew 27:19). She is depicted as learning about Jesus' righteousness in a dream.[19] Her voice is significant in that it echoes and amplifies a Roman offi-

16. As noted by Nolland (2005: 819), "[s]he is to be thought of as one of those who gathered in Galilee to make th[e] trip to Jerusalem." Cf. Matthew 17:22. Nolland adds: "[b]ecause of the role of a woman here [in Matthew 20:20–23], it is not quite the surprise in [Matthew] 27:55-56 that it is in Mk. 15:40-41 that women follow Jesus." Cf. Wilson 2022: 2.167: "as we learn from 27:55-56, she [the mother of Zebedee] also became one of Jesus's followers."

17. See Luz (2001: 315) on the history of interpretation of Matthew 14:21 in the eastern and western traditions. Although Luz recognizes the sexist aspect of the western tradition's exclusion of women from the feeding miracle(s) in the Middle Ages, for him Matthew's addition of women merely "shows that he takes seriously the actual miracle." But 5.000 is a miraculous enough number given that only five loaves of bread were available (one per thousand recipients). Davies and Allison (1988–1997: 2.493) likewise downplay the Matthean addition by describing it as "just an interpretation of Mark which emphatically underlines the crowd's vastness."

18. See note 13 above.

19. Wives warning their husbands was a trope (Davies and Allison 1988–1997: 3.587; see examples in Wilson 2022: 2.393 n. 304).

cial's – her husband's – assessment of Jesus as innocent (Matthew 27:18, 23–24).[20] When one reads the story of Jesus politically,[21] her voice also helps provide another dual witness at the story's most critical juncture.

To summarize: on the hypothesis of Matthew and Luke using Mark, Matthew retains almost all of the Core Group with two explicable exceptions, adds further female characters, and amplifies women's role as followers of Jesus and, in the case of Pilate's wife, sympathetic to him.

3. Women in Luke's Gospel: Insights from Markan Priority

The Lukan male/female ratio of individuals healed by Jesus (or petitioning on behalf of a child or a slave) who receive their own episode stands at 15/6, which is essentially similar to the Matthean ratio (13/5).[22] Similar to Matthew's gospel, the true scale of the Lukan changes comes into view when one examines the increased participation of women in the story. Here, Lukan changes are more substantial than Matthew's (and go considerably beyond the Markan template). As we did with Matthew, let us begin by surveying what Luke does with the Core Group. The evangelist preserves ten of Mark's fourteen female characters (see above):

1. Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31 // Luke 4:38–39);
2. Mary the mother of Jesus (Mark 3:20, 31–35; 6:3 // Luke 1–2; 8:19);
3. the woman with the hemorrhage (Mark 5:24b–34 // Luke 8:42b–48);
4. Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:21–24a, 35–43 // Luke 8:40–42a, 49–56);
5. the poor widow (Mark 12:41–44 // Luke 21:1–4);
6. the woman who anoints Jesus in Simon's house (Mark 14:3–9 // Luke 7:36–50);
7. the high priest's maid (Mark 14:66–70 // Luke 22:54b–57);
8. Mary Magdalene (Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1 // Luke 8:1–3; 24:10);
9. Mary the mother of James the Less (Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1 // Luke 8:1–3; 24:10);
10. the "other" women who had followed Jesus to Jerusalem (Mark 15:41b // Luke 23:49, 55; 24:10).

The woman who anoints Jesus' head in Simon's house in Bethany (Mark 14:3–9) remains in Luke's gospel but has been transformed into a sinner who anoints Jesus' feet in Simon's house in Galilee (Luke 7:36–50).[23] The four actual omissions from the Core Group include Herodias (Mark 6:14–29);

20. Sánches (2019: 203) observes that "the scenography" of a power couple in antiquity included the element of "harmony existing within the ruling couple." Although Pilate and his wife were not, strictly speaking, a ruling couple, their position was one of considerable political power.

