

Chance or the Original Order of Q: Vincent Taylor Goes to Vegas

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The case for the existence of the document Q is not one argument proceeding from necessary, self-evident premises, but rather a wide assembly of converging probabilities, no one of them taken alone being strong enough to settle the issue. There are arguments based on verbal agreement between gospels, on word order agreements, on judgments as to which version of a pericope is the more primitive, on pericope order agreements, on historical grounds—the field is vast.¹ An essay of this size cannot attempt to cover all of these areas, or even to cover one of them exhaustively. I will limit my discussion therefore to one argument: the argument from pericope order agreement.

The difficulty with almost all arguments both for and against the Q hypothesis is that, in the last resort, they are aesthetic judgments about what an editor would (or should) have done. They can all be seen in two ways.² The particular appeal of the argument from order is that it has a quasi-mathematical aspect, and so it takes on an aura of the objective. But even within the mathematical aspect of the argument, one finds an element of the subjective: what level of agreement is required before it should convince?

¹ A good (but somewhat biased) introduction to the basic issues can be found in C.M. Tuckett, “Synoptic Problem,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 263ff. An excellent appraisal of arguments from order (primarily with regard to Markan priority, but closely related to the “Q” debate) can be found in David Neville, *Mark’s Gospel—Prior or Posterior? A Reappraisal of the Phenomenon of Order* (JSNTSup 222; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

² A good example of this is a common argument that Luke could not have known and used Matthew. While Matthew was rather free with his Markan source, the argument goes, Luke was very conservative with his Markan source, sticking rather closely to Markan order. Yet he felt free to differ wildly from Matthew in the order of the sayings. Why would there be such a difference in the way he treats his sources? Those who say Luke did know Matthew could simply flip the argument around: Luke followed Mark closely because Mark was the oldest, most reliable record of the historical order of things. However, observing that Matthew was rather free with the order of his Markan source, Luke surmised that Matthew was probably also free with the historical order of the sayings, and hence did not feel that he needed to cling too closely to their order as found in Matthew. Both ways of arguing are plausible.

Exactly how much is enough? The aim of this essay will be to determine more objectively what weight the argument from pericope order agreement carries.

The Two Column Argument

There are two versions of the argument from pericope order. The first simply lines up the double tradition (those sayings shared by Matthew and Luke but not Mark) in two columns and notes that about one third of the sayings are found in the same relative order in both Gospels. John Kloppenborg-Verbin reports an agreement of twenty-seven out of sixty seven pericopae.³ “Such agreement in the sequence of Q’s sayings finds its best—perhaps only—reasonable explanation in the supposition that Matthew and Luke used a document and were thus influenced by its arrangement of sayings.”⁴

Elsewhere, Kloppenborg-Verbin states that “if little or no common order existed in the Matthean and Lucan reproduction of the sayings, or if the order which existed fell within the range of probabilities of random or accidental agreement...then the case for Q would be greatly weakened.”⁵ In other words, given two collections of the same sayings, there are three possibilities: either the collections will agree in order more than one would expect to happen by chance, less than one would expect to happen by chance, or about the same amount as one would expect to happen by chance. Based on this model, it is not hard to test the claim that the double-tradition sayings in Matthew and Luke agree in order more than one would expect by chance. 1) Assign a playing card to each saying of the double tradition. 2) Let the resulting stack of cards represent Matthew (or Luke, if preferred). 3) Shuffle the deck thoroughly, so that the order of the deck is entirely randomized. 4) Let the resulting stack of cards represent Luke (or Matthew, if the first stack was Luke). 5) See how much the first stack agrees with the second in order. If you repeat this experiment several times, you will get a good idea of how

³ John S. Kloppenborg-Verbin, *Excavating Q* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 67. He reports the agreement as “more than 30%” on p. 58 of the same work, and 35 out of 106 “units” in John S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1987), 72.

⁴ Kloppenborg-Verbin, *Excavating Q*, p. 58.

⁵ Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q*, p. 47

closely two collections of identical sayings will agree in order by sheer chance.

I performed this experiment myself, as follows: I assembled sixty seven playing cards in a definite order, shuffled them thoroughly, and then noted how many out of the sixty seven cards remained in the same relative order. My first result was thirteen cards, and subsequent experiments confirmed this as a normal result. So if Matthew's pericope order were related to Luke's pericope order only randomly, one would expect thirteen of Matthew's pericopae to have the same relative order as Luke's pericopae. Finding twenty seven out of sixty seven in the same relative order is striking, double what one would have expected.

