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The Present State of the Q Hypothesis

Howard C. Bigg

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In its classical formulation, the Q hypothesis forms an important element in the so-called two document hypothesis (2DH). In its simplest form the 2DH states that Mark as the earliest gospel was used independently by Matthew and Luke in the composition of their gospels and that, in addition, they drew upon a second source, labelled Q,¹ to account for a body of material, mostly sayings of Jesus of some 200 verses, not found in Mark. To complete the picture, some critics like Streeter² posited further sources for Matthew and Luke (M and L) to account for the remaining material found only in those gospels. Streeter's great book on the gospels, written in 1924, although in some respects dated, remains the classic statement of the synoptic problem and its solution and still receives widespread support. The 2DH has, however, come under considerable attack in recent years, principally from advocates of the revised Griesbach hypothesis which seeks to demonstrate that the synoptic gospels were written in the order Matthew—Luke—Mark, thereby eliminating the need for Q. The purpose of this article is to give some account of recent developments and to assess their importance in relation to the Q hypothesis.

The heyday of the Q hypothesis belongs roughly to the period 1910-1950. Streeter, as we have seen, argued the case for Q in a way which for many critics put the matter beyond doubt. The 2DH as a whole was looked upon as an 'assured result'. Writers such as T W Manson³ and Vincent Taylor⁴ produced works which did not question the validity of Q. Indeed, Taylor's book *Behind the Third Gospel* is an elaborate working out of the proto-Luke hypothesis which assumed that Luke combined Q and L before encountering Mark. Thus, this period was one of untroubled confidence in the 2DH in general and of Q in particular. It should be noted, however, that despite the growing chorus of dissatisfaction with Q since the early 1950s, the majority of critics have continued to regard it as at least a working hypothesis and the whole enterprise of redaction criticism is indeed based upon the priority of Mark and the existence of Q. The following are amongst its modern defenders: J A Fitzmyer, W G Kümmel, E Bammel, F G Downing, G M Styler, E L Bradby, D R Catchpole, G N Stanton, D Luhrmann, P Hoffman, S Schulz and I H Marshall. From this list, which is by no means exhaustive, it can be seen that whilst the Q hypothesis can no longer be regarded as an 'assured result' as a consequence of the many attacks made upon it in recent years, it is in no danger of demise.

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It is now time to look more closely at some of the objections to Q. There are two interrelated problems which have received special scrutiny in recent years, namely those of the minor agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark and the Mark-Q overlaps. We begin with the minor agreements.

¹ Usually explained as a translation of the German *Quelle* (source).

² B H Streeter, *The Four Gospels: a Study of Origin* (London, 1924) 233ff.

³ *The Mission and Message of Jesus*, part 2 (London, 1937) ed D A Major.

⁴ *Behind the Third Gospel* (Oxford, 1926). 'The Order of Q' *JTS* (1953) republished in *NT Essays* (Epworth, 1920) 90-94.

Streeter in *The Four Gospels* recognised the importance of the minor agreements by devoting a whole chapter to them.⁵ Their importance lies, of course, in the fact that there are numerous agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark in the triple tradition and these have to be explained on the basis that Matthew and Luke had no contact with each other. He begins the chapter by noting that his predecessors in the study of the synoptic problem, Sanday, Burkitt and Turner, had expressed the opinion that 'the solution of this problem would be found in the sphere of Textual Criticism'.⁶ He goes on to observe that 'as far as I am aware, no consistent attempt has been made to explore the question thoroughly in the light of the latest researches into the grouping of MSS and the history of text'.⁷ Thus, whilst the study of the minor agreements⁸ is as old as the 2DH itself, Streeter regarded textual criticism as the key element in the solution of the problem raised by them. The importance attached by Streeter to this avenue of investigation can be seen by noting that of the four categories under which Streeter discusses the minor agreements, by far the most space (16 pages) is devoted to the textual question. The other categories treated by him are arranged as follows: 1 irrelevant agreements; 2 deceptive agreements; 3 agreements due to the overlap of Mark and 'Q'. In this way, Streeter disposed of the minor agreements. Streeter's method has been described as 'disposal' deliberately. The chapter on the minor agreements is placed near the end of his exposition of the 'fundamental solution' embracing the priority of Mark and the existence of Q. The discussion of the minor agreements is not therefore part of the argument which establishes the 2DH. It is merely a small residual problem which does not, in Streeter's judgement, imperil the validity of the 2DH.