21. On this, see the essays in Snyder and Zamfir 2020.

22. Male: (1) 4:31–37; (2) 5:12–16; (3) 5:17–26; (4) 6:6–11; (5) 7:1–10 (master); (6) 7:1–10 (slave); (7) 7:11–17 (child); (8) 8:26–34; (9) 8:40–42a, 49–56 (father); (10) 9:37–43a (father); (11) 9:37–43a (child); (12) 11:14; (13) 14:1–6; (14) 17:11–19; (15) 18:35–43. Female: (1) 4:38–39; (2) 7:11–17 (mother); (3) 8:2; (4) 8:40–42a, 49–56 (child); (5) 8:42b–48; (6) 13:10–17. We have opted to count Luke 17:11–19 (a group of male recipients) as a single entry under male characters, similar to how we counted the Matthean duplicated characters within a single episode.

23. Bovon 2002: 291: the divergent accounts of a woman anointing Jesus are potentially "written fixations of a single gospel memory," sharing "[t]he same narrative scheme." Similarly, e.g., Wolter 2008: 291. Note, however, that Luke 7:36–50 recycles multiple Markan motifs: not only Mark 14:3–9 (which could be the foundation of Luke 7:36–50), but also Mark 2:5 (Luke 5:20; 7:48b); Mark 2:7 (Luke 5:21; 7:49b [diff. Matthew 9:3]); Mark 5:34 (Luke 7:50b; 8:48 [diff. Matthew 9:22]). Cf., e.g., Radl 2003: 492; Klein 2006: 293–95. It is therefore possible to surmise that Luke 7:36–50 is a pastiche of Markan motifs.

Herodias' daughter (Mark 6:14–29); the Syrophoenician woman (Mark 7:24–30); and Salome (Mark 15:40; 16:1). As with Matthew's treatment of the Core Group, these Lukan omissions of Markan material are explicable. Herodias and her daughter belong to the legend of John's execution which Luke omits entirely; their absence comes with the episode's omission.[24] The episode featuring the Syrophoenician woman belongs to the Great Omission of Markan material in Luke (Mark 6:45–8:26); once again, the woman's absence comes with the episode's omission. While Luke could theoretically have lifted this story from the omitted Markan block and preserved it in some other context, its omission corresponds to (a) Luke's apparent intention to keep Jesus in Israel (the mission to the Gentiles comes after Easter) and (b) the prominent role that the (potentially rhetorically undesirable) identification of the Gentiles as dogs plays in the dialogue. Finally, Salome (Mark 15:40; 16:1) is replaced with Joanna (Luke 8:1–3; 24:10), preserving Mark's fellowship of three specific women on Easter morning (Mark 16:1 // Luke 24:10). Although technically an omission, it is therefore at the same time a substitution. Overall, it is apparent that these omissions are collateral to Luke's other compositional concerns.

As noted by Mary Rose D'Angelo (1990: 442), Luke "increase[s] the number of stories about women in the Gospel."[25] Let us now turn to the Lukan additions, with eleven new female characters including one group:

1. Elizabeth the mother of John (Luke 1);
2. Anna the prophetess (Luke 2:36–38);
3. the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11–17);
4. the sinful woman who anoints Jesus (Luke 7:36–50);
5. Joanna (Luke 8:1–3; 24:10);
6. Susanna (Luke 8:1–3);
7. Martha of the Martha/Mary pair (Luke 10:38–42);
8. Mary of the Martha/Mary pair (Luke 10:38–42);
9. the woman who praises Jesus and his mother (Luke 11:27–28);
10. a crippled woman (Luke 13:10–17);
11. the daughters of Jerusalem (Luke 23:27–31).

Two observations are of special significance. First, the character development that Mary receives in Luke's infancy narrative dramatically rewrites the barely-there portrayal of Jesus' mother encountered in Mark's gospel. Of particular significance is the fact that Mary exhibits agency, giving her consent to the divine impregnation (Luke 1:38; we shall return to this in the context of

24. A number of different reasons have been proposed for this, with no real consensus to date. Wolter's (2008: 167) assessment is representative of the mainstream opinion: the legend was apparently deemed insignificant. It is possible, however, in light of Luke's apparent interest in women as disciples of Jesus (see the discussion below), that Luke does not wish to portray *other* women (*any* women) as the reason for John's demise, avoiding some of the gender stereotypes on display in the Markan legend. Instead, the responsibility for John's beheading rests solely with Herod (Luke 9:9). Cf. Radl 2003: 196.