Scholars who suppose that Luke did not know Matthew—a topic for discussion in its own right⁶—argue that some connection between the two gospels must be posited, either an oral connection and a written one. An oral connection, they say, does not account well for an extended agreement in order *between* sayings, so the existence of some one documentary source seems to be the most reasonable explanation.⁷ This hypothetical source they call Q, for German *quelle*, “source”.⁸

Taylor's Argument

The second version of the argument from pericope order agreement, proposed by Vincent Taylor, is much more ambitious. It claims to prove not only that there is a documentary connection between Matthew and Luke, and that the document in question is one document (“Q”), but even claims to prove that the original order of this document

⁶ See *Beyond the Q Impasse: Luke's Use of Matthew*, ed. Allan J. McNicol et alia (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1996), a work entirely devoted to showing, pericope by pericope, that Luke *did* use Matthew. See also footnote 2, above.

⁷ The possibility of an oral connection is usually dismissed rather quickly, but given that entire documents were frequently memorized in the ancient world this dismissal may be overhasty. One begins to suspect that part of what shapes the Synoptic Problem debate is a desire on all sides for clarity and simplicity which excludes the complexity of most human affairs.

⁸ Some also say that Mark was known as the “P” source because of the traditional association between Mark's Gospel and the preaching of Peter. When a second source was posited along with Mark, it was dubbed “Q”, simply because this was the next letter of the alphabet. This reason for the name “Q” is less likely than the one given above, but more interesting!

is found in Luke's Gospel.⁹ Given that no one any longer supposes that Matthew used Luke's Gospel as a source, Taylor's argument would be a well-nigh mathematical proof of the existence of Q: if it is proven that Matthew was following a document with Luke's order, and yet he was not following Luke, then it is clear that Matthew was following some unknown third document, "Q"; it would also be proven that Luke did not follow Matthew. The import of Taylor's argument is clearly enormous.

Taylor's key insight is that Matthew¹⁰ gathers most of his double tradition material into five great speeches, grouped according to theme. So if Matthew used Q as the source for these sayings, it is most reasonable to suppose that he ran through Q once to gather material for the Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 5-7), ran through Q again to gather material for the Mission Charge (Mat. 9:37-10:42), and again for the next speech, and again for the next, and then again for the next. So rather than simply lining all of Matthew's double tradition material up against all of Luke's double tradition material, as is usually done, Taylor first lined up the Sermon on the Mount with Luke's material, and then the Mission Charge with Luke's material, and then the next speech, and so on until he had six sets of two columns comparing Matthew with Luke (six sets of columns because he divided the eschatological discourse of chapters 23-24 into two parts). He then lined up the remaining double tradition material in Matthew and Luke in a seventh set of two columns. (His columns are reproduced in Appendix A. The reader is advised to look over the appendix to get a visual feel for what Taylor was attempting.) Taylor claimed that the result was a striking agreement in order between Luke and each of the Matthean columns, with a few minor discrepancies in order which could be explained in terms of Matthew's redactional (i.e., editorial) activity. The whole thing is so tidy, so *right*, that given such order it seems impossible not to take it as clear evidence of Matthew's intended design. As C.M. Tuckett said, "Such a phenomenon is hard to

⁹ Vincent Taylor, "The Original Order of Q," in *New Testament Essays: Studies in Memory of T. W. Manson, 1893-1958*, ed. A.J.B. Higgins (Manchester University Press, 1959) p. 246ff.; reprinted in *The Two-Source Hypothesis: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. Arthur J. Bellinzoni, Jr. (Mercer University Press, 1985), p. 295ff.

¹⁰ Taylor used the name "Matthew" to designate the author of the canonical gospel of that title, with no judgment being made about who the author was in history. The same goes for "Luke".

explain on other hypotheses.”¹¹ Moreover, as Kloppenborg-Verbin points out, there have been no real attempts to refute Taylor’s claim, despite the continuing controversy over Q.¹²

However, Kloppenborg-Verbin himself is careful not to lean too heavily on Taylor’s argument. Give a fellow enough columns, he points out, and *any two lists* of common elements can be reduced to a common order; given the initial 30% pericope order agreement between Matthew and Luke, he finds it “scarcely surprising” that Taylor’s multiple columns are able to reconcile the disagreements in order to such an extent.¹³ In short, Kloppenborg-Verbin is not convinced that Taylor’s ingenious approach actually proves anything more than the original, simple observation made by lining up Matthew’s Q material and Luke’s Q material in two columns.