Streeter's treatment of the minor agreements has provoked a barrage of criticism in recent years. One of the most sustained attacks came from W R Farmer, the principal figure in the current revival of the Griesbach Hypothesis (GH) in which Mark's gospel is placed third. In his book *The Synoptic Problem*⁹ Farmer sought to reopen the whole question of synoptic relationships. He did this by offering a lengthy review of synoptic criticism, mainly in England, culminating with Streeter, followed by a somewhat shorter section entitled 'A New Introduction to the Problem'.¹⁰ Towards the end of his review Farmer delivers his verdict: 'The only sound historical judgement that can be rendered in a critical review of the history of the synoptic problem is that "extra-scientific" or "non-scientific" factors exercised a deep influence in the development of a fundamentally misleading and false consensus'.¹¹

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Farmer spends 34 pages on a critique of the minor agreements as handled by Streeter. His principal objection to Streeter's procedure is the way in which the agreements are split up into the categories referred to above, and a different solution found for each one. Further, Streeter fails to treat agreements in omission and thus gives, in Farmer's view, a misleading assessment of the overall picture. He writes as follows:

⁵ Op cit, 293-331.

⁶ Op cit, 295.

⁷ Op cit, 295.

⁸ See F Neirynck, *The Minor Agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark with a Cumulative List* (BETL, Louvain, 1974) 11-48 for full details.

⁹ (London, New York, 1964); 2nd ed (Dillsboro, NC, 1976).

¹⁰ Op cit, 199ff.

¹¹ Op cit, 190.

If a particular passage exhibits a web of minor but closely related agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark, there is the prospect that these different agreements will be divided into two or more of Streeter's different categories, thus dissipating the full impact which these same agreements would make on the mind of the reader if he were to have them all brought to his attention at the same time, and discussed together in the concrete wholeness of the particular context which they have in the passage concerned.¹²

This criticism of Streeter's approach to the problem is certainly valid and Farmer is not the only critic to have seen this as a flaw.¹³ However, granted the evidence of the phenomenon, the question is how it is to be explained. Farmer claims that the existence of such a 'web of minor but closely related agreements' points decisively to Luke's knowledge of Matthew, thus eliminating the need for Q. He takes as an example Mark 2:1-12, = Matthew 9:1-8, = Luke 5: 17-26, and discusses a number of agreements which together constitutes a 'web'.

One such agreement occurs in Mark 2:12 = Matthew 9:7 = Luke 5:25. Streeter sets out the data as follows:

Mark 2:12	Matthew 9:7	Luke 5:25
'εξῆλθεν ἔμπροτθεν πάντων	ἀπῆλθεν εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτοῦ	ἀπῆλθεν εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτοῦ

This example is treated by Streeter as a 'deceptive agreement'. In the course of his discussion, he argues that 'the only real coincidence between Matthew and Luke is that both of them are at pains to bring out more clearly than Mark that the man did exactly what Our Lord commanded him'.¹⁴ Farmer, whilst admitting 'the fallacy of merely counting words or considering extracts without a study of the context',¹⁵ argues that this particular agreement is one of several in the passage, which, when seen together, cannot be dismissed so easily.¹⁶ Whether the phenomena observed by Farmer can be described as a 'web of ... closely related agreements' is a matter for debate, but the real question is how it is to be satisfactorily explained.

The significance of the minor agreements from the stand-point of the GH has recently been examined by C M Tuckett as part of a wide ranging study entitled *The Revival of the Griesbach Hypothesis*.¹⁷

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Tuckett's purpose is to see whether the minor agreements can be adequately explained on the GH as Farmer alleges they can. His conclusion is as follows:

The results... are largely negative. The arguments have shown that the GH accounts for the minor agreements no better than the 2DH, and indeed in some cases fares even worse.

¹² Op cit, 119.