25. D'Angelo (1990: 442) treats "Luke-Acts as a source for women's *history* … with the most vigilant suspicion" (emphasis ours). Similar to D'Angelo, our concern is not with the historical accuracy of Lukan female portraits. It is limited to the role they – as literary constructs – are given in his narrative (D'Angelo: "the redactional level").

Matthean Posteriority).[26] Second, the emphasis on female disciples increases considerably.[27] In Luke 8:1–3, Mary Magdalene, a character from Mark's gospel whose role was limited to the Passion Narrative, is introduced much earlier than in Mark or Matthew. She enters the narrative while the group is still in Galilee, alongside two new female disciples, Joanna and Susanna. A short while later, Luke 10:38–42 introduces two more new female characters, Mary and Martha. These sisters are juxtaposed by the author, with Mary exhibiting "'disciple' behavior."[28] While Martha concerns herself with the traditional tasks of a mistress of the house, Mary is praised by Jesus for her apparent focus on learning (cf. Bovon 2013: 70–71).

To summarize: on the hypothesis of Matthew and Luke using Mark, Luke retains two-thirds of the Core Group with four explicable exceptions. Luke makes up for these exceptions by adding eleven new female characters and significantly amplifying women's role as disciples of Jesus.

4. Matthean Posteriority: An Assessment

One of the currently leading alternatives to the Q hypothesis is Matthean Posteriority: Matthew used Mark *and* Luke. Our survey of female characters in Matthew and Luke poses questions for this theory in light of (a) Matthew's high degree of retaining the Markan female characters and (b) addition of new female characters. It seems unlikely that Matthew kept all but two of the women he found in Mark's story (one of the omissions being a substitution), added five new female characters of his own, and yet left out *all* of the eleven new female characters introduced by Luke. As a deliberate strategy, this would be a very surprising compositional decision. Statistically, such a purge of new Lukan female characters – a thorough editorial ostracism – is inconsistent with what Matthew seems to be doing on Markan Priority.[29]Besides the statistical considerations, two further aspects are of special significance.

26. Since in Roman antiquity one encounters "a culture … in which … issues of consent were irrelevant" (Leonard 2019: 341–42; cf. Webb 2015: 58), explicit attestation of Mary's consent in Luke 1:38 likely signals a significant hagiographic development. Leonard (2019) has studied the example of Galla Placidia (c. 388–450 CE) and her forced marriage to the Visigothic king Athaulf in captivity, which resulted in a pregnancy (for the list of ancient sources, see Leonard 2019: 347 n. 17). Leonard (341) observes that the sources leave us with a "one-sided and sterilized narrative." Placidia is "represented by the ancient authors as voiceless and entirely passive" (337). Thus (337), Paulus Orosius "represented [Placidia's] capture and marriage as an afterthought, … [occurring] in accordance with the providence of God; neither the agency of the Goths, nor Placidia, is evident." All of this is somewhat similar to Matthew's Infancy Narrative and forms a striking contrast with the Lukan Annunciation.

27. See the classic discussion in Ryan 1985.

28. Nolland 1989–1993: 2.601. Klein (2006: 398 n. 36) downplays Mary's depiction and attempts to put the sisters on more of an equal footing that may be warranted by Luke's story. Yet Martha is explicitly reprimanded by Jesus, while Mary is not. Klein's hypothesis that "es wird von ihr erwartet, daß sie das Gehörte in die Praxis umsetzt" is a creative reading that lacks sufficient textual signals. Lukan Jesus nowhere states that Mary must now act in accordance with what she has learned. The whole point seems to be that she is praised for prioritizing *learning*, in a clear contrast with Martha. Hence, Nolland 1989–1993: 2.602: Martha's domestic service has "negative overtones," while Mary is depicted as "ha[ving] chosen just that preoccupation with the message of the kingdom of God that Jesus would commend to Martha as well." Luke seems to have constructed here and in 15:11–32 (another uniquely Lukan text) something of a gender pair: two sibling pairs, male and female, with the sibling who acts in accordance with the existing norms complaining about the non-conforming sibling being rewarded (and thus missing the larger point as far as God's vision is concerned). For helpful background in antiquity, see, e.g., Lambropoulou 1995.