But he does not draw any definite line. C.M. Tuckett is obviously impressed with Taylor’s results, while Kloppenborg-Verbin is scarcely surprised. Where is the line beyond which one must be impressed, and before which one may be scarcely surprised? The remainder of this essay will be devoted to laying this line out more clearly, and to making the case that Taylor’s argument falls rather short of the line.

Taylor’s Argument Examined

The idea of using of a different set of columns to compare each speech in Matthew to Luke is entirely sound, given the structure of Matthew’s Gospel. Even if one might achieve the same agreement in order with fewer columns mathematically, still the twelve sets of two columns is the only arrangement which makes sense editorially.

We can boil Taylor’s results down to numbers by counting the total number of pericopae in the desired order within a given column. In the following table, 15/23

¹¹ “Synoptic Problem”, p. 268.

¹² *The Formation of Q*, p. 66.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 69. Kloppenborg’s remark is illustrated by the fact that McNichol has constructed an account on which Luke used Matthew by multiple scans - the converse of Taylor’s position. However, McNichol’s schema requires a rather large number of columns and somewhat odd divisions between scans. See *Beyond the Q Impasse: Luke’s Use of Matthew*, particularly the folded charts in the envelope glued to the back cover.

means that 15 pericopae were found in the correct relative order out of 23 pericopae in the column. Taylor's results are as follows:

I. 15/23 II. 8/11 III. 3/3 IV. 3/4 V. 3/4 VI. 4/7 VII. 13/23

One should note that set I represents two scans, i.e. Taylor supposed that Matthew ran through Q twice to compose the Sermon on the Mount (this break in the Sermon is represented by the dotted line in the first column of Appendix A).

We can test Taylor's argument by the same method we used to examine Kloppenborg-Verbin's claims. Taylor works with a total of 75 sayings in the double tradition.¹⁴ I assigned a playing card to each saying in Luke, and let the resulting stack of cards represent Luke's Gospel. Then I shuffled the cards thoroughly to randomize the order, and broke the stack into groups of cards equal to the groups of sayings in Taylor's columns. Finally, I noted how many cards in each group remained in the same relative order as they were in the original "Luke" stack. As Taylor did, I permitted myself two "scans" for the first group of 23 cards. The following table presents the results of two such experiments:

I. 14/23 II. 4/11 III. 2/3 IV. 2/4 V. 3/4 VI. 5/7 VII. 8/23
I. 14/23 II. 4/11 III. 2/3 IV. 2/4 V. 2/4 VI. 3/7 VII. 7/23

The strengths and weaknesses of Taylor's results can be seen in outline in these results. His strongest points are obviously sets II and VII, where his results far outstrip the results of randomly shuffled playing cards. I will comment first on the remaining, weaker points, and then take up these two stronger ones.

Set I. Surprising as it may seem, I have tried this experiment with twenty-three playing cards time and time again, and fifteen out of twenty-three pericopae in the same

¹⁴ The reader will note that Taylor's 75 total of pericopae differs both from Kloppenborg Verbin's 67 and from Kloppenborg's 106. The question of how exactly to divide the gospel text is a difficult one. In fact, Taylor himself used only 68 pericopae in an earlier version of his argument, on the grounds that seven pericopae of the double tradition were likely not part of Q because of the low verbal agreement between Matthew and Luke. See Taylor, "The Order of Q", *Journal of Theological Studies* New Series 4 (1953): 27-31.

order with two scans is precisely what one would expect from two groups of common units whose relation is entirely random. Taylor's results for the Sermon on the Mount are neither more than or even less than one would expect by chance.

Furthermore, it is hard to make sense of what Taylor thinks Matthew was doing as an editor in the second scan. Surely we are not supposed to think that Matthew composed the Sermon on the Mount and then scanned Q a second time in order to insert various bits of Q material all through the Sermon? This seems like a betrayal of the clear, appealing scheme originally proposed in which the rationale for the number of scans is the number of speeches.

Set III. Taylor's result of three out of three is mildly impressive: if three cards are put in a definite order and shuffled, the odds that they will be in the same order after the shuffle are one in six. However, if an entire deck of cards is shuffled, the odds that three cards can be found in the exact same order as they were before are very high. Moreover, if we suppose that Luke 13:18-21 forms a unit, as seems likely since the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven are closely related in content and directly attached to one another in both Luke and Matthew,¹⁵ then set III should be counted as two out of two. Now if two playing cards are shuffled, the chances that they will be in the same relative order after the shuffle are one in two - nothing impressive, statistically.