¹³ Eg A M Farrer, 'On Dispensing with Q; in D E Nineham (ed) *Studies in the Gospels. Essays in Memory of R H Lightfoot* (Oxford, 1955) 55-88.

¹⁴ *The Four Gospels*, 300.

¹⁵ Op cit, 299f.

¹⁶ Farmer, op cit, 132: 'These agreements include the following: "behold ... On a bed ... (being carried by four men) ... he said ... and ... (in his spirit) ... he said ... (to the paralytic) ... (and take up your bed) ... upon the earth to forgive sins ... he went away to his house..." The words in brackets are found in the text of Mark but have nothing to correspond to them in the text of either Matthew or Luke.'

¹⁷ (Cambridge, 1983).

Many of the agreements can be explained separately on the basis of Markan priority, and some cannot be so easily explained by the GH, since all the agreements have to be due to Mark's editing ... Whilst the minor agreements all present some difficulties for the 2DH, and whilst some of Streeter's own arguments were suspect... overall the 2DH can often give a more coherent explanation of these agreements than can the GH.¹⁸

We come now to consider the question of the Mark-Q overlaps. This has obvious connections with the minor agreements, since as noted above, this was one of Streeter's categories to explain some of these.

This connection has been stressed more recently by E P Sanders in *The Overlaps of Mark and Q and the Synoptic Problem*.¹⁹ He makes the obvious comment that 'if there were really no agreement between Matthew and Luke against Mark, the statement that Matthew and Luke were composed independently of each other would gain enormously in probability'.²⁰ He continues, however, by asserting that 'once the true extent of such agreements is observed, it becomes difficult to insist that Matthew and Luke were independent of each other'.²¹ This is true, but it is not a matter of insisting on the independence of Matthew and Luke in the face of weighty evidence to the contrary, but weighing all the evidence, including the minor agreements to see whether the 2DH can continue to bear the weight placed upon it. Nevertheless, Sanders is right to stress that the minor agreements are the biggest single embarrassment standing in the way of acceptance of the 2DH. He is right, further, to point out the dangers of resorting to a Mark-Q overlap as a convenient way of containing the problem.²² Streeter, as is well known, abandoned the notion that Mark knew and used Q, set forth in *Oxford Studies in the Synoptic Problem* (1911) by the time he came to write *The Four Gospels* (1924). Perhaps he, too, was aware that recourse to Q too readily could lead to the spectre of Mark and Q overlapping to such an extent that the distinction between the two sources becomes fatally blurred. In *The Four Gospels* he thus agreed that 'we have no right to call in the hypothesis of the influence of Q for this ulterior purpose, except in places where the existence of obviously different versions, or of doublets very distinctly defined, provides us with objective evidence of the presence of Q'.²³

Sanders questions whether this apparent safeguard is adequate and can be consistently applied. His conclusion is that the data is not

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susceptible to such a neat solution. The following extended extract will give some indication of the nature of the difficulties:

When all the overlaps are added together, one finds that a great deal of Mark overlaps with some other source also known by one or the other or both of the supposedly later Evangelists. There are instances in which Matthew differs widely from Mark, which Streeter does not list as overlaps at all, such as Matthew XV. 29-31 = Mark VII 31-7. Why does this not qualify? Further, why is the theory of different sources not used to explain the

¹⁸ Op cit, 75.

¹⁹ NTS 19 (1973) 453-465.

²⁰ Art cit, 453.

²¹ Art cit, 453.

²² This is what D Dungan picturesquely calls 'The loophole ... the blessed overlap', in 'Mark—The Abridgement of Matthew and Luke', *Jesus and Man's Hope*, vol I (Pittsburgh, 1970) 51-97.

²³ *The Four Gospels*, 306.

differences between Luke IX 57-62 and Matthew VIII 19-22? The passage is attributed to Q, and both Matthew and Luke are considered to have taken it from there. But the differences between the two forms of the tradition are greater than the differences between Mark and Luke in the Beelzebub Controversy, which is considered an overlap of Mark and Q. *The point is that what constitutes enough difference between two forms of the same tradition to require different sources is not defined.* Some of the 'overlapping' passages are closer together than many of the passages for which the theory of overlapping traditions is not introduced. There is a certain methodological weakness here.²⁴

The simple appeal to Mark-Q overlaps advocated by Streeter is thus seen to be inadequate, and Sanders is probably somewhere near the truth when he suggests 'the reason for this seems to be that Streeter's objective test ... was thought of after the passages were selected'.²⁵ The synoptic interrelationships appear to be a good deal more complex than Streeter envisaged in 1924.