29. For other examples of similar inconsistencies between Matthew's use of Mark and Matthew's presumable reception of Luke, see Andrejevs 2024 (responding to Garrow 2023).

4.1 Jesus' mother (Luke 1–2; 8:19).

Luke giving Jesus' mother more agency than either of the other synoptists is a problem for Matthean Posteriority. Most notably, he gives Mary the volition to consent to God's call to become Jesus' mother (Luke 1:38).[30] By contrast, Matthew 1–2 simply presents Mary as a vessel for Christ. If he used Luke, Matthew would be removing Mary's consent, deliberately turning her into a passive recipient instead of an active actor. In the process, Matthew would also have rendered Mary voiceless, redirecting the angelic communication to Joseph (Matthew 1:18–25). Since it is otherwise apparent that Matthew reveres Mary,[31] it is unclear why he would suppress her agency in this manner and eliminate this aspect of her storyline in Luke.

Matthew's theoretical suppression of Mary's agency is further problematized by his rewriting of the episode featuring the woman with the hemorrhage (Mark 5:24b–34 // Matthew 9:20–22). It is well known that Matthew tends to abbreviate some of Mark's lavishly detailed stories, and the episode of the woman with the hemorrhage is among the principal examples. The Markan episode is significantly abridged by Matthew, while Luke retains much more of the Markan version. And yet it is Matthew that preserves the woman's agency by retaining her direct speech (Mark 5:28 // Matthew 9:21; diff. Luke 8:44). Thus, it appears that even when Matthew is focused on abridgement of his source and seeks to promptly move on to the next episode, the voices of female characters interacting with Jesus are valued highly enough to be retained. This observation casts further doubt on Matthew's theoretical suppression of Mary's voice and agency in the Annunciation.

4.2 New women disciples: Joanna, Susanna, Martha, and Mary (Luke 8:1–3; 10:38–42)

In light of Matthew increasing the number of Markan women who follow Jesus (Matthew 14:21; 15:38) and introducing the mother of the Zebedee (Matthew 20:20–23; 27:56) as a disciple, his theoretical omission of these Lukan women disciples seems curious. There is no obvious reason for Matthew to have omitted any of these Lukan women, let alone all four of them (and this brings us back to the aforementioned riddle of a complete editorial purge of new Lukan female characters by Matthew).

Because of these considerations, we find Matthew's use of Luke to be the least likely of the currently popular synoptic source theories, at least from the angle studied in our project.

5. Farrer Hypothesis: An Assessment

The currently leading alternative to the Q theory is that of Luke using Mark *and* Matthew. Our survey of female characters in the synoptic gospels poses questions for this theory in light of (a) Luke's focus on female discipleship and (b) Farrer proponents' need to theorize Luke's delib-

30. E.g., Radl 2003: 68: "Maria … gibt ihre Zustimmung." Cf. Nolland 1989–1993: 1.57: "In giving her consent Mary is also making a statement of faith." See n. 26 above.

31. Consider his redaction of the potentially offensive in this regard Mark 3:20–21 (omitted by Matthew on Markan Priority). Note also that nothing in Matthew 1–2 diminishes Mary's role and agency *unless* it is presupposed (as Matthean Posteriority does) that Matthew is *rewriting* Luke 1–2.

erate and surgical removal of female characters from Matthew's episodes while preserving the episodes in which they appeared; something Luke never does with Mark (unless one counts the Joanna substitution, which, as noted earlier, is not a true omission).[32]