Sets IV and V. This set looks more impressive than it is. If four cards are put in a definite order and then shuffled, the chances that three out of the four cards will be in the same relative order after the shuffle are fifteen in twenty four, i.e. more than fifty percent.¹⁶ So, counter-intuitive as it may be, Taylor's result of three out of four is statistically *more* likely than my result of two out of four with the playing cards. Again, nothing impressive statistically.

The same observations hold for set V, in which the playing cards did achieve

¹⁵ This is not an unheard-of position. In fact, Bultmann opined that the parable of the leaven was a secondary outgrowth of the parable of the mustard seed. See Rudolph Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers: 1963), 172.

¹⁶ This figure is found by considering four units ABCD, writing out all twenty-four possible orders of those units (4x3x2x1), and then counting all the sets which retain either ABC, ABD, ACD, or BCD.

three out of four.

Set VI. Four out of seven seems to be an average result for randomly related units, as can be seen in the fact that my first trial run with playing cards achieved five out seven, and my second trial run three out of seven. (Taylor's brackets indicate a score of six out of seven here, on the grounds that 24:43-51 and 24:26-41 are simply interchanged, but had I allowed myself such maneuvers with the playing cards, my results might have been much more impressive as well.)

Gathering the results together, we can say that five out of Taylor's seven sets of columns exhibit no more agreement of pericope order than would be expected from sheer chance in two collections of identical sayings. Sets II and VII, however, are more striking.

Set II. There is no convincing way to discount the impressiveness of set II. Out of eleven units related randomly to one another, one would expect four to be in the same order, as indeed the results of the playing card experiments show. To find double that number in the same relative order, indeed only two short of the entire eleven, is simply extraordinary.

One might argue that Luke 12:3-9 is one unit on the grounds that these three sayings are immediately joined in both Luke and Matthew, which would reduce the score to six out of nine, and the odds of getting six out of nine are not so small as one might imagine. However, the content of the sayings in question does not give strong enough support to the idea that they traveled as a unit.

Set VII. It is difficult to guess what Taylor sees Matthew as doing editorially in set VII, the "leftovers" after the great speeches are accounted for. How does he get this scattered material into one scan of Q? Are we to think that Matthew composed the main gospel narrative separately from the speeches, scanning over Q once for that purpose, and then inserted the separately composed speeches into the gospel? Or are we to think that he composed the gospel together with the speeches, and then went over Q one last time, inserting different interesting bits as he found them (a procedure more believable on computer than on parchment)? It is not clear from what Taylor says, and until a convincing editorial account is provided of how set VII gets into one scan, it must count as a weak spot in the multiple scan theory.

Yet the brute fact of the agreement in order remains, thirteen out of twenty-three pericopae, which as the cards show is nearly double what one would expect from two randomly related sets of common units. However, for an argument based on pericope order agreement, one can discount the first three pericopae since, as Kloppenborg points out, their content is so bound to the narrative context that there is really no other order in which they *could* be placed.¹⁷ This brings the score down to ten out of twenty, which is still about three-halves what one would expect from randomly related sets—statistically noteworthy, if not so striking as set II.

Yet even if the agreement in order were perfect, it would not directly support Taylor's conclusion. Because neither column represents a thematic collection of sayings, there is nothing in the order of these two columns to suggest which order is more original; neither gospel "gathers" or "scatters".

The Final Result

Having considered all seven of Taylor's sets, we can now sum up the results. Of the seven sets, only two showed any results beyond what one would expect from randomly related sets of common units, namely the eight out of eleven of set II and the (effectively) ten out of twenty of set VII. So out of a total of seventy five units, Taylor discovered eighteen units in statistically significant agreement. At this point one may legitimately wonder if Taylor has made any advance at all over the simple two-column comparison, in which more than a third of the units are found in a common order.

But if we compare Kloppenborg's results with Taylor's, it becomes apparent that Taylor has made one clear advance. In appendix A, the units with an asterisk are those units included in Kloppenborg's list of the twenty-seven units which are found to agree in relative order when Matthew and Luke are lined up side by side.¹⁸ If we set aside the second scan in the Sermon on the Mount - editorially the least convincing part of Taylor's scheme anyway - Kloppenborg's list of twenty-seven covers very nearly all the

¹⁷ Kloppenborg-Verbin, *Excavating Q*, 67.

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 68-71.

remaining “scores”, taking all of the first scan of the Sermon on the Mount, most of the next several discourses, and all but two of the “leftovers” in set VII; but the Mission Charge (set II above) remains a long, untouched field. Precisely at the point where Taylor is statistically the strongest, here Kloppenborg’s list of twenty-seven misses it entirely.