But the question must again be asked: Is the situation better explained by abandoning the 2DH and substituting the GH?

Whilst Sanders in his article on the Mark-Q overlaps was content to point out the inherent difficulties for the 2DH involved in such an appeal, advocates of the GH believe that the solution simply removes the problem in a convincing way.

Tuckett in the book referred to above devotes a chapter to the Mark-Q overlaps viewed from the standpoint of the GH. His method is to examine three passages in detail: the mustard seed (Mark 4: 30-32 and parallels); the Beelzebub controversy (Mark 3: 20-30 and parallels); the collection of sayings (Mark 4: 21-25 and parallels). He includes, however, some general observations on the question of overlapping sources. In particular, he points out that the postulating of overlapping sources is a feature of the GH as much as the 2DH 'often in passages usually ascribed to Q on the 2DH. Where Luke's version appears to be unrelated to, if not more primitive than Matthew's'.²⁶ Examples used by Farmer are the parables of the lost sheep, the talents/pounds, and the wedding feast, together with parts of the Apocalyptic Discourse. In all

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these cases, Farmer says that Luke was using parallel traditions. Thus, on the admission of one of its principal advocates, the GH is not as watertight as is sometimes claimed.

When Tuckett examines particular passages, his findings do not suggest that the Griesbach solution is likely to be correct. Thus, in the case of the mustard seed, Tuckett says that 'there is strong evidence for the "existence of obviously different versions" (to use Streeter's terms)'.²⁷ 'There is', writes Tuckett, 'a non-Markan source which probably extended to the parable of the leaven. [This] source must be a common source prior to both Matthew and Luke. If one calls this source Q... one must conclude that there is here a "Mark-Q overlap".'²⁸ Thus, Tuckett in this passage, as in some others, concludes that the evidence is consistent with

²⁴ Art cit, 455. Italics mine.

²⁵ Art cit, 456.

²⁶ Op cit, 77.

²⁷ Op cit, 84f.

²⁸ Op cit, 85.

an overlap of sources between Mark and Q. The possibility that Mark has redacted Matthew and Luke does not appear plausible if he has adopted the principle of following his two sources where they bear concurrent testimony, which Farmer claims that he does.²⁹ On the evidence of the passages examined, 'the existence of two distinct versions, a Markan and a non-Markan, and these two... independent of each other' is still the most likely explanation.

The GH has been touched upon in connection with the related issues of the minor agreements and the Mark-Q overlaps. We have now reached the point where the GH itself must enter the picture. The GH purports to provide a solution to two separate issues related to the synoptic problem: the priority of Mark and the existence of Q. By placing Mark third and making Luke dependent upon Matthew, the advocates of the GH believe that the weaknesses and problems of the 2DH are overcome. By changing the order of the synoptics in this way the GH has to demonstrate, first Luke's knowledge and use of Matthew, second Mark's abbreviation of the two longer gospels. We turn now to consider these.

It is obvious that the success of the GH depends almost totally on its ability to surmount the two hurdles just mentioned. It has, however, to do this in order. Put simply, the GH has to show convincingly that Luke knew and used Matthew before there is any point in embarking upon the second enterprise—Mark's supposed abbreviation of his predecessors.

It will be recalled that Austin Farrer's central premise was that the 2DH was erected 'on the incredibility of St. Luke's having read St. Matthew's book'.³⁰

At this point we are discussing the question of possible contact between Matthew and Luke only. Farrer, himself, accepted the priority of Mark but rejected Q—a view to be taken up again some thirty years later, as we shall see.

The purpose of Farrer's essay was, therefore, to furnish reasons, why, in his judgement, there are no insuperable problems in the path of

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such a theory. It fell to F G Downing in his article, 'Towards the Rehabilitation of Q',³¹ to point out how improbable Farrer's contention was by examining some key passages, including the notoriously difficult Beelzebub controversy (Matthew 12:22-45 = Mark 3: 20-29 = Luke 11: 14-26). The interesting feature of Farrer's essay is that he attempted to combine Luke's use of Matthew with the priority of Mark, and Downing had little difficulty in showing how unlikely it was that Luke followed Matthew with Mark before him.