With regard to (a), it seems unlikely that Luke would have added four new women disciples (Joanna, Susanna, Martha, and Mary [Luke 8:1–3; 10:38–42]), yet omitted the women present at the sole retained feeding miracle (Luke 9:12–17; diff. Matthew 14:21; 15:38).[33] By omitting this detail introduced and emphatically repeated by Matthew (Matthew 14:21; 15:38), Luke would potentially be removing women from the domain of learning, which contradicts what Luke seems to be stressing in the story about Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–42). That is, while in Luke 10:38–42 Mary is praised for prioritizing learning, in Luke 9:12–17 the evangelist – if he was consulting Matthew's text – would have opted to have women not listen to Jesus talk about the kingdom after all. It is noteworthy that in Luke's gospel the crowds *receive instruction* (Luke 9:11: ἐλάλει αὐτοῖς περὶ τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ) *before* they are miraculously fed, whereas in Matthew 14:13–14 the emphasis is, more vaguely, on following Jesus. Farrer's Luke, then, preserves the Markan motif of instruction (Mark 6:34 // Luke 9:11; diff. Matthew 14:14) but omits the Matthean women (added by Matthew to the Markan version) from the audience. This editorial decision fits poorly with Luke's emphasis on female discipleship exhibited elsewhere (Luke 8:1–3; 10:38–42).

With regard to (b), let us first recall one of Luke's famous compositional traits: writing in threes. There are many unique triads and triplets in Luke's gospel. The following three (no pun intended) are of particular relevance to our discussion:

1. three Sabbath healings (Luke 6:6–11; 13:10–17; 14:1–6; Mark and Matthew only have the first one [Mark 3:1–6 // Matthew 12:9–14]);
2. three "lost and found" parables (Luke 15:3–7, 8–10, 11–32; Mark has none; Matthew only has the first one [Matthew 18:12–14]);
3. three individuals who affirm Jesus' innocence during the Passion (Luke 23:4, 13–16, 22 [Pilate], 40–42 [the Good Thief], 47 [the centurion at the cross]; Mark and Matthew only have the first one [Mark 15:14 // Matthew 27:18, 23–24]).[34]

32. This phenomenon resembles Farrer's Luke's so-called "unpicking" of Matthean elements from the parallel Markan episodes, long regarded as a problem for the Farrer Hypothesis (e.g., Downing 1965; Tuckett 1996: 31–34; Foster 2003: 319; Kirk 2011: 476–77; Garrow 2016: 221).

33. Note also that Luke introduces Mary Magdalene (along with Joanna and Susanna) – and thereby the motif of women following Jesus – *before* the feeding miracle (Luke 8:1–3; 9:10–17). Why would Luke then omit the presence of women *at* the feeding miracle? It seems more plausible that Luke did not read Matthew's miraculous feedings. Then, the explanation of the Lukan omission would simply be that it did not occur to Luke to include the women in that particular episode (as opposed to him making a deliberate editorial decision to excise them).

34. In a dramatic editorial change, Luke transforms the affirmation of Mark's centurion from "truly this man was God's son" (Mark 15:39) to "truly this man was innocent" (Luke 23:47).

Next, let us recall another famous Lukan compositional trait: construction of gender pairs (e.g., [1] Luke 2:25–38; [2] Luke 11:27–28; 14:15–24; [3] 12:45 [diff. Matthew 24:48–49]; etc.).[35] Note how the first two of the Lukan triplets referenced above incorporate such pairs (female examples are emboldened below):

1. three Sabbath healings (Luke 6:6–11; 13:10–17; 14:1–6; the female character [an infirm woman] is distinctive to Luke's gospel);
2. three "lost and found" parables (Luke 15:3–7, 8–10, 11–32; the female character [a woman searching for a coin] is distinctive to Luke's gospel).[36]