Indeed, Kloppenborg is not unaware of this advance. He cites the Mission Charge as the one case in which Taylor’s type of explanation has considerable force.¹⁹

Despite this bright spot, Taylor’s grand attempt to prove the existence and unity of Q, that Luke preserves the original order of Q, and all that this implies in one quasi-mathematical demonstration, is not successful. Even if the Mission Charge were an entirely certain example of the sort of thing Taylor argues, it would not prove that Luke contains the original order of Q. The real evidence that Luke has the original order of Q was that in him the various scans are overlaid, while in Matthew each scan is cleanly separated, proving that Matthew could have scanned from a document with Luke’s order but Luke could not have scanned from a document with Matthew’s order. Therefore as long as the only certain example is a single scan, neither text has multiple scans overlaid or cleanly separated. It remains possible that both authors faithfully reproduced this one scan of a third document, the full order of which is retained in neither, or that Matthew scanned from a document with Luke’s order, or even that Luke scanned from a document with Matthew’s order.

This essay has considered only a small fraction of the evidence for and against the existence, unity, and order of Q. Taylor’s argument from pericope order agreement makes a bid to render much of the other evidence unnecessary, but fails to do so. For a complete understanding of the Synoptic debate, one must still examine the rest of the data.

¹⁹ *The Formation of Q*, p. 78.

Appendix A

The bracketed passages are those which do not follow Lukan pericope order. One should note that Taylor does not in fact bracket *all* the pericopae which are out of order, as for example Mat. 12:43-45, and Mat. 24:43-51; my reckoning of how many pericopae he found out of order is based on the actual arrangement of the pericopae instead of simply on which ones he chose to bracket.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Luke Matthew 5-7
 6:20-23 5:3-6, 11-12*
 6:27-30 5:39b-42*
 6:31 (7:12)
 6:32-36 5:44-48*
 6:37-38 7:1-2*
 6:41-42 7:3-5*
 6:43-45 7:16-20*
 6:46 7:21*
 6:47-49 7:24-27*

 11:2-4 6:9-13
 11:9-13 (7:7-11)
 11:33 (5:15)
 11:34 6:22-23
 12:33b, 34 (6:20-21)
 12:57-59 (5:25-26)
 13:23-24 7:13-14
 13:25-27 7:22-23
 [25:10-12]
 14:34-35 (5:13)
 16:13 (6:24)
 16:17 5:18
 16:18 5:32

THE MISSION CHARGE

Luke Matthew 9:37-10:42
 6:40 (10:24-25)
 10:2 9:37-38
 10:3-12 10:9-16
 10:16 (10:40)
 12:2-3 10:26-27
 12:4-7 10:28-31
 12:8-9 10:32-33
 12:11-12 (10:19-20)
 12:51-53 10:34-36
 14:26-27 10:37-38
 17:33 10:39

DISCOURSE ON PARABLES

Luke Matthew
 10:23-24 13:16-17
 13:18-19 13:31-32*
 13:20-21 13:33*

DISCOURSE ON DISCIPLESHIP

Luke Matthew
 14:11 18:4
 (15:4-7) (18:12-14)
 17:1-2 18:6-7
 17:3-4 18:15, 21*

ESCHATOLOGICAL**DISCOURSE I**

Luke Matthew
 11:39-48 23:4-31
 11:49-51 23:34-36
 11:52 (23:13)
 13:34-35 23:37-39

ESCHATOLOGICAL**DISCOURSE II**

Luke Matthew
 12:39-40 24:45-44
 12:42-46 24:45-51
 17:23-24 24:26-27*
 17:26-27 24:37-39*
 17:34-35 24:40-41*
 17:37 (24:28)
 19:12-27 25:14-30*

THE REST OF THE Q PASSAGES

Luke Matthew
 3:7-9, 12, 16-17 3:7-12*
 3:21-22 3:16-17
 4:1-13 4:1-11*
 6:39 (15:14)
 6:43-45 (12:33-35)
 7:1-10 8:5-10, 13*
 7:18-23 11:2-6*
 7:24-28 11:7-11*
 7:31-35 11:16-19*
 9:57-60 (8:19-22)
 10:13-15 11:21-23*
 10:21-22 11:25-27*
 10:25-27 (22:34-39)
 11:14-23 12:22-30*
 11:24-26 12:43-45
 11:29-32 12:38-42*
 12:10 (12:32)
 13:28-29 (8:11-12)
 13:30 (20:16)
 14:15-24 [22:1-10]
 16:16 (11:12-13)
 17:5-6 17:20
 22:28, 30b 19:28