Despite Farrer's failure, the question of Luke's knowledge of Matthew has continued to fascinate some scholars convinced that the merits of the case have not been properly investigated. One such investigation was that of R T Simpson in an article almost contemporary with that of Downing's entitled 'The Major Agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark'.³² It follows Downing's approach by examining specific passages. An example is the opening passage of Mark (1:1-13, = Luke 3:1ff = Matthew 3:1ff). He proposes to show two things: "First that the changes made by St Matthew and St Luke in the text of Mark are

²⁹ *The Synoptic Problem*, 217.

³⁰ Farrer, art cit, 56.

³¹ NTS 11 (1965-66) 169-181.

³² NTS 12 (1965-66) 273-284.

editorial improvements of that gospel; secondly, that St Luke must have known a version of Mark which incorporated the same editorial improvements as those which are found in Matthew.³³ Simpson is therefore convinced that Matthew and Luke have used Mark independently and furthermore that both have 'improved' Mark in a way which suggests the use of one by the other.

Simpson argues his case forcefully, but on consideration it fails to convince for the following reasons:

1 Simpson argues with some cogency that Mark 1:1-13 is a 'Markan Compilation', but then goes on to assert that 'there never was any parallel to it in the tradition. It seems likely that such traditional material as was employed by St Mark was of a fragmentary nature only.' This can only be considered improbable and Simpson offers no evidence for such a view. Unfortunately, however, it has a knock-on effect in relation to other passages considered and it seems a good deal more likely that such an important tradition as the opening of Jesus' public ministry existed in parallel forms.

2 It is a moot point whether Mark 1:1ff is significantly related to the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke. However, Simpson is on very thin ice in assuming that the Matthean and Lukan versions of Mark 1:1-13 are improvements of that source. Thus in commenting on their treatment of Mark 1:8, he writes as follows:

What makes it quite certain that these alterations are of an editorial nature... is that the new teaching appended to Mark 1:8 is not in fact self-contained: It actually begins with a pronoun (*οὐ*) which refers back to the subject (*αὐτός*) of the clause taken from Mark which immediately proceeds it.³⁴

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But this begs the question of which *αὐτός* the *οὐ* relates back to since both Matthew and Luke use the same phrase as Mark. We conclude that Simpson's 'modest' conclusion 'that editorial improvements and those alone, provide a real indication of the true relationship between the first three gospels' is unlikely to be true.

More recently, Michael Goulder and H Benedict Green have approached the question afresh in essays originally given as papers at the Ampleforth Conferences of 1982 and 1983.³⁵ Their essays are entitled respectively 'The Order of a Crank',³⁶ and 'The Credibility of Luke's Transformation of Matthew'.³⁷ The titles of both essays, especially that of Goulder, echo the scorn expressed most forcefully by Streeter in *The Four Gospels* that any theory which seriously postulated direct contact between Matthew and Luke must be the work of a crank. Green, too, aware of the reception accorded to Farrer's essay thirty years earlier, puts that down to '[allowing] himself to be sidetracked into a typological account of what Luke was about, where most of his readership could not follow him'.³⁸

³³ Art cit, 275.

³⁴ Art cit, 278.

³⁵ *Synoptic Studies: The Ampleforth Conferences of 1982 and 1983*, ed C M Tuckett (JSNT Press, 1984).

³⁶ Op cit, 111ff.

³⁷ Op cit, 131ff.

³⁸ Op cit, 131.

