

Pahl, Michael W. Review of Delbert Burkett, *Rethinking the Gospel Sources: From Proto-Mark to Mark*. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48.4 (December 2005): 827–828.

Rethinking the Gospel Sources: From Proto-Mark to Mark. By Delbert Burkett.

London: T & T Clark International, 2004, ix + 290 pp., \$35.00 paper.

Rethinking the Gospel Sources is the first in a projected three-volume study of the sources of the canonical Gospels by Delbert Burkett. In this first volume Burkett has provided a creative but not compelling solution to the Synoptic Problem. Burkett deserves accolades for the clarity and comprehensiveness with which he writes. His argument throughout is easy to follow with each section introduced clearly and summarized efficiently and with plenty of examples and tables throughout.

Burkett begins his study with an “Introduction to the Problem” (chap. 1), in which he summarizes the main current solutions to the Synoptic Problem along with brief notes on their historical antecedents. He concludes this chapter by agreeing with some scholars that “the simpler theories do not work,” thus paving the way for his own more complex theory. He then briefly outlines the rest of the book, in which he will develop this theory.

Chapters 2 through 6 provide some foundational analyses of the Synoptic data, which then form the basis for Burkett’s theory described in chapters 7 through 12. Chapters 2 and 3 function similarly, focusing on “Markan Redaction Absent from Matthew and Luke” and “Matthean Redaction Absent from Mark and Luke.” A key aspect of his analysis in these chapters is what he calls “benign omissions,” that is, words, phrases, and themes that are found frequently in Mark or Matthew respectively but not in the other two Synoptics, and for which there are no discernible grammatical or ideological reasons for their omission. For Burkett, these benign omissions are devastating to the traditional source theories, leading him to conclude that canonical Mark did not serve as a source for either Matthew or Luke (denying any theory of Markan priority) and that canonical Matthew did not serve as a source for either Mark or Luke (denying any theory of Matthean priority). In addition, in the chapter on Mark, Burkett comments on the infamous “minor agreements” between Matthew and Luke against Mark in the triple tradition, which he believes also raise serious doubts about the dominant Two-Source Hypothesis.

Chapters 4 and 5 likewise function similarly, attempting to discern the “Sources Common to Mark and Matthew” and the “Sources Common to Mark and Luke.” Burkett accomplishes this by a detailed comparison of the order of pericopes in these Gospels. He notes that the main traditional source theories have a good measure of explanatory power in this regard, recognizing Mark as the “middle term” but that these theories cannot adequately explain the divergences from Mark’s order that are found, for example, in Matt 7:28–9:34. Thus, Burkett proposes that, rather than canonical Mark being the middle term, Mark and Matthew had common sources, as did Mark and Luke. Burkett discerns these sources by noting the similarly ordered pericopes in each set of compared Gospels as a particular sequence and then, at each point the order diverges, noting this as a different sequence. This leads him to find three distinct sequences in the Mark-Matthew comparison and three in Mark-Luke, which he then proposes actually reflect distinct sources shared by those Gospels respectively.

Chapter 6 provides the final pillar for Burkett’s source theory, examining evidence for source “Conflation in Mark” such as alternating agreement with Matthew and Luke and dual expressions. Burkett concludes that Mark did indeed conflate his sources, sources that were shared by Matthew and Luke.

In Chapter 7 Burkett moves “Toward a New Theory,” summarizing his analysis thus far, weighing previous theories against his observations of the Synoptic data and finding all of them wanting, and announcing his new theory, which is then explicated in the following chapters. In essence, Burkett proposes that a basic Proto-Mark including a common Synoptic core went through two independent revisions, producing Proto-Mark A and Proto-Mark B. Proto-Mark A, along with unique Matthean material (M) and Q-like sources, then served as a source for Matthew, while Proto-Mark B, along with unique Lukan material (L) and the same Q-like sources, served as a source for Luke. Finally, canonical Mark was written using Proto-Mark A and B as well as other shared sources such as a kerygmatic source and adding unique Markan material and the author’s own “layer” of redaction. Chapters 8, 9, 10, and 11 discuss the scope and possible historical setting of Proto-Mark, Proto-Mark A, Proto-Mark B, and the kerygmatic source respectively. Chapter 12 concludes the main part of the book, providing a summary account of “The Making of Mark,” including an explanation of the variant endings of Mark’s Gospel. Rounding out the book is an

appendix on “Dual Temporal and Local Expressions,” a select bibliography on the Synoptic Problem, and indexes of ancient sources and modern authors.

Like other such complex theories, the attractiveness of Burkett’s theory is its comprehensiveness, attempting to account for everything one encounters in each Gospel and in a detailed comparison of the Synoptics. Ironically, however, this also proves to be its downfall, especially with its almost exclusively literary bent. Burkett rightly states that the origins of the Synoptic Gospels may be more complex than the bare traditional theories propose. However, he assumes that the complexity of the Synoptic phenomena must be explained by a complex literary theory—his “simplest” solution is invariably a direct literary one—rather than allowing for a complex, and to great extent unrecoverable, interaction of direct manuscript access, personal or shared or liturgically shaped memory of written sources and oral traditions, notes from personal research perhaps even influenced by eyewitness testimony, conscious and subconscious aspects of personal style and ideological redaction, and the like. Space precludes discussing other problems with Burkett’s foundational analyses, such as his lack of real engagement with arguments for the relative primitivity of canonical Mark, the significance he attaches to the “benign omissions,” or his method of discerning sources behind sequences. It must suffice to say that there is not necessarily a conscious choice with an attendant grammatical or ideological reason behind every observable difference among the Synoptics, nor if there is such a conscious choice is that choice necessarily discernible, nor do these discrete differences necessarily reveal written sources hidden among detectable “layers” of other sources and their redaction.

In sum, Burkett’s first instalment in this series provides a fresh approach to the Synoptic Problem and as such offers a significant contribution to Synoptic studies, but it fails to overturn the virtual consensus of Markan priority and to account for the growing awareness of the influence of orality and memory on the Gospels and their origins.