With this background in mind, let us now circle back to one of Matthew's new female characters: Pilate's wife, an elite individual who speaks up for Jesus (Matthew 27:19). The three individuals who affirm Jesus' innocence in Luke 23 are all men. If Luke had access to Matthew, he would have (a) removed the agency of a witness from a woman; (b) passed on arguably his best opportunity to show "dass der Einfluss Jesu bis in höhere gesellschaftliche Schichten reicht";[37] (c) passed on including a woman in a compositional triad, contradicting his own approach in the three Sabbath healings and the three "lost and found" parables; and (d) dismantled an existing gender pair (Pilate and his wife). When one combines these data with the aforementioned omission of Matthew's women from the feeding miracle, one is left with two occasions on which Farrer's Luke eliminated female characters (and dismantled gender pairs) added/constructed by Matthew while preserving the episodes in which they appear. This surgical procedure contradicts Luke's reception of Mark: unless one counts the Joanna substitution, the Core Group members are *never* removed from the Markan episodes preserved by Luke. Farrer's Luke's hypothetical procedure also contradicts three compositional characteristics exhibited by Luke on Markan Priority: the evangelist's interest in associating Jesus with women whose influence extends into the higher levels of society,[38] occasional inclusion of women in triadic constructions, and construction of gender pairs.[39]

Albeit somewhat more probable than the reverse, the hypothesis of Luke using Matthew therefore also seems unlikely from the angle taken in our study.

35. For these examples, we have selected gender pairs that do not have parallels in Mark or Matthew. For gender pairs in Luke-Acts, see the classic summary in D'Angelo 1990: 443–8.

36. With a number of scholars, D'Angelo (1990: 443–4) suggests that the woman who had ten coins is redactional in Luke. Cf. Fleddermann 2018.

37. Wolter 2008: 301. See the next note.

38. Joanna in Luke 8:3; 24:10. Cf. Wolter 2008: 301. If Luke associated Jesus with a positively disposed woman "of substance" (Nolland 1989–1993: 1.366) from Herod's circle, why would he forego an association with a positively disposed woman of substance from Pilate's circle? Which of the two had more political "substance"? The premium placed by Luke on the positive appraisal of Jesus (and, in Acts, his followers) by the Romans is among Luke's demonstrable rhetorical objectives (Luke 22–23; cf. Acts 18:12–17; 23–24; 26:31; 27:42–44; 28:16–18, 30–31).

39. As far as the gender pairs are concerned, D'Angelo (1990: 447) observes that "Luke's redactional techniques are at work in the deliberate inclusion of women." The same surely applies to Luke's triadic constructions.

6. Two Source Theory: An Assessment

In post-Enlightenment research, the foundation of the Two Source Theory has traditionally been the premise of the implausibility of Luke's use of Matthew and vice versa (e.g., Weiss 1889: 486 n. 1; Kirk 2017: 251). It was this premise, driven by considerations such as the phenomenon of alternating primitivity (e.g., Weiss 1889: 486 n. 1; Streeter 1924: 183; Davies and Allison 1988–1997: 1.116; Tuckett 1996: 10; Kloppenborg 2003: 223-225; Scherer 2016: 199; Andrejevs 2023: 160-163), that necessitated the hypothesis of Matthew's and Luke's mutual independence and, as a consequence, the use of the shared non-Markan source Q. Our study offers another set of data that bolsters the methodological foundation of the Two Source Theory: the inconsistencies described in the preceding two sections (present on the Matthean Posteriority and Farrer hypotheses) are absent on the Two Source Theory.

7. Conclusion

Five years ago, Sara Parks (2021: 481–2) noted that "our knowledge of a given time period or body of literature … [must fold] at least a basic alertness to gender into the analysis." Our objective in this article, accordingly, was to offer an *additional* set of data that we believe should be taken into consideration by the participants in the ongoing analysis of the synoptic problem. To the best of our knowledge, this set of synoptic data has not been investigated in the context of the synoptic problem until now.

From the specific angle adopted in our study, Matthew's use of Luke (Matthean Posteriority) appears less than probable statistically and, in light of Matthew's redaction of Mark, further comes across as somewhat illogical. Luke's use of Matthew (Farrer Hypothesis) appears somewhat more probable, but, in light of Luke's interest in female discipleship and other phenomena discussed above, still remains somewhat counterintuitive and hence problematic. Matthew's and Luke's independence (Two-Source Theory) seems more probable statistically and offers plausible, internally consistent explanations of the redactional developments observed in these gospels on the premise of Markan Priority.

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