We will take Green's essay as the more thoroughly argued. He seeks to offer convincing reasons why Luke follows Mark for long stretches with only minimal influence from Matthew. (Green, like Farrer before him accepted the priority of Mark, but not Q). Green certainly succeeds in showing that Streeter's caricature of Luke's supposed procedure is in fact just that. Luke does not systematically remove Matthean material from its Markan context in Matthew and insert it in a different Markan context (as Streeter alleged he did). An example is found in Matthew 9:35—12:50, much of which is reproduced in Luke 9:51—12:59. Of 126 verses in Matthew, Luke offers parallels to 78. 28 of these, however, are placed elsewhere in Luke. Further, Matthew has 48 verses which Luke does not reproduce. 29 have parallels in Mark already, followed by Luke in their Markan context. Of the remainder, there are only two passages having more than two verses (Matthew 11:28-30—the conclusion of Jesus' thanksgiving to the Father and Matthew 12:17-21—a long formula quotation) and Green suggests reasons for their omission by Luke which are plausible enough. But there is more: of the 167 verses in the Lukan passage, some 70 are paralleled in Matthew elsewhere, both earlier and later, a good number of them in the Sermon on the Mount. Green then says this:

Our next task... is to identify further concentration of nonMarkan material in Matthew which would have caught Luke's eye in the same way, and discover how far it would have been possible for him to leave the material in the context in which he found it.³⁹

What then follows is an exercise in redaction criticism where, point by

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point, Green offers reasons why Luke did not reproduce Matthew's sermon in its entirety.

Taken individually Green's points are very speculative. For example, he suggests that Matthew's antitheses (5:21-48) would have been alien to Luke's purpose and ethos. This may be true in their Matthean formulation, but, without their implied anti-Judaistic bias, he could well have found such material usable and even attractive. Luke, in any case, is well able to accommodate tradition strongly critical of Jewish opposition to Jesus' message, eg his woes on the cities (Luke 10:13-15). Whilst Green's argument cannot be written off, they remain in the final analysis unconvincing. First, in regard to his overall view, it requires a great deal of imagination to envisage Luke using large portions of Mark and an edited version of Matthew with Markan touches. Second, and perhaps more important, the theory creates real problems when applied to particular passages. Green recognises this in connection with Luke's version of the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, the Mission Charge and the Beelzebub Controversy, which 'need to be tackled in detail'.⁴⁰ Although, as we have seen, Green does not advocate the Griesbach Solution to the synoptic problem, the failure of his attempt to make Matthew a direct source for Luke has serious repercussions for that view. Whilst it remains theoretically possible that Mark was the last of the three synoptics to be written, based upon the 'Concurrent Testimony' (to use W R Farmer's expression) of the other two, the problems for that view are still formidable and the situation is not at all helped by the added difficulties of making Matthew a source for Luke.

³⁹ Op cit, 136f.

⁴⁰ Op cit, 149.

The question of the theology of Q, which has occupied scholars for several years now, has not been treated in this article. It is, of course, an aspect of the wider issue of the theology of the evangelists and how this may be detected and delineated. Many scholars believe that the Q tradition exhibits certain clear themes and traits and that this, at least indirectly, supports the theory that Q is a distinct entity with its own interests. However, the results that have so far emerged from such studies are far from unanimous in their conclusions and the reader is directed to the writer's article in *Themelios* (January 1981) for some assessment of these studies.⁴¹ The fact is that the existence of Q is an assumption, rather than a conclusion for most scholars active in this area.⁴² More recently, scholars convinced of the reality of Q write confidently on the question of its origin.⁴³ Such studies may or may not advance our knowledge of the key question of where this layer of tradition came from, but the fact remains that it is in the area of detailed comparison between the synoptic gospels that the real key lies, although, in the nature of the case, it is unlikely that we will ever know with any certainty the precise limit of Q and how far Matthew or Luke have preserved it in their gospels.

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In the opinion of this writer, the balance of probability lies firmly on the side of retaining, in some form, the 2DH. The GH has revealed many weaknesses and flaws in the traditional view, but not so as to fatally undermine it. Q does have a future.⁴⁴

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⁴¹ 'The Q Debate Since 1955', *Themelios* vol 6 no 2, 23ff. [http://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/journal-issues/6.2_Biggs.pdf]

⁴² Eg G N Stanton, 'On the Christology of Q', in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament* (Cambridge, 1973) 27-42.

⁴³ See John S Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Tradition* (SCM, 1987).

⁴⁴ For a fairly recent assessment of the state of 2DH see G M Styler, 'The Priority of Mark, excursus IV in C F D Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament* (3rd ed, 1981) 285ff.