Proposed Solutions to the Synoptic Puzzle

**Augustine’s Solution (Matthew—Mark—Luke)**
Augustine (fourth century) argued that Matthew was written first, and Mark simply abbreviated Matthew (Harmony of the Gospels 1.2.4 [Patrologia latina 34.1044]). Luke was written last, making use of both his predecessors. Augustine’s solution thus defends the canonical order of the Gospels.

Proposed by J. J. Griesbach in 1789, this solution also posits that Matthew was written first, but it departs from Augustine in suggesting that Luke wrote second (making use of Matthew) and Mark wrote last, producing a digest of Matthew and Luke. The Two-Gospel Hypothesis is also known as the Griesbach Hypothesis.

**The Two-Source Hypothesis (Mark and Q—Matthew and Luke)**
By the nineteenth century, the view that Mark was written first had gained widespread acceptance. Chief among the early proponents of this view were K. Lachmann and H. J. Holtzmann. In addition to positing Mark as a source for Matthew and Luke, Holtzmann proposed a second source, the sayings material that has come to be known as Q. In addition, Matthew and Luke incorporated a variety of other materials into their Gospels; this material is commonly designated M and L respectively, but those labels are not meant to designate discrete, single sources.

**The Four-Source Hypothesis (Mark and Q and M and L—Matthew and Luke)**
In the early twentieth century, B. H. Streeter proposed a variation on the Two-Source Hypothesis known as the Four-Source Hypothesis. According to this view, M and L were actual written documents that (like Q) had been lost. This part of the theory has been rejected; almost all modern scholars recognize that the material in M and L may have derived from multiple sources, both oral and written. One potential point of confusion: modern scholars sometimes use “Four-Source Hypothesis” to refer to what is described above as the Two-Source Hypothesis.

**The Farrer Theory (Mark—Matthew—Luke)**
Proposed in 1955 by Austin Farrer, this theory holds that Mark’s Gospel was written first, Matthew used Mark as a source, and then Luke used both Mark and Matthew as sources. The theory is essentially a revision of the Two-Source Hypothesis that preserves Markan priority but dispenses with the need for positing a hypothetical Q source to explain the material Matthew and Luke have in common but that is not found in Mark. This theory has been championed by Michael Goulder and Mark Goodacre.

**Status of the Synoptic Puzzle in the Twenty-First Century**
- almost no scholars hold to Augustine’s solution
- a small minority of scholars hold to the Two-Gospel Hypothesis and a slightly larger minority hold to the Farrer Theory
- the majority of scholars hold to the Two-Source Hypothesis
- almost no scholars hold to the Four-Source Hypothesis (as described